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Social Enterprises and Employment: Case Studies from Egypt

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Abstract

The social economy is considered a key factor in providing employment opportunities and improving living conditions for vulnerable groups. Although there are no official statistics regarding the number of social enterprises in Egypt, the growing number of different actors in the ecosystem, as intermediary support organisations, indicates the prosperity of social economy. Based on eight case studies of social enterprises in Egypt, the discussion in this research shows that social enterprises mostly attract young, educated Egyptians. They operate in different sectors, such as education, the environment and crafts. They generate direct and indirect economic opportunities, mainly for women, young people and informal workers. However, limited access to financial resources and the non-existence of a legal framework for social enterprises are two major barriers to the development of social enterprises in Egypt. These barriers constrain their potential role in facilitating the formalisation of informal employment.

Keywords: Social economy; social enterprises; employment; Egypt

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INTRODUCTION

The Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) or the “*Economy of the people*” (UN-ESCWA, 2016) refers to several types of economic institutions with twin objectives: profit maximisation and social welfare maximisation. The SSE is based on the generation of innovative, transformative and cost-effective solutions to face social and environmental challenges (Kadry, 2013; Wolk, 2007). SSE institutions include mutual associations, cooperatives, women’s self-help groups, unions of informal economy, fair-trade networks, solidarity finance schemes and social enterprises (United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy, 2014; UN-ESCWA, 2016; ILO, 2017a).

SSE institutions play a significant social role in the community where they operate, in addition to their income generating activities. These social entrepreneurs work on solving market failures to build a more sustainable and inclusive economic model. Their social roles include empowering young people and women, tackling climate issues and improving living conditions for the vulnerable groups in the society. Additionally, SSE institutions generate job opportunities for their members, as well as for non-members. For instance, agricultural cooperatives create employment in food production, marketing, credit, insurance and transportation. They provide decent job opportunities for vulnerable groups that are more likely to be trapped in informal employment, such as young people, women and those with disabilities (United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy, 2014; World Economic Forum, 2020).

In the Egyptian context, where unemployment, informal employment and under-employment present major challenges, social enterprises may be considered as key players in generating decent employment opportunities. In Egypt, as well as in other MENA countries, SSE institutions, mainly social enterprises, are prospering. Social enterprises attract the engagement of young, educated Egyptians. Although, there is no official statistics regarding the number of social enterprises, the increasing number of different actors in the ecosystem, mainly intermediary support organisations, indicates the growing number of social enterprises. However, social enterprises face several challenges that may hinder their development, social impact and role in providing decent formal jobs. These challenges include the enabling environment, the legal framework and regulations, financial resources and innovative economic alternatives (UN-ESCWA, 2016).

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a decrease in the commercial activities and the revenues of social enterprises, as with all other enterprises, given the slowdown of economies. Nevertheless, this pandemic may present an opportunity for social enterprises. With the new health, economic and social challenges revealed by the pandemic and with the existing social problems, such as unemployment, hunger and

violence, the role played by social enterprises and other SSE institutions becomes more relevant, especially in the health and services sectors. Locally driven SSE institutions have a better understanding of cultural norms, the social relations within society and the challenges faced. Thus, they may respond quickly and effectively to the changing needs resulting from this health crisis. In Egypt, social enterprises contribute to reducing the prevalence of the pandemic through innovative solutions. Examples of these innovative solutions include: shopping on behalf of the elderly and the needy living alone; providing sterilisation services and platforms for sharing information and raising awareness (Alaa El Din, 2020; EASPD, 2020; El Sayed, 2020; Weaver, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2020; Roan and Udayakumar, 2021)

Within this context, the aim of this research is to provide an overview of social enterprises in Egypt, its ecosystem, the main challenges they face and the role they may play in providing formal economic opportunities. The discussion in the paper is based on eight case studies of social enterprises in Egypt. The paper is organised as follows: Section one gives an overview of the definition of the social solidarity economy, its institutions and the challenges they face; Section two discusses the role played by social enterprises and other SSE initiatives in generating formal employment; Section three represents the social context and ecosystem of social enterprises in Egypt; Section four discusses eight case studies of social enterprises in Egypt; and Section five provides the conclusion.

WHAT IS THE SOCIAL SOLIDARITY ECONOMY?

The “*Economy of the people*” or the Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) refers to several types of economic institutions with twin objectives: profit maximisation and social welfare maximisation. SSE institutions include cooperatives, mutual associations, women’s self-help groups, unions of informal economy, fair-trade networks, solidarity finance schemes and social enterprises. Social and Solidarity institutions differ from charitable organisations, as they are involved in income-generating and market activities. Their activities include health, education, social protection, micro-finance, collective banking and different types of socio-economic services, such as food provision. Additionally, with the new technologies, the SSE includes the sharing economy, such as car-pooling and crowdfunding (Ahmed-Zaid et al, 2013; United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy, 2014; UN-ESCWA, 2016; ILO, 2017a).

The social economy is considered a key factor in generating decent employment opportunities and in improving living conditions of vulnerable groups, such as young people, women and informal workers. SSE institutions empower informal workers through education, capacity building, training and access to information. SSE

initiatives reduce the power of information asymmetry within the labour market and product markets. Additionally, they enhance income levels and ensure their regularity. For instance, when informal self-employed individuals become members of cooperatives, such solidarity strengthens their voice and their business. And as a cooperative, they gain legal recognition, increasing their access to financial institutions and other public services (Mshiu, 2010, United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy, 2014; Utting et al, 2014; Roelants, 2015; ILO, 2017b).

However, SSE initiatives face several challenges, including a restrictive legislative and bureaucratic framework; lack of qualified human capital; and lack of access to technology. Access to financial resources and the non-existence of a legal framework for social economy entities are two major constraints that may hinder the development of the social economy. SSE initiatives apply different business models to achieve their social goals, based on the market they are targeting. The different legal frameworks provide access to different financial resources. For instance, the non-profit organisation framework allows access to philanthropic funding, whilst for-profit structures allow the implementation of commercial activities and income generation (FEMISE, 2016; UN-ESCWA, 2016).

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic became an additional challenge faced by social enterprises and other SSE initiatives. The economic slowdown has resulted in a decrease in their economic activities and revenues. Additionally, access to funds and financial resources became more difficult in such a period of uncertainty. In such a context, social enterprises need to adapt new business models to mitigate the impact of the crisis and ensure their financial sustainability (Alaa El Din, 2020; EASPD, 2020; El Sayed, 2020; Weaver, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2020).

THE SOCIAL ECONOMY AND FORMAL EMPLOYMENT

SSE institutions promote employment and local development, in addition to social and environmental protection, cultural diversity and empowerment. Evidence-based research shows that social enterprises and other SSE institutions are key actors in the transition from the informal to the formal economy, as they provide informal workers with the information, the required skills and the economy of scales needed for such a transition.

The organisation of informal workers in associations or cooperatives allows their voice to be heard and addresses market failures related to access to finance, market information, technology, support services and markets. The Solidarity Economy provides informal workers with the social protection they need, access to credits, new markets and support groups. In India, where informal workers represent

up to 90 percent of the workforce, it is found that 34 non-governmental organisations provide health insurance to their community, especially to the poor informal workers (United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy, 2014; Utting et al, 2014; Roelents, 2015; Van Zeeland; 2015; UN-ESCWA, 2016; Charmes, 2018).

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT AND ECOSYSTEM OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISES IN EGYPT

High poverty rates, population growth, environmental challenges and unemployment, especially amongst the young are major challenges for the Egyptian government, as well as other MENA countries. The informal economy became a major provider for employment, goods and services, mainly for lower income groups (Van Zeeland, 2014; UN-ESCWA, 2016). Within this context, SSE initiatives developed in the region as a provider of basic services and facilities and as a creator of jobs and income. SSE institutions play a significant role in rural areas, by combatting illiteracy, creating and supporting local development projects and empowering women (Ahmed-Zaid et al., 2013).

SSE initiatives are prospering in the MENA region, mainly in Jordan, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. Its value added represents between 1 and 2 percent of GDP, whilst it contributes 4 percent of the created employment. It exists mainly in the form of NGOs, cooperatives, mutual enterprises and social enterprises. However, the presence of SSE institutions in the region is less significant, compared to other regions (FEMISE, 2016; UN-ESCWA, 2016).

In Egypt, social enterprises are the main form of the social solidarity economy. Although, there is no legal framework, known as “*Social Enterprise*”, different enterprises define themselves as “*Social Enterprise*”. This reveals the awareness of these entrepreneurs of the social economy and the role they play in maximising social welfare in their societies, in addition to profit maximisation. These enterprises do not only maximise profit, they also play a significant social role in the community where they operate. These social entrepreneurs work on solving market failures in order to build a more sustainable and inclusive economic model. Their social roles include empowering young people and women, tackling climate issues and improving the living conditions of vulnerable groups in society (World Economic Forum, 2020). For them, profit maximisation is not an objective, it is the tool to achieve and sustain the required social impact.

Whilst there are no official statistics regarding the number of social enterprises in Egypt, the increasing number of different actors in the ecosystem, mainly intermediary support organisations, indicates the growing number of social enterprises. Within this ecosystem, the Egyptian government is a major actor. The government provides support to social enterprises and their social roles through facilitating the paperwork and bureaucracy relating to their activities. Government actors include the Ministry of Social Solidarity and the Ministry of Investment and International Cooperation (The initiative of “*Your company Your idea*”). Social enterprises are mainly medium, small and micro enterprises, with some exceptions; the Institution for the Development of Medium, Small and Micro Enterprises (M.S.M.E.D.A), established in 2017, is considered another major player within the ecosystem. M.S.M.E.D.A is concerned with medium, small and micro enterprises and entrepreneurship; it coordinates and unifies the efforts of all the relevant authorities, including NGOs and initiatives working in the field.

Other organisations, whose role it is to promote the concept of SEs and support social entrepreneurs include non-profit organisations, such as *Ashoka* and *Synergos*. Both are pioneering organisations that provide support to social entrepreneurs and innovators. Higher education institutions are other significant players in the ecosystem through entrepreneurship courses and incubators (Kadry, 2013; Abdou and El Ebrashi, 2015), such as the Faculty of Economics and Political Science (FEPS) Incubator at Cairo University, the AUC venture lab and the Heliopolis University incubator. Additionally, there is an increasing number of local home-grown intermediary support organisations for social enterprises, such as *Nahdet El Mahrousa* and *Flat6* incubators, angel investors, like *Cairo Angels*, or regional networks, such as *Wamda* in Dubai (Abdou and El Ebrashi, 2015). Additionally, the interviewed SEs stated other players, like Care NGO, the World Bank and the British Council.

Social Enterprises in Egypt: Case studies

The discussion in this paper is based on interviews with eight social enterprises. To our knowledge, there are no official statistics or database for social enterprises in Egypt. And as stated in the previous section, there is no legal status of “social enterprises”. Thus, finding a representative sample of social enterprises was not an easy task. Accordingly, the selection of the interviewed enterprises was based mainly on the EMNES network and the snowball effect. The choice of enterprises considered the diversification of the sector, the gender and age of the founders and, most

importantly, the fact that these enterprises declare themselves to be a “Social Enterprise”.

Based on the eight interviews, this section provides an overview of the main characteristics of these enterprises and their roles in job creation. We should consider that the discussion of these case studies cannot be generalised. The conducted interviews were based on a questionnaire² exploring the characteristics of the social enterprise, its activities, its legal and financial situation, in addition to the knowledge of the entrepreneurs interviewed concerning the social economy in Egypt. The aim of the interviews was to understand the ecosystem of social enterprises in Egypt and the role played by these enterprises in generating formal job opportunities.

All those interviewed - founders/CEOs/representatives - define their enterprises as a social one, instead of by their different legal frameworks. This shows the awareness of the founders/CEOs/representatives of what the social economy is and the social role played by their enterprises. Amongst the eight enterprises, four are in the education sector, training and capacity building with a declared social impact: sharing more knowledge, educating people and changing the culture. Three others are in the environmental sector, their main activities include recycling, cleaning the Nile and other areas in Egypt and raising awareness of environmental issues. The eighth one is in the traditional craft field. This enterprise works on promoting Egyptian traditional crafts and avoiding its disappearance. They empower women and men working in this field by providing training and the development of support products.

Seven of the eight institutions were created after 2000 and can be considered as small enterprises, given their size and budget. There is only one exceptional enterprise interviewed that may be considered the “oldest” and “biggest” amongst the eight enterprises, as it was created in 1977.

Amongst the eight enterprises, only two were founded and managed by women, and seven founders/CEOs are less than 40 years old. They are well educated and are aware of the importance of the social role played by their institutions. This new generation of entrepreneurs has a powerful desire for social change; they use innovative ideas to create a financially sustainable model that allows them to achieve their social goals (Schulyer, 1998; Kadry, 2013). Profit maximisation for them is not an objective, it is the tool to achieve and sustain the required social impact. They all agreed that, in the case of realising profits, they will be re-invested to expand their activities and to increase the numbers of those benefitting from their activities.

In line with the literature, all the interviewed social enterprises declared that the lack of a legal framework and the limited availability of funds and financial resources are the main challenges facing this “new” business model:

² The questionnaire is available in Annex I

Legal Framework:

All those interviewed are aware of the concept of the social economy and they define themselves as a social enterprise, despite the non-existence of a legal framework for social enterprises. Given the restrictive legal framework, social enterprises may take the form of cooperatives, for-profit companies or not-for profit companies (Abdou and El Ebrashi, 2015). Our interviewed social enterprises are enterprises with limited liabilities or sole proprietorship. Being for-profit companies provides them with more flexibility, space to grow, allowing them to be financially sustainable through paid activities (Abdou and El Ebrashi, 2015).

They all agreed that the main reason behind the choice of such a legal framework was to be able to work/produce and create profit as a means to achieve their social goal in a financially sustainable way (Kadry, 2013; Hockerts, 2010). The two chosen legal frameworks - limited liability company and sole proprietorship - provided a more flexible legal framework compared to the non-profit organisation framework. However, three of the social enterprises interviewed have created a non-profit organisation as an additional arm to their enterprises. This is justified by the funding opportunities that may be provided for non-profit organisations.

All those interviewed agreed that having a special legal framework for social enterprises is highly necessary for the development of the social economy in Egypt. Such a legal framework must take into consideration the twin objectives of such enterprises: profit maximisation and the social impact. This would enable them to operate more efficiently.

Access to finance and borrowing:

Access to financial resources represents an important challenge, not only for SEs, but also for all SMEs, in addition to their important roles in creating economic opportunities and reducing poverty. The founders of SEs depend mainly on their own financial resources or personal supporters. Another source of funds includes grants from international donors and organisations supporting entrepreneurship. Additionally, the limited liability enterprise framework allows them to create events and activities to sustain themselves financially.

Other challenges include bureaucracy, society's acceptance and the different stakeholders in their fields. The interviewed female founders face more challenges and pressure from society. They explain that it was difficult to enter such a field and establish their activities as women, given the stereotypes and the fact that only certain fields are considered as acceptable by society for female employment.

All the interviewed SEs, except the "biggest" one, may be considered as small enterprises, given the number of employees. They all contribute in creating economic

opportunities. They mainly provide job opportunities for young, motivated individuals who believe in the social objective of the enterprise. In addition to the full time and part time employees in the SE, those interviewed explain that they play an important role in indirectly creating jobs through their activities and events. For instance, one of the interviewed founders explains that her SE has 20 employees of which 50% are part time. But, on average this SE may create 200 jobs per year through their organised events.

The interviewed SEs work closely with informal operators and workers in different fields. Bureaucracy and the high cost of formalisation pose a significant challenge for these workers. Social enterprises may provide the informal employees with training and support to improve the quality of their output, to export or to work in better conditions. However, they do not have the financial resources or tools to play a significant role in the transition of these informal workers to formality.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Social economy institutions, mainly social enterprises, are prospering in Egypt. These enterprises operate as limited liability companies or sole proprietorships. And the founders/ CEOs declare themselves as social enterprises, given their twin objectives of maximising profit and maximising social welfare. The importance of this new business model is growing, as reflected by the increasing number of social enterprises and supporting organisations.

Based on eight case studies of social enterprises in Egypt, the paper explores the social economy ecosystem, the characteristics of these enterprises, the challenges they face and their role in generating decent jobs. The eight interviewed enterprises operate in the education sector, training and capacity building, the environment and handicrafts. They generate direct and indirect economic opportunities mainly for young people, women and informal workers.

The limited access to financial resources and the lack of a legal framework that recognises the twin objectives of these enterprises, hinder their development and limit their potential role in making the transition from informal to formal employment. Nevertheless, there is a potential role to be played in the future, if the social enterprises are recognised as a legal entity that would benefit from tax incentives, registration benefits, access to finance and other resources (Abdou and El Ebrashi, 2015).

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has appeared as a new barrier to the development of social enterprises. The economic slowdown results in a decrease in

their revenues and the financial opportunities available. However, the pandemic may be considered an opportunity for the social economy. The spread of the new coronavirus sheds light on the existing social challenges and on new ones. In such uncertain times, the role played by locally driven social enterprises becomes more relevant, especially in the health and services sectors. Therefore, policy makers have to ensure the sustainability of these enterprises, through a package of regulations and incentives that consider the social role that can be played by these profit maximising enterprises.

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Annexe I: Questionnaires

Euro- Mediterranean Network for Economic Studies (EMNES)

Social Enterprises and its role in formalising the informal economy

Explain the purpose and the objectives and the study, as well as what is EMNES

Explain that information will remain confidential (if the institution and /or interviewee does not wish to be cited in the study). Anonymity will be respected.

Does the person accept that the discussion be recorded?

1. Name of the enterprise
 2. Branch of activity
 3. Description of the goods produced or the services provided
 4. Date of creation
 5. Legal status of the enterprise
 6. Legal framework within which the enterprise operates
 7. How many persons are employed as permanent paid employees
 8. Do you employ volunteers?
 - 8.1 If yes, how many and for how many hours per day or per week per person on average
 9. What is your targeted clientele or who are your targeted beneficiaries?
 10. Annual turnover or budget of the enterprise (last year)
 11. Structure of the budget (main sources of funding):
 - % government subsidies
 - % international institutions subsidies
 - % bilateral institutions subsidies
 - % sale of products or services
 - % other (specify)
 12. What is your function in the enterprise?
 13. Is it you who originally had the idea of this enterprise?
 - 13.1 If yes, could you explain your motivations and your objectives? And the main challenges you faced at creation and now?
-

(The interviewer must restart the discussion as often as necessary, in order to go deeply into the subject)

13.2 If not, who was the creator and what were his/her motivations and objectives? And the main challenges he/she faced at creation and now?

14. Could you specify the social role of the enterprise?

15. If there is a positive balance between resources and expenditures (for non-profit institutions) or a profit (for enterprises of the economic sector) at the end of the year, what use is made of this surplus?

- Expand the activity and the number of beneficiaries
- Re-invest in the activity
- Share with stakeholders

Social Solidarity Economy

- 1- Do you know what is “social enterprise”?
- 2- Can you define your institution as “social enterprise”?
 - a. If yes. Why?
 - b. If No. Why?
- 3- Do you know other “Social Enterprises”?
 - a. If yes. Can you nominate them?
 - b. Would you share their contacts with us?
- 4- In your opinion, what is the level of recognition of the “Social Solidarity Economy” in Egypt today (politico-legal, social and economic)?
- 5- Do you know who are the actors who facilitate the activity of the social enterprises?

- 6- Do you have access to (economic, financial, legal) data on the SSE in Egypt?
 - a. If yes, which ones?
- 7- Do you think the social enterprises may contribute to the formalisation of the informal sector in Egypt, in addition to its social role?
 - a. If yes. Through which channels?

Last question: Anything you would like to share with us about your activity, or the social and solidarity economy?

To be filled in by the interviewer

Name of the person interviewed:

Phone, email:

Were there other persons present during the interview? Who and why?

Date and location:

Atmosphere of the interview:



ABOUT EMNES

The Euro-Mediterranean Network for Economic Studies (EMNES) is a network of research institutions and think tanks working on socio-economics policy in the Euro-Mediterranean. EMNES is coordinated by the Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association (EMEA).

The research conducted by EMNES Researchers, Associates and Fellows aims to design sound and innovative socio-economic models that are inclusive, sustainable and employment creative, to devise new models for regional integration and to provide policy recommendations towards this goal.

EMNES research agenda is organized around the following mutually reinforcing and interconnected themes led by EMNES researchers, associates and fellows:

- Governance, institutions and institutional reforms;
- Macroeconomic policies and employment creation;
- Private sector, micro, small and medium –sized enterprises development, entrepreneurship and social business;
- Digital economy;
- Healthcare policy;
- Human capital development, education, innovation, skill mismatch and migration;
- Labor markets, employment and employability;
- Finance, financial inclusion and the real economy;
- Sustainable development;
- Regional integration;
- Euro-Mediterranean economic partnership;
- Scenarios analysis and foresight.

EMNES performs **research activities**, disseminated through series of internal and external publications (studies, working papers, policy papers, policy-graphics and books) and the organization of **annual conferences**, and **policy workshop meetings and online webinars** to bring together leading researchers, policy makers and representatives of the civil society to discuss and debate optimal policies for the future of the region.

EMNES research and outputs are underpinned on the **four fundamental principles: Independence, Scientific Excellence, Policy Relevance and Deep Knowledge of Euro-Mediterranean Affairs.**

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