



A Case Study in Inclusiveness

Focusing on Better Life Association's participatory process in women's empowerment highlighting tools for developing sustainable communities

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Amira H. Abdel-Aziz
Aliaa A. Mahmoud
COLLECTIVE ROUTES LLC

This case study is a byproduct of a larger consultancy, YPE-DAPP, implemented by Oxfam to demonstrate the partner organizations' abilities in incorporating the inclusiveness value and other organizational and developmental values on their organizational and/or programmatic levels using the case study approach. The consultancy team applied primary data sources, including interviews, focus groups, and a workshop with the partner organizations' employees and community members, in addition to secondary data sources, which included project reports, relevant documents, and literature.

Better Life Association was established in 1995 in El-Minya Governorate to raise awareness about the rights of marginalized and deprived communities, such as quarry workers, fishermen, farmers, and women. Better Life works on empowering its community members with a social and economic empowerment approach as an implementation of the human rights approach.

As per Reham Karam, Program Manager at Better Life, the association describes **inclusiveness** as integrating the most marginalized individuals into the returns of community development through providing them with a better quality of life; consequently, the association builds their strategic vision and plans to achieve social justice. Women are occupying the largest percentage of Better Life's projects, empowering them on personal, educational, economic, and social levels. When the founder established the association in his village, he was concerned with raising awareness against circumcision, which was widespread among households and caused death and severe health problems. It took him time to build trust with the community, but then people felt that the association was caring about them, especially after integrating two types of projects together: awareness and infrastructure development, as the village lacked many basic services and infrastructure.

In its early beginnings, the association discovered that 50% of women in Upper Egypt's rural villages had neither birth certificates nor national IDs. Subsequently, in cooperation with the government, they were able to issue them thousands of formal documents.

Shortly, the association has set a broader vision for women empowerment with different interventions. Aside from activating the existing health units and developing health services in the community, the association provided literacy programs with the aim of decreasing illiteracy rates, which resulted in a large number of women getting literacy certificates, a number of women completing their formal education, and another group getting jobs with their literacy certificates.

Afterwards, the association encouraged women toward financial literacy through microloans projects to start running their small and micro businesses, such as selling groceries or vegetables. In addition to supporting a group of leading women to register as members in local popular councils to develop their leadership skills and to get engaged in society, they have a vital role in raising local issues with the government and presenting their local communities.

Women tend to be more supported by their presence in groups together, so they started to organically organize community movements that represent each village. They used to support each other in social cases; for instance, they made a collective decision not to circumcise their daughters.

By time, the Better Life Association helped them in formally forming and registering the initial form of women's cooperatives. Women continued working with the support of Better Life until the number of cooperatives reached about 20 cooperatives managed by empowered women who were members of Better Life projects.

Beside its work in El-Minya, Better Life conducted capacity-building training for working women in Aswan factories, introducing them to the association's activities. Better Life then observed that these women need financial and business literacy empowerment, but unlike El-Minya, the community is most familiar with handicrafts and not agriculture. People in Aswan have different backgrounds and cultures, e.g., Nubian, urban, rural, and tribal, in addition to a large population





who moved with their families from other governorates to find better job opportunities in this touristic city.

However, there were neither organizational formations nor funding bodies that supported women's projects; therefore, the association started building awareness among women about establishing cooperatives. The idea of a working woman in such projects was rejected by many spouses and family members, particularly because it required occasional trips to Cairo. However, Better Life helped women apply collective pressure to their families, and the issue was resolved when women spoke to other women's families and felt trust in the cooperative's members.

In addition to providing legal, managerial, and financial advice, the association assisted women in registering their cooperatives under the Ministry of Social Solidarity, putting them in contact with local and international supporting organizations, such as the National Council for Women, and the Social Fund for Development and international donors.

According to Egyptian law, establishing a cooperative is the way people operate a small economic for-profit project while having a collective capital. Therefore, each of the 23 founding women shared an amount of EGP 1,200 with an opportunity to install the amount up to 6 months, so they formed a collective capital of about EGP 28 thousand, which was challenging because their economic level was already unstable. Better Life organized an exchange visit for women in Aswan to meet women in El-Minya, which motivated them further in establishing their cooperatives.

Women faced several challenges in forming and managing cooperatives, such as the bureaucratic registration process and bylaws; financing the cooperative with no guarantee of receiving a financial return; and working together as a team, particularly given their different backgrounds and cultures.

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When women wanted to rent a venue, the property owner told them: You are all women; I want to deal with men! But luckily, Better Life was in contact with coordinators in the governorate and asked them to become a linkage between women and the property owner, Rafik Samouel, Better Life Financial and Administrative Manager.

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It took the cooperative about two and a half years to overcome these challenges and to build the awareness and capacities of women who became able to manage, operate, and gain a basic profit. Afterwards, other challenges appeared related to product development, marketing, and financial skills, which was a motive for Better Life to provide women training on these skills. Another challenge was the geographical distance, that women had to travel to other cities to buy raw materials or attend exhibitions.

Better Life is continuously supporting women to improve the products' quality standards along with financial, technological, creative, and administrative sustainability. In addition, women are keen to reach local and international markets, representing Aswan's identity.



We started to assign tasks; looking frequently for exhibitions dates, locations, number of visitors, age group, and social class. Then based on this information we prepare the appropriate products. Each woman has a talent, someone is good at presenting, someone is good at marketing, someone is good at design, etc., Sahar El Sheikh, Chairperson of the cooperative in Aswan.



In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) and the Central Administration in Aswan governorate, women started to produce face masks, distributing them for free to local communities, medical centers, and service centers. As well as sterilizing public spaces and leading awareness campaigns to educate the community about COVID-19. Also, they started to cook and sell meals in order not to halt their business activities. All these activities aided in their community's recognition; people started to ask them about their activities and were interested in knowing about their work in handicrafts. At this time, tourism was nearly stopped, which is the main revenue-generating business in Aswan. Thus, Better Life addressed the market outside Aswan and empowered women to sign a protocol with the Cooperative Union in Cairo to register in exhibitions all over Egypt, plus encouraging women to sell their products online through Facebook and the Jumia online store. Better Life trained women to manage the online logistics for orders and started developing its own online store where women can exhibit their products.

The development in women's personalities was evident. By expressing themselves, speaking in public, and convincing others, they developed their self-confidence. Despite having no prior academic or professional experience, they developed their business abilities and this helped them in other areas of their lives, e.g., continuing their education or improving their relationship with their families after learning how to interact with different people. Furthermore, women are currently strengthening others' capacities; as a result, there are currently over 500 registered members in the cooperatives. Women also started to organize awareness campaigns in their communities emphasizing the value of "decent work for women," outlining its benefits on the personal and social levels.

Coexistence and community presence in development are the first priorities in any intervention. In order to achieve an appropriate and sustainable intervention on the ground, it is then necessary to assess the needs of community members, provide them with services based on their actual necessities, and involve them in the process without undervaluing the support of specific partners, such as husbands and family members in the case of women's empowerment.





Cairo, Egypt

www.collectiveroutes.org

info@collectiveroutes.org
