

# Social participation in Egypt

Civil Society's former experience and new opportunities

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All for Equity

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## Executive Summary

Al Shehab Institution for Comprehensive Development, a civil society organization in Egypt, has been working since 2001 in one of the largest urban informal settlements in Greater Cairo. The objective of the organization's mission is to build and strengthen the capabilities of people so that they can actively participate in addressing their unfulfilled needs, and influence the shaping of policies that affect their local community and well being. This organization, in collaboration with national and local non-governmental organizations, has been addressing the opportunities and key constraints for social participation that are experienced by the people of Ezbet el Hagana. Through the social participation of residents, many of the social determinants which have resulted in their poor health are being addressed, such as inadequate housing, poor provision of water, sanitation, solid waste removal, and lack of access to quality health care and education. Social participation has empowered residents to take action to improve their own daily lives, and to communicate their needs and problems to local authority service providers. Opportunities for civil society action are opening up as Egypt is undergoing a significant political and economic transition that began on January 25<sup>th</sup> 2011. This is encouraging the social participation of citizens and civil society organizations to prioritize their needs to realize a just and equitable society, and providing them with opportunities to make their voices heard.

## Introduction

This case study explores the experience of Al Shehab Institution for Comprehensive Development, a civil society organization which has been working since 2001 in one of the biggest urban informal settlements in Greater Cairo. The objective of the organization's activities is to build and strengthen the capabilities of people so that they can actively participate in addressing their unfulfilled needs, and influence the shaping of policies that affect their local community and well being.

Egypt is undergoing a peaceful transition that began on January 25<sup>th</sup> 2011. The recent political and social changes are expanding opportunities for citizens and civil society organizations to actively participate, to prioritize their needs to realize a just and equitable society, and provide them with opportunities to make their demands heard. In such a changing environment with promising democratic spaces for people and civil society groups, poverty, exclusion, and ill-health remain pressing problems. To change national social and economic policies and priorities will take time; to have an impact on

people's lives will taken even longer. Therefore, it is important to document the activities carried out by Al Shehab and identify and address the key constraints to social participation experienced by the people of Ezbet el Hagana.

This analysis also provides a guide on how to address social determinants of health and involve community members in different activities in order to promote among them the sense of inclusion, empowerment and the ability to have some control over measures that determine their health. It also provides an example of the important role of civil society groups in addressing health inequities and gaps within the country. The study highlights the vital role of other civil society organization actors such as the Cairo based organizations, the Association for Health Environment and Development (AHED), and the Development Support Center (DSC) to develop the capacities of local leaders and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to realize their desired goals.

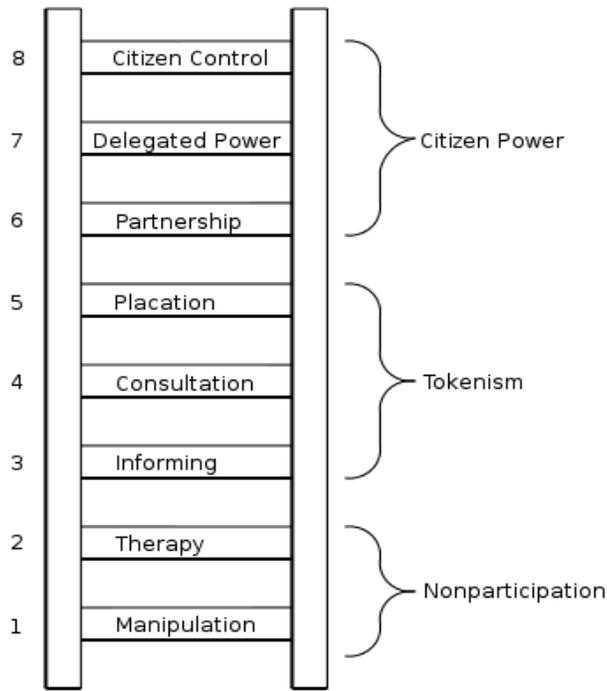
The process of social participation and community involvement can take different forms. The process can *inform*: providing information that can assist people in problem-solving; *consult*: soliciting and encouraging people's feedback; and *involve* by directly engaging the community and the broader public in a trustworthy process of voicing diverse concerns, interests and hopes. It can foster *collaboration* by building a steady partnership with the community and initiating a process of inclusively developing ideas, decisions and alternatives. It can *empower*, a situation in which policy and decision-making is in the hands of people and local communities.

Sherry R. Arnstein, writing in 1969, developed an eight level ladder of participation, see figure 1.<sup>1</sup> She associates citizen participation with citizen power and control that “enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future”. For her, partnership is most effective when participants have an organized and resourced base from which to work, and to which they are accountable.

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<sup>1</sup> Arnstein S. 1969. The ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the Institute of American Planners* 35 (4): 216-24.

**Figure 1: Rungs on the ladder of citizen participation**



The Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) defines civil society as “the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes, and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family, and market though, in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are complex. Civil society is often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development nongovernmental organizations, community groups, women’s organizations, faith-based organizations, professional organizations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions, and advocacy groups.<sup>2</sup>

The WHO’s Commission Secretariat considered that civil society engagement in the CSDH process as an important opportunity. “The engagement of civil society (CS) is vital to this process and to the

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<sup>2</sup> CHS (2008). *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health*. Geneva, World Health Organization.

Commission's success. Such engagement will: provide a global platform for CS voice and advance CS agendas relative to social determinants; strengthen capacities among participating CS organizations; enhance learning from community level; promote country action shaped by civil society knowledge and concerns; broaden the political uptake of the Commission's messages; and improve the chances of sustainable impact"<sup>3</sup>.

The final report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) affirmed that civil society groups from the global to the local level are a vital bridge between policies and plans and the reality of change and improvement in the lives of all. By helping to organize and promote diverse voices across different communities, civil society can be a powerful champion of health equity. The report also stated that "many of the milestones towards health equity in a generation will be marked – achieved or missed – by the attentive observation of civil society actors".<sup>4</sup>

Ezbet El Hagana is an urban slum area located in north-eastern Cairo, situated between two prestigious neighborhoods and close to the airport. The population is estimated by the local authority to be at least one million. An accurate census of this area has never been conducted. The area is defined as an "informal settlement" as people settled without formal permission on desert land belonging to the state. Residents include around 4500 refugee families, mainly from Sudan and Somalia.

Between June 2008 and July 2009 an analysis of the social determinants of health in Ezbet El Hagana was carried out, as a collaboration between Al Shehab, the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office of WHO initiative on Social Determinants of Health and health equity, the Association for Health and Environmental Development (AHED) and the Development Support Center (DHC).

Qualitative studies provided an opportunity for individuals and groups of people to express their own ideas about the social determinants of ill health. A follow up quantitative sample survey asked individuals to prioritize social determinants and estimate their health impact. The table below identifies

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<sup>3</sup> Strategy for systematic engagement of civil society in the work of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health Status report 17 June 2005

<sup>4</sup> CHS (2008). *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health*. Geneva, World Health Organization, page 23-4.

those social determinants having a high impact in the sample survey, as well as those identified through qualitative methods. Some problems are shared by a large number of households. Others, such as poor working environment, and family, “tribal” or clan disputes may only affect a relatively small number of families but the impact on the security and health of those affected may be severe.

While there are a number of different ways to rank individual items, the table is intended to provide a general indication of the priority social determinants which residents recognize as being associated with ill-health. The quantitative survey was conducted during a national shortage of subsidized bread, which sold for 10 piasters, compared to 25 piasters for unsubsidized bread. As bread is the biggest single food item, and residents depend on subsidized bread purchased from special outlets, bread shortage was the first concern identified in the survey.

**Table 1:** Summary of social determinants of health identified in Ezbet el Hagana

	Quantitative findings: sample survey	Qualitative studies
1.	Bread shortage; food insecurity	Lack of clean water, sanitation
2	Drug addiction	Poor housing quality
3	Unemployment	Lack of work opportunities, unemployment
4	Insecurity	Poor quality and unaffordable services, especially health services
5	Violence (fights/beatings/police reports)	Lack of garbage disposal services; presence of garbage
6	High prices of apartments and late marriage	Violence and drug addiction
7	Absence of social protection	High voltage wires
8	Child labor	Insecurity and lack of protection
9	Divorce or husband fleeing from responsibilities	Racism and lack of protection for refugees and asylum seekers

**Key constraints for effective social participation in Ezbet El Hagana:**



Activating community participation and initiating a participatory process to move community members from being passive recipients of services to active actors capable of voicing their demands and holding duty bearers accountable both locally and nationally is challenging. Promoting social participation within communities is constrained by the high degree of passivity and feeling of dependency among community members, and a long-standing mistrust of organizations and outside actors. The local and national government has been perceived as ignoring the plight of residents. Such views are fueled by structural factors inside the local community such as extreme poverty and widespread violence particularly against women and members of minority groups such as asylum seekers and refugees. Effective social participation requires a supportive environment and political will. The paper will discuss and elaborate the main challenges Al Shehab faced in actively engaging people and working in partnership with them, instead of on their behalf, to control the determinants of their wellbeing and human rights.

Al Shehab Foundation for Comprehensive Development was founded in 2001 by a group of activists and youth.

**Our Mission**

Promoting and developing slum and poor areas and empowering the residents of these areas to own their tools and resources, in order to be able to defend their rights.

**The Strategic Goals of Al Shehab:**

- 1- To empower the most marginalized groups within the poor and slum areas.
- 2- To alleviate the all forms of discrimination and violence against minorities and to achieve the integration between the individuals within the local communities.
- 3- To provide access to the infrastructure for the residents of the poor and slum areas.
- 4- To enhance the community participation of the residents within the poor and slum areas.
- 5- To build the capacity of the institution to enable it to achieve its goals.

[www.shehabinstitution.org](http://www.shehabinstitution.org)

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Shehab started to work in Ezbet El Hagana in 2001. During the first two years the foundation addressed immediate factors that contribute to poverty and the violation of basic needs particularly among women



and children, the most disadvantaged groups within the local community. The organization implemented activities such as literacy classes, income generation activities for women and artistic and informal activities for children. It later shifted its strategy from tackling direct and basic needs towards a “rights-based” approach to organizing the local community and empowering women and men with knowledge and tools to improve their quality of life and foster their human rights.

There are 21 community based organizations (CBOs) in Ezbet El Hagana; most have been working since the mid-1990s. The great majority are quasi-governmental (founded by the government) or faith-based organizations. They are charity-oriented, providing affordable services (health and educational), financial assistance in terms of low-credit loans, or material assistance in the form of food, school bags and used clothes.

These approaches present a challenge for Al Shehab Foundation. For a long time, residents had been treated as passive beneficiaries and their human potentials to act and create were neglected, thus creating a feeling of social exclusion and learned dependence. These attitudes fostered the expectations of community members for an immediate response to their problems. Residents did not appreciate that social participation is a process that takes time and effort to show positive improvements within the community. At first, many people were unaware of their potential for action, and unwilling to actively participate in addressing the problems the community faces.

To respond to this challenge and foster a culture of social participation, Al Shehab employed a strategy and tactics that respect people's expectations and desires and responds to intermediate determinants of health by encouraging residents and mobilizing them to engage in actions to improve their situation.

### **Providing services as means of community mobilization and organization: shifting the paradigm**

In 2003 Al Shehab trained individuals from Ezbet El Hagana on participatory rapid needs assessment and worked with them to identify the major problems that the community was facing. The poor conditions of housing and lack of access to safe drinking water, sewerage connections and electricity emerged as significant issues that people were struggling with. The state laid sewerage mains in a few streets but most households could not afford to make connections from their houses to the mains. To respond to this real and pressing need, Al Shehab implemented a project to extend sewerage to 750

households, which residents claimed had improved their health status. Al Shehab utilized this project to organize the local community, establishing the first **community committee** in El Hagana during the planning of the project. The committee, which included men and women, worked with Al Shehab to identify the priority catchment area, set criteria for the fair selection of the households, supervise the implementation in the field and evaluate the project. The community committee was the first informal institutionalized base for social participation and citizen involvement in programs and activities in Ezbet el Hagana.

In order to enhance the capacities and skills of the committee members to enable them to engage in advocacy activities to hold duty-bearers accountable, and to mobilize their peers in the local community, the committee carried out a series of capacity development trainings covering different subjects such as the rights-based approach for development, communication and negotiation skills, lobbying and advocacy.

After gaining a deeper understanding of community issues and prioritizing the significant needs and causes of deprivation in Al Hagana, Al Shehab established in partnership with the committee an initiative to "defend people's rights to decent housing". Under this initiative a range of projects were initiated, such as:

- i) Installing roofs for the households to provide protection from sun and rain. The intention is to provide a model of minimum requirements for decent safe housing and advocate for that model on the community level as well as the level of local and national government. The model identified community based strategies to tackle bad housing conditions which were also a health risk.
- ii) Mobilizing local residents and affected groups by collecting signatures for a petition identifying the most common housing concerns in El Hagana and sending it to the head of the local council and the Cairo Governor to make these issues heard at the policy level,
- iii) Members of the committee and different community representatives, together with lawyers from Al Shehab Foundation, participated in the monthly meetings held by the local council

officials and presented citizen's key concerns about the right to housing and the need to work together to figure out possible solutions.

### **Strengthening and scaling-up community committees:**

The work of the community committee, combined with their commitments and enthusiasm, allowed local residents learn about different approaches to working in the community and encouraged more people to participate in these activities. A growing number of people sought to join this committee. Recognizing the need to address another priority issue, a right to education committee and right to safe drinking water committee were formed.

The members of the new committees received a package of skill development trainings to strengthen their community-based capacities and improve their communication skills so that they could voice their demands to the local government. The Development Support Center (DSC) provided this training and helped each committee to set strategic objectives and action plans. DSC also helped the committees and Al Shehab to network with other NGOs, committees and community-based initiatives carrying out similar activities in other informal settlements in Greater Cairo, through organizing and facilitating meetings and field visits to share experiences, success stories, opportunities and key challenges the different actors experiencing in their communities.

Each committee in Ezbet El Hagana collected information to learn more about the issues of concern and to ground their actions in objective local data. For instance, the education committee has worked with Al Shehab since 2008 on participatory research to identify the socio-economic and educational factors that result in disadvantaged children quitting primary schools. After collecting and analyzing the data, a three-day workshop was organized in Al Shehab to plan key interventions with the committee, teachers, the families of affected children and education staff in the local council of Nasr City. Based on the study's findings and the workshop, Al Shehab and the committee are carrying out activities such as: upgrading the infrastructure within the schools in El Hagana, training teachers on active learning methods, promoting a culture of respect for children's rights in the schools and providing after-school courses for children. The committee succeeded in inviting and including members from Nasr City Education Department and working collectively on solving the challenges facing children's right to education and issues that emerged during the implementation of the activities.

### **Changing attitudes and mindsets:**

To change the attitude of dependency common among Ezbet El Hagana residents, Al Shehab and the community committee organized community-based campaigns to expand the base for people's participation and create a "critical mass" that would raise people's awareness about their rights, as expressed in the international human rights conventions. Al Shehab organized public meetings in the main streets of Ezbet El Hagana to debate and discuss issues such as citizen, state and NGOs roles and responsibilities towards the residents. Such meetings in the open air, including women, men and youth, provide adequate space for people, particularly the poor and marginalized, to express their opinions about the issues they face and promote a sense of community and solidarity among them.

### **Local resource mobilization:**

Community-based situation analysis that merely identifies needs and gaps most likely promotes dependency and helplessness among community members and the feeling that they have nothing to provide for their own community. We believe that regardless of how much the community is excluded, they have potential resources that need to be identified and redirected to address problems they are facing. Al Shehab adopted simple techniques to highlight, mobilize and enable people to utilize existing local material and human resources to provide opportunities for genuine citizen-driven development.

#### *a) The social mapping exercise:*

Al Shehab and representatives from each district in El Hagana conducted social mapping exercises to identify resources in each district. Information was provided on community based organizations (CBOs) and their activities, community leaders, the availability and quality of services and facilities (schools, private and public health facilities), economic activities, places of worship, formal and informal social networks and success stories of individual and collective actions to address the key problems in the area.

The findings of each exercise were discussed in open meetings with the residents of the area. Tasks were assigned to local volunteers and cadres to communicate with the identified service facilities/providers, leaders and key persons in the area.



b) Capacity development: from charity to development:

Local community based organizations (CBOs) are an important internal asset of the Ezbet El Hagana community and part of its social fabric. They have a long history in the area, and are rooted in citizens' daily lives and concerns. In order to utilize their capacities and direct their energy toward addressing structural causes of ill-health and deprivation, in 2006/7 DSC provided capacity development programs for three CBOs (Al Moez, Al Fayhaa and Al Hedaya associations) to help to move their approaches towards a developmental approach. The CBOs benefited from trainings on the right-based approach, needs assessment, strategic and operational planning, advocacy, communication, governance and monitoring and evaluation. Also, DSC provided on-going consultations for the CBOs to assist their staff to formulate their objectives and actions. The capacity development process enhanced the CBOs understanding of the importance of rights-based work and shifted the attitude of the staffs to apply developmental approaches rather than only delivering charity handouts. CBOs are now actively involved with the different committees' activities; they participate and present the demands of their constituency in meeting with officials and other stakeholders. Some CBOs initiated media campaigns and invited journalists to listen to local residents explain the key challenges and issues they face. Al Moez association, working in the third district of El Hagana, initiated awareness raising activities to address domestic violence against women. Al Shehab and some of the trained CBO staff trained other CBO cadres who, later on, started to work closely with the education committee and mobilized funds to contribute to the school upgrading program.

### The local and national government relations with the community:

One of the key challenges citizens and civil society groups in El Hagana have been facing has been the perceived lack of concern of governmental authorities and service providers for the needs of local people. There was no community/citizen participation in the processes of planning or making decisions that directly affected local people. The residents have a negative attitude towards local service providers and the local council in Nasr City who, in turn, were said to treat with contempt the residents seeking for their services.

*"Government and authorities forgot us since years, the only time we see officials and politicians around parliamentary election season when they promise us with services and nothing change. I remember in 1995 the parliamentary candidate in his efforts to win votes in the election utilized his connection with policy makers and got the Water Authority to start working on laying water mains in Hagana. A day after the elections results they stopped working and took the pipes back"*

Interviewee from Ezbet El Hagana describing the relation with government and politician, 2006.

### Advocacy:

The right to safe drinking water emerges in all the community meetings and needs assessment assignments as a big issue. This was in spite of significant efforts residents had made to present their case to the Cairo Governorate, the Local Council and the water authority. In 2006, the community committee and Al Shehab formed a twenty member "water committee" to specifically address this issue. The DSC helped the committee members and Al Shehab staff by facilitating strategic planning meetings for the campaign. As a result, participants were able to gain a better understanding about the roles of key stakeholders, and identified appropriate messages and tactics.

To realize its objectives, the campaign employed a range of activities such as:

- i. Gathering evidence: The community representatives worked with Al Shehab staff gathering information about the key reasons for the lack of access to safe water, sources of drinking water among a sample of the deprived households, and documented the direct and structural consequences of the lack of access to safe water in El Hagana.
- ii. Conducting a media campaign to publicize the problem of the lack of access to safe water in Ezbet El Hagana, and to exert pressure on policy makers and executive authorities.



- iii. Lobbying and negotiating with officials and the service provider: Al Shehab facilitated several meetings and discussions between relevant governmental stakeholders and community representatives. The Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources, Water Authority and Cairo Governorate attended some of these meetings. These activities resulted in an agreement with the Water Authority to lay water mains in the second district of Hagana. This step encouraged community members to continue their pressure to ensure that each household in El Hagana has access to drinking water.

***Violence and discrimination against women:***

Sex-based violence undermines women's abilities to actively participate in family and community affairs, as well as having an adverse effect on their health. In El Hagana violence against women and girls is widespread, taking the form of physical, psychological and verbal abuse. Al Shehab considers gender-balance and equity a key principal of all its intervention. In order to ensure that women and girls participate equally with men in different programs and express their opinions freely, Al Shehab is tackling the determinants that deter their full engagement and to promote their participation in domestic and public spheres.

- i. *Addressing domestic violence against women (VAW)* implemented a two year program of action in 2007 providing legal counseling, psychological and medical support for survivors of VAW. More than 330 men and women peers and cadres from the local community were trained to address VAW and spread the messages within their localities. Training topics included women's human rights, the consequences of VAW on women's health and capabilities, in addition to its affect on children and the family well being. The project developed and distributed a legal and service manual to facilitate women's access to the available governmental and non-governmental services.
- ii. *Legal empowerment of women:* One of the factors that contribute to women's vulnerability to violence and exclusion in Ezbet El Hagana is that most of women do not have official documents such as birth certificates and National ID cards. If women do not have these documents, they cannot practice their citizenship right and benefit from educational, economic and health services that could improve their situation. In order to address this issue Al Shehab expanded

the activities of the legal aid unit in Ezbet Al Hagana and helped to register and issue official documents for 7000 women from the community. Also, they organized community-based campaigns to raise residents' awareness about the importance of registering girls and providing them with these official documents. They provided advice and simplified messages directed towards women and girls on how to obtain these documents. This activity also helped to change community attitudes about women's right,

- iii. *Improving girls' skills to access internet:* The few internet cafes in El Hagana cater to boys and young men. Girls are deterred, or forbidden, from going because of the fear that they would be exposed to undesirable content. Thus, girls are effectively prevented from developing a skill that could help them gain employment. Since mid-2007 Al Shehab has been implementing an activity to develop the computer and internet skills of graduates as a means of expanding their employment opportunities and empowering them to interact with the public spheres.

#### **Networking with other civil society groups:**

Building partnership and collaborations with other civil society groups is critically important to enable local NGOs and community groups to acquire the capacities and skills to actively participate in shaping their future. Since its foundation, Al Shehab has developed strategic partnership with DSC and AHED to improve its performance and realize its desired outcomes. For years, as described above, DSC and AHED have provided technical support for Al Shehab and the local community in the form of training in advocacy, participatory needs assessments, strategic planning, and good governance. They have also assisted in enhancing the quality of program implementation, addressing emerging issues from the field, supervising the implementation of activities such as social mapping to ensure accurate quality data. They have also shared their experiences with other similar community initiatives and movements in Egypt.

#### **Social participation in Ezbet El Hagana since January 25, 2011:**

The changes in Egypt after 25 January 2011 encouraged and promoted a new sense of volunteerism and local activism among Ezbet El Hagana residents. The political changes brought by the 18 days of non-violent struggle motivated more people in the local community to initiate actions. A group of young

females and males was formed in February 2011 to clean the streets and collect the garbage, and they are now planning activities in conjunction with the local authorities to develop and maintain a routine system for garbage disposal. In August 2011, residents from El Hagana organized themselves and demonstrated for hours along the nearby Cairo-Suez Desert Road for a pedestrian bridge across the road. Because many children have died or been injured in accidents while crossing this road, residents are continuing their protests until the promise of the local council to build this bridge has been fulfilled.

Since February 2011, Al Shehab staff has continued to organize meetings in El Hagana to discuss new vocabulary of freedom, democracy, and social justice and to discuss how to respond to the new situation. Al Shehab Foundation provided space for the local committees to meet with the emerging political parties to discuss the different challenges people are facing and their views about the just changes they desire. Also, the committees are preparing manifestos that identify the intermediate and structural causes of deprivation which they plan to circulate for signature and circulate to the potential parliamentary and presidential candidates, to obtain their commitments toward the community and to be able to hold them accountable in the future.

Al Shehab is also organizing female domestic workers to develop their capacities and leadership skills to register an NGO to be managed and run by domestic workers themselves, in order to struggle for legal protection<sup>5</sup> and improvements in their social and economic situations.

## Conclusion

The Al Shehab case study to foster social participation and empower residents in Ezbet El Hagana is one example among many similar initiatives that are being replicated in other urban and rural communities in Egypt. Such developments demonstrate the importance of a national commitment to change which gives an increasing role to social participation in the promotion of better health and social outcomes, and greater equity. A focus on equity and rights during efforts to improve living conditions also strengthens social cohesion and personal security.

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<sup>5</sup>According to the present labor law, domestic workers are excluded from legal protection.

Social participation and community empowerment is not an end in itself. It is a dynamic means of building effective participative democracy that includes the voices and the interests of the society and provides space for mutual dialogues, respect and sharing power among different actors.

The efforts of civil society groups to organize citizens on the community level and engage them in the process of voicing their diverse concerns and hopes were considered a remarkable success in the past, considering the prevailing passivity of the local communities, and people's reluctance to meet with officials, and the perceived risks to citizens and civil society groups that struggle for dignity, equity and justice. Now, with political changes and the promising space for people and civil society organizations, the key challenge and real success- we would argue- should be involving people, especially the most disadvantaged populations, to form a majority in the decision-making process and create channels and supportive measures to empower citizen to hold managerial power. Our question is to what extent active civil society groups can adjust their strategy to seize the present opportunities to realize such vision in the current transition period.

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