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CREATING KNOWLEDGE TO END POVERTY

DID SELF-HELP SAVE EGYPT?

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On 28 January, 2011, the police withdrew from Egyptian cities. The youth quickly formed *ad hoc* committees to defend their neighbourhoods. The speed and organisation of these committees surprised most Egyptians, led to believe for so long that 'self-help did not exist in Egypt'. The government always blamed its failure to reduce poverty on the growing population and its high dependency on the state. However, was it in fact self-help that *for so long* saved the Egyptian state from failing?

Despite improvements in education and health, more than 21.6% of Egyptians (about 18 million) still live in poverty (EHDR, 2010, 249). Our research examines whether a more active role for the poor can lead to more sustainable poverty reduction strategies.

We conducted 150 interviews in three sites in Egypt: Manshiet Nasser (a large Cairo slum area); Tafahnā Al Ashraf (a Delta region village); and rural villages in Menia. The aim was to explore perceptions of wellbeing and to examine patterns of self-help initiatives undertaken to 'fill in' the gap left by the incompetent state.

Tafahnā presents an Islamic model of self-help. A local leader, using an Islamic discourse, mobilised the community to establish village income-generating and educational projects. Activists' dedication to one idea, active local leadership, increased communal participation and availability of funds to sustain the initiative were key factors for success. Religion and ethics encouraged individuals to reconcile their self-interests with communal goals.

The case of Manshiet Nasser illustrates the difficulties encountered by self-help initiatives among the urban poor. These include distorted understanding of volunteerism, dependence on support from donor agencies, and limited scope and financial sustainability of initiatives.

The case of anti-FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) women's groups and informal quarry workers in Menia demonstrated the role of 'rights-based' initiatives in protecting the rights of vulnerable groups and helping

them voice their needs. It also showed how local NGOs can facilitate self-help, by creating a suitable environment for initiatives to thrive.

Success factors

Social capital and communal participation play a key role in any successful self-help initiative. The scope of the initiative should be wide enough to address communal needs and limited enough to allow activists to achieve their goals effectively. A gradualist approach to administration helps initiatives to widen their scope after establishing adequate institutional structures. The relationship between external actors and self-help activists is crucial. The government and other external supporters need to create a suitable environment in which the activists can operate.

Our research found that poor people *can* initiate, manage and sustain their own projects to produce permanent improvements in their living conditions. To establish these initiatives,



Anti-FGM women's self-help group in Menia, Egypt.

poor people have to overcome restrictive state regulations and unequal hierarchical power relations. In doing so, they discover their inherent strengths, and are empowered to generate new collective capabilities to envision and achieve a better future.

This research also challenges some perceived truths about the role of international players and national governments in providing for the poor. Poor people may not have sufficient resources to help themselves, but they still do not need to be *helped* – instead, they need to be *empowered*.

Key policy points

- Policymakers need to realise that the poor are actively undertaking their own grassroots initiatives to improve their wellbeing.
- Coordinated communal processes, dedicated local leaders, a unifying idea, adequate institutional structures and supportive external facilitators are necessary for the success of self-help in Egypt.
- The *nature* of external support is important. External actors and donors should seek to create a suitable environment for the poor to 'empower' themselves.

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Email: solava.ibrahim@manchester.ac.uk. This briefing is based on the author's PhD research and on her forthcoming book, *The Power of the Poor*.

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