Leveraging the Capacity of the Egyptian Diaspora to Promote Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Egypt

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The authors are co-founders of The NEGMA Conference, which involves an annual competition designed to promote innovators and entrepreneurs working to solve challenging development problems in Egypt. Dr. Mowafi and Ms. Farag are currently also working to establish an organization that links the technical capacity of the Egyptian diaspora with the needs of social entrepreneurs working in Egypt.
Abstract:

Over the past decade, the entrepreneurial landscape in Egypt has developed significantly, with incubators, business plan competitions, and organized mentorship programs springing up to assist young entrepreneurs to fulfill their business aspirations, particularly in the area of information technology. After the January 25th Revolution, as the nation looks to solve a broad set of social and economic challenges, many have recognized the great potential for entrepreneurship to serve as a dynamic force in a New Egypt. As entrepreneurship continues to gain currency as a tool for social and economic development in Egypt, the role of the Egyptian diaspora in supporting the country’s emerging entrepreneurs must be examined. In this paper, the role of diasporas in spurring development in their countries of origin will be explored. A comparative analysis will be done in which the relationship between host countries and the Indian and Israeli diaspora networks, respectively, will be studied to learn potential lessons for the Egyptian case. The authors will focus on global diaspora models in which emphasis is placed on the need for the diaspora to participate with local communities to create sustainable solutions, rather than to dictate prescribed ideas. Engaging the Egyptian diaspora with local entrepreneurs and innovators provides symbiotic benefits for both groups. On the one hand, Egyptian entrepreneurs can benefit from “brain gain” by harnessing the educational, professional, and technical resources possessed by the Egyptian diaspora. On the other hand, because members of the Egyptian diaspora often have deep social, cultural, and familial ties to Egypt, they may feel deeply gratified by the ability to give back to their country of origin.
Introduction

In the post-January 25th era, social entrepreneurship holds significant promise for promoting the type of meaningful economic growth and job creation needed in Egypt. While the past decade has witnessed the burgeoning of incubators, business plan competitions, and organized mentorship programs for young entrepreneurs, the focus of these efforts has largely been in the areas of software and information technology (IT). Entrepreneurship in fields outside of technology, including in the social sector, education, and healthcare, has been comparatively limited, despite the work of a few key players including Nahdet el Mahrousia and Ashoka.

In the coming years, a substantial leap is needed to promote social entrepreneurship as a tool for sustainable development across sectors in Egypt (Valenzuela, 2011). As the development community considers how to best utilize and augment existing resources to bolster social entrepreneurship, the role of the Egyptian diaspora must be examined for a number of reasons. First, the Egyptian diaspora, estimated to be about 2.7 million people, contributed $7.8 billion in remittances to Egypt in 2009 alone, according to the International Organization for Migration in Cairo (IOM-Cairo). This figure, which has been steadily growing since 2000, represented approximately 5% of the national gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009. This financial contribution in Egypt makes the diaspora community a significant economic force in the country. Second, the Egyptian diaspora, as with many diaspora communities around the world, is highly educated. IOM-Cairo found that an average of 47% of Egyptians living in Europe, the United States, and Canada have university or graduate degrees. In the United States, this figure was 62.7%; in Canada, 65.4% (Zohry and Debnath, 2010). Third, as traditional aid models come under increasing scrutiny due to political pressures and/or concerns about sustainability, the development community must explore alternative methods to scale up the internal capacity of
Egypt’s social sector. Since Egyptians abroad often have deep social, cultural, and familial ties to Egypt, the diaspora is potentially well positioned to contribute to development in a more permanent, sustainable way. These ties enable Egyptians in the diaspora to engage in people-to-people initiatives that promote economic growth and development.

The objective of this paper is to conduct a comparative analysis designed to examine the role of diaspora communities in spurring development in their countries of origin. The Indian and Israeli diasporas will be studied to extract lessons for the Egyptian case. The central research question is: What can the Egyptian diaspora learn from the Indian and Israeli communities about how to structure, mobilize, and act to promote sustainable development through social entrepreneurship and innovation. The paper will conclude with a series of policy recommendations for development practitioners, entrepreneurs, investors, governments and the global Egyptian community at large.

We consider this paper an exposition of preliminary research related to the topic of the role of diaspora communities in engaging with home countries toward development goals. To research the Indian and Israeli diaspora communities and the role they have played to date in developing their home countries, we have used online and scholarly resources including systematic searches of Google, Google Scholar, and the business database ABI/Proquest. For the purposes of this early work on the topic, our goal was not to engage in a comprehensive initial search, but rather to survey the landscape preliminarily to learn about the main themes and modes of engagement that other successful diasporas have utilized over time to support social entrepreneurship in their home countries. With this early research, we seek to identify important avenues that may be
applied (or not) to the Egyptian case, and to highlight initial policy recommendations and further questions that should be explored in future studies on this topic.

The Indian Diaspora Experience

The Indian diaspora, numbering approximately 27 million people, has contributed dramatically to economic development in India over the course of the past decade. The Indian diaspora is well educated, highly employed, and wealthy. In the United States, for example, 74% of Indian-born people have a bachelor’s degree or higher (US Census Bureau, 2009). And according to the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora, over 72% of Indian immigrants participate in the US labor force. As a result of high education levels, Indians are well represented in well-paying positions and industries, including management, business, finance, information technology, the sciences and engineering. With nearly 60% of Indian-born men and 35% of Indian-born women working in these sectors (Terrazas and Batog, 2010), Indians have the highest median income of any group living in the United States: $91,195. Compared with the average median US income of $50,740, it is clear that Indians benefit from a pronounced economic advantage (US Census Bureau, 2009).

With an estimated purchasing power of $300 billion and $52 billion paid in remittances through formal channels in 2009, the Indian diaspora is a formidable economic force (The Economist, 2009; High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora, 2000). In addition to the transfer of money, the robust exchange between India and its diaspora involves the movement of talent, proliferation of business networks (particularly in high tech and IT), trading of ideas, and promotion of Indian soft power around the globe.
Indians have been particularly effective at leveraging the capacity of the diaspora to promote the growth of the IT sector in India. The diaspora helped to promote the establishment of the “Indian brand,” prompting businesses to seek out Indian engineers, outsourcing firms, and technology (Naujoks, 2009). A study of 1500 first generation Indians and Chinese in Silicon Valley showed that 74% of the Indians expressed interest in starting a business in India (Ionescu, 2007). This desire to invest in their country of origin is symbolic of the robust, bidirectional exchange that powers the Indian diaspora.

Social Entrepreneurship in India

As a field, social entrepreneurship is steadily developing in India, spurred by the significant need for social and economic development in the country (Poon, 2011). The World Bank estimates that over 40% of India’s population lives in poverty, defined as living on less than $1.25/day (World Bank, 2008). This heavy burden of poverty introduces interrelated development challenges such as housing, access to drinking water, sanitation, the growth of urban slums, and public health, among other issues. These widespread problems have led to significant growth in the size of the development community in India. Part of that growth has occurred at the non-governmental organization (NGO) level. A 2010 government report found that India has a total of 3.3 million registered NGOs (Shukla, 2010). Increased interest from major international development actors has also attracted significant projects and global talent to development efforts in India. Foundations, including The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and academic research institutions, such as the MIT Poverty Action Lab are two such organizations. In concert, these dynamics have contributed to the growth of social entrepreneurship in the country (Poon,
While precise estimates of the size of the social enterprise sector are difficult to obtain, business plan competitions such as Genesis, social incubators including UnLtd India, and a plethora of innovative projects across the country, suggest that social entrepreneurship is gaining currency in India.

Despite this recent progress, there remain challenges in promoting social entrepreneurship in India. Examples include a lack of information about best investment options, poor trust in intermediaries and/or organizations themselves, and certain legal constraints with respect to accepting foreign investment in India. Further, social entrepreneurship is not developing uniformly across the country, resulting in some geographic areas with no significant entrepreneurial activity in the social sector (Bakshi and Baron, 2011).

**Government Support for Diaspora Investment**

The Indian government is well organized with respect to diaspora affairs. Additionally, there is high-level political will for projects designed to strengthen and enhance the capacity of the Indian government to engage with the diaspora. The government has handled diaspora relations within India in a formal capacity since 1977, with progressive reforms leading to program expansions over time. Since the early 1990s, state offices created independent units to handle diaspora affairs. Although these units were highly decentralized and limited in their potential to scale up, their focus on attracting diaspora investment in India resulted in a number of development initiatives across the country. In 2000, the government appointed the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora to conduct a rigorous examination of diaspora affairs. Based on the findings of this Committee, the government implemented a series of reforms. The most
significant of these reforms was the establishment of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in 2004. Chartered with connecting the diaspora community with India, the Ministry was created out of the need to centralize diaspora affairs through a single agency capable of more effective coordination and scale up of operations. With the establishment of the MOIA, the Indian government has moved in the direction of providing more organizational direction and structural support to the diaspora community.

Organizations and Funds Promoting Indian Development and Entrepreneurship

At the government level, under the direction of the MOIA, a number of organizations have been established with the express purpose of promoting investment for development in India. The Overseas Indian Facilitation Centre launched in 2007 as a clearinghouse for diaspora investment in India, with a focus on illuminating investment opportunities and facilitating business partnerships. In 2008, the India Development Foundation of Overseas Indians (IDFOI) was established to promote philanthropic diaspora investment in human development initiatives across the country. Established as a not-for-profit trust fund, the IDFOI was established to direct philanthropic giving through a single window that would address the specific challenges described earlier (Indian Government, 2011). The IDFOI was designed to increase the Indian diaspora’s trust that their money was being rightly allocated. By collecting funds directly and disbursing them, the IDFOI also reduces the need for independent diaspora philanthropist to conduct extensive searches for organizations that would provide solid investment opportunities or great social impact. Through the IDFOI, Indians can contribute to causes/initiatives that they are passionate about, or they can simply give and let the Foundation allocate resources as it best sees fit. The mission of the IDFOI is to promote sustainable development and social change in
India by, “facilitating public-private partnerships (PPPs) between the Overseas Indian philanthropist and credible philanthropic organizations” (India Development Foundation of Overseas Indians).

*Participation First, Now Sustainability: Shifting Views of the Diaspora’s Role in Development*

The relationship between the Indian diaspora and the homeland has not always been as strong as it is today. In the post-colonial period, the nascent Indian government explicitly distanced the diaspora in favor of focusing on domestic politics (McCann, 2011). The Indian diaspora also invested little in improving relations with the homeland during this time. Feeling both isolated by the government and struggling to create their own identity in their new homes, members of the Indian diaspora were generally disconnected from India until the 1970s when Hindu Nationalism emerged (McCann, 2011). By the economic liberalization of the early 1990s, the government and the diaspora recognized their symbiotic need for one another and began a period of active engagement that today makes India one of the strongest diasporas in the world.

Over the past decade, Indians have moved from promoting diaspora participation to strategically assessing how that participation can be most effective for development in India. In recent years, there has been a pronounced shift in interest towards projects that promote sustainable development rather than traditional philanthropy. A non-governmental organization operating in India called Dasra, for example, has been working to connect philanthropic giving with social enterprises to promote sustainable development through The Indian Philanthropy Forum project (Dasra, 2010). The development community must also look to the success of entrepreneurship in the technology sector as a model for what is possible in the social sector. If Indian professionals
around the world are able to direct the skills they have acquired in their host countries towards businesses and ventures that have both an economic and social impact, the future of the social sector in India may be as bright as the past decade has been in the technology sector.

The Israeli Diaspora Experience

Israel provides an interesting example of how sustained investment by the diaspora can lead to significant strategic ties and development gains over time. While it has been perennially difficult to pin down an overall impact of diaspora communities across the world, even a preliminary comparative analysis reveals important areas in which Israel has excelled, and advances in social entrepreneurship is one of these areas.

Before moving into this discussion, however, it is important to note the unique demographics of Israel and its diaspora. Partially due to its political history, Israel is one of a minority of countries that actually has more people designated as ‘diaspora’ than ‘native.’ Additionally, while most diaspora communities are defined as immigrants or their children residing in host countries, the Israeli diaspora is defined as the entire world’s Jewish population outside of Israel. According to 2010 statistics, the Israeli population stood at 5.7 million, whereas the Jewish Disapora reached 7.7 million (DelaPergola, 2010). While the authors recognize the unique religious and cultural affinity that the world’s Jews may feel toward Israel for historical reasons, we do believe nonetheless that translatable lessons can be learned about how Israel has related to its diaspora, what investment tools it has employed, and what can be done to formulate a longer term strategic vision for cohesion of a global ethnic community to serve the goal of sustainable development through entrepreneurship and innovation in its home country.
In contrast to the Indian diaspora community, which has only considered diaspora ties seriously for development aims over the past two decades, Israel has incorporated a strategy for outreach to its global diaspora for over six decades. Between 1950 and 2007, the GDP per capita of Israel has grown an average of 5-6% per year at constant prices, essentially increasing six fold in that time span (Israel Central Bureau Statistics, 2009). And while many factors have played a role in this growth, involving the Jewish diaspora with the future of Israel – whether diaspora individuals planned to live in country or not – has been an integral part of the country’s strategy. Unlike many emerging countries, however, Israel has not relied solely on remittances by individuals living abroad. In fact, remittances place low among the total type of investments made by Jews abroad to Israel. Rather, Israel quickly favored institutionalized forms of investment that would help the state better leverage and disperse funds into key sectors quickly. These tools have included an Israeli Diaspora Bond, promotion of foreign direct investment (FDI), and professional exchanges that would more critically engage the diaspora in the “project” of Israel through complete emersion with its citizens and various sectors. In particular, a consistent effort has been made to involve youth in such exchanges, guaranteeing cultural and personal affinity to the country as well as direct knowledge of its economic and social development challenges.

Diaspora bonds are debt instruments that countries (and sometimes sub-sovereign entities or corporations) use to raise financial capital from their diaspora communities. Diaspora communities are targeted since they are more likely to feel a sense of patriotism toward their
home countries and willingness to invest in it, they may already hold other debt or investments in the local currency creating an interest in buoying that currency to leverage risk, and they are also more likely to understand the overall market of their home countries better than others in the global community and willing to balance the risk with investment for long term gains to their home country (Ketkar and Ratha). Since 1951, Israel has successfully issued such bonds to its diaspora at a discounted rate (essentially a charitable act), thereby ensuring (a) a steady source of income from world Jewry for the state of Israel, (b) leverage in the international markets for Israel’s sovereign credit rating, and (c) significant amounts of capital for development projects within Israel funded from abroad. In fact, Israeli diaspora bonds and U.S. debt guarantees together form the bulk of Israel’s foreign debt, making it one of the most securely indebted countries in the world (Ketkar and Ratha). And although Israel has offered these bonds at a discounted rate for over 60 years to its diaspora, the returns on investment have been strategic since having a bulk of financial capital available for development was viewed as more significant than receiving potentially greater amounts of inflow through small donations that would be dispersed through the economy in untargeted ways.

Beyond Financial Capital: The role of Human, Social and Cultural Capital in Israel’s Development

Beyond financial capital, Israel has also taken the long view on engaging its diaspora’s human capacity for development. In the process of building its education system and infrastructure within the country, Israel recognized that gaining from the experiences and knowledge of Jews around the world would help infuse a crucial form of capital into the country that could not be easily monetized. Beyond education, the exchanges that have taken place between Israel and
Jews around the world have formed a social and cultural affinity for the country resulting in positive externalities in terms of other forms of direct investment, favorable bilateral policies toward Israel, and increased awareness and cultural understanding among the global community of the direction and goals of the state. Additionally, the United Nations cites the importance of engaging diasporas for innovation and creativity ‘capital,’ the impact of which is hard to measure but is easily translated into financial gains through creation of new businesses and expansion of various sectors in home countries (Ionescu, 2007).

Social capital has also taken on particular importance over the past few decades in development policy circles. Personal and institutional trust and social networks, for example, can translate into important gains when it comes to investment in home countries. In the case of Israel, its continuous outreach over many decades and implementation of transparent government institutions and banking systems has given the diaspora a generally high sense of trust that their money, time and effort will be put to good use by the home government for the country’s development. Further, exchanges between Israel and Jews in the diaspora – bringing individuals and groups to Israel to experience life and work alongside others for short periods, for example – have done much to increase a sense of bonding social capital among groups in home and host countries. These strategies have been ongoing for decades and have born positive results in terms of cultivating a sense of trust and community with the diaspora toward the state of Israel. This is a particularly interesting feat since many of these individuals nor their parents have actually lived in, or originated from, Israel itself.
Social Entrepreneurship in Israel

In the younger generation, one effective connection that has been made between Jews abroad and those in Israel is in the area of social entrepreneurship. A simple internet search reveals an explosion of organizations focused on social enterprises in recent years that successfully tie development work in Israel to the resources of the diaspora through global competitions, exchanges, knowledge networks and cultural forums.

Building on the foundational successes of the older generation, Israel has coined itself a “Start-up Nation,” essentially transfixing the language of entrepreneurship and innovation on the entire society and inspiring the younger generation to pick up where the older generation left off. Whereas the Israel of the 1950’s and 60’s was focused on agriculture and manufacturing, the country developed rapidly over time to become a high technology hub with universities and institutes of higher learning to support these growing industries. Today, youth are cross-pollinating between the technology and business industries and the social sector they view as central to the teachings of Judaism and the mission of the state of Israel, to promote a new sector called social entrepreneurship.

To promote social entrepreneurship in Israel, there is often a fluid interchange of people, ideas and activities between Israel and the diaspora, particularly with the U.S. For example, an organization called YEDID (“friend” in Hebrew) seeks to build on ‘Israel’s entrepreneurial spirit’ while bridging the gaps between rich and poor by promoting access to rights, economic advancement, and equal participation in democracy regardless of race, ethnicity or language. YEDID’s founder, Sari Revkin, was named Israel’s social entrepreneur of the year in 2008 by
the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship. Ms. Revkin has strong ties abroad as she completed her Masters at the University of Maryland in the United States and then worked in Baltimore’s Welfare Rights Organization before taking the knowledge and skills she learned abroad back home to Israel.

Another interesting initiative is by Birthright Israel, an organization that brings Jews from the diaspora to Israel to promote an immersive educational and cultural experience. In recent years, Birthright Israel has launched a grant program in social entrepreneurship which offers $10,000 for individuals to come implement projects in Israel that “create vibrant Jewish communities.” The overall goal of this initiative is “to inspire all Israel trip participants and their peers to expand their connections to the land and people of Israel, to deepen their personal commitments to Jewish life, and to find or form a community where Jewish responsibility, learning, and celebration thrive” while becoming “actively engaged in Jewish giving by funding innovative projects that are shaping the Jewish future (Birthright Israel website).”

Other organizations such as PresenTense (PT) actively engage the diaspora in social entrepreneurship through multiple channels. First, PT offers fellowships through their offices based in Israel, the U.S., and Russia. These fellowships train early-stage entrepreneurs to launch low-cost, high-impact ventures, designed to impact the Jewish community. These entrepreneurs are then supported by diaspora professionals who offer training sessions to fellows in a variety of fields relevant for projects that have been launched, and further reach into their networks to find mentors for these early-stage entrepreneurs. All of these efforts are made to synergize the talent of the global Jewish community toward ventures that will have social as well as economic impact in Israel. In the process, it effectively brings this global community closer together in a
symbiotic exchange of cultural, social and business interests that serve a larger goal of home country sustainable development.

In the academic sphere, Israel has successfully engaged students and faculty in universities around the world to promote the country’s interests as well. This effort has gone beyond traditional groups such as Hillel, for example, a network of U.S.-based student groups that often focuses on religious, cultural and political events in support of Israel on campus. The Israeli diaspora has also successfully engaged in research and academic program development on campuses worldwide that allow for exchanges between thought leaders in Israel and Jews abroad to brainstorm and engage on ideas that are of benefit to home country development. At the time of this writing, the first ever Harvard Israel Conference (http://israelconference2012.org/) is being planned by a group of Israeli students who “wanted to bring the Israeli spirit to [the Harvard] campus the way they see it—as that of a vibrant, innovative and eternally optimistic state.” The two main panels, focused on entrepreneurship and innovation, are entitled “Innovating a Region” and “Start-Up Nation,” and feature prominent speakers including Israelis, Diaspora Jews from Harvard and other prominent institutions, and importantly, supporters of the cause from non-Jewish backgrounds, who will all contribute to the two-day event to educate about, learn from, and celebrate the work that is done to further development and entrepreneurship in Israel.

Working Toward Something Bigger

In researching the linkages between diaspora Jews and Israel, one concept emerged repeatedly: that of Tikkun Olam, or ‘repairing the world.’ While the concept itself has a long and
complicated Biblical and Rabbinical history, it is often used in the modern Jewish state to compel citizens to engage in social action for the greater good.

Lessons Learned and Policy Recommendations

This preliminary analysis of how India and Israel have engaged their diaspora communities reveals important lessons and policy recommendations for Egypt. In particular, Egyptians may work together on implementing the following:

1. Creating a global community of tight-knit Egyptians, not just on the topic of social entrepreneurship, but also more broadly in areas of culture, history, and shared values;

2. Creating exchanges by which Egyptians abroad may experience Egypt – not just as tourists, but as natives – and the same true for Egyptians in Egypt to go abroad; this is to create greater understanding of the other’s experiences and background and tighten cultural and emotional affinity for one another;

3. Concept of “transformative” or “venture” philanthropy needs to be better understood in the Egyptian community. Most resources (although still not enough) have been poured into traditional business entrepreneurship and there is still not a clear understanding of the meaning and benefits of investing in social entrepreneurship. Short workshops and/or retreats can be set up to educate investors and those managing CSR funds about the role and potential impact of social enterprise;
(4) Roundtable discussions should be set up between innovators (particularly the youth that make up the majority of the unemployed and the majority of entrepreneurs globally) and investors so that they may better understand their respective cultures and aims and hone in on a mutually beneficial investor-investee relationship based on partnership rather than traditional investor-driven, hierarchical relationships which may not result in the greatest level of impact or productivity;

(5) Psychology matters: creating a spirit of entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation can go far to actually helping Egyptians actualize these goals in reality. Other successful diasporas have launched forward partially from the internalized belief that they are indeed “a nation of entrepreneurs” (Israel) and “Going places” (India). Believing is often a first step in actuating any success;

(6) Creating a sense of community is not dependent on size of country - Israel is less than 1/10th the size of Egypt and India is more than 10 times the size of Egypt; yet both have managed to foster a strong self-identity and linkages to their diasporas that have benefited both the home country as well as their respective communities worldwide;

(7) The media in all its forms (print, TV, radio, social) need to be optimally utilized to help create this vision of a “New Egypt based on innovation and entrepreneurship” to make this option appealing for unemployed youth such that they take the initiative to translate their ideas into action;
(8) Resource Centers should be established across the country, led by existing organizations that support entrepreneurship in Egypt (e.g. Ashoka, NM, Endeavor, Google, Flat6Labs) and further catalyzed by the professional capacity of Egyptians throughout the diaspora to serve as physical spaces where emerging entrepreneurs can learn more about the process, methods, investment and mentorship opportunities available from the wider Egyptian community to launch, sustain and scale-up their enterprises;

(9) Longer term: Need to increase the evidence base around effectiveness of social enterprises so that investors and practitioners may be better informed about what ideas are likely to successfully bear social and financial returns. Israel and India have more transparent research cultures and we can learn from them about the tools and benefits of engaging in such work;

(10) As Egypt becomes more democratic, it will provide an important opportunity for the government to get more involved in creating transparent systems for investment that may channel diaspora funds more effectively into the country for sustainable development with both positive social and economic impact. For this mode of investment to be effective, however, diaspora Egyptians must feel a sense of trust in the system that their money will be fully directed for development purposes, and that systems for accountability and good management practices have been put in place to track such investments.
Future Research

Egyptian researchers should continue to learn from what other countries have done to partner with their diasporas and indeed should engage in rigorous research to evaluate the programs and policies that are put into place in Egypt. To build on our current research exploring the role of diaspora communities to promote development and social entrepreneurship in home countries, we plan to undergo a more in-depth analysis of instruments that have been used in other contexts, as well as interview prominent diaspora organizations from other countries that have successfully employed partnerships with their home countries. It is our hope that this work will inform policymakers, practitioners, investors and entrepreneurs alike in their quest to bridge gaps of opportunity for the development of a New Egypt.
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