PATTERNS OF SOCIAL INNOVATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST & NORTHERN AFRICA

The financial economic crisis in 2008, followed by the Arab Spring in 2011, proved how deeply rooted the challenges in the region are. No rapid solutions but a steady transformation toward Sustainable Development is needed. Achieving this, better understanding and empowerment of social innovations in Arab States are crucial in order to speed up this transition.

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In 2013, the OECD stated that extreme poverty afflicts fragile states. There are three causes of illegal migration: economic (i.e. unemployment), socio-political (i.e. inequity, insecurity), ecologic (i.e. natural disasters). Such factors are correlated to Sustainable Development (SD) and transforming communities to be more resilient.
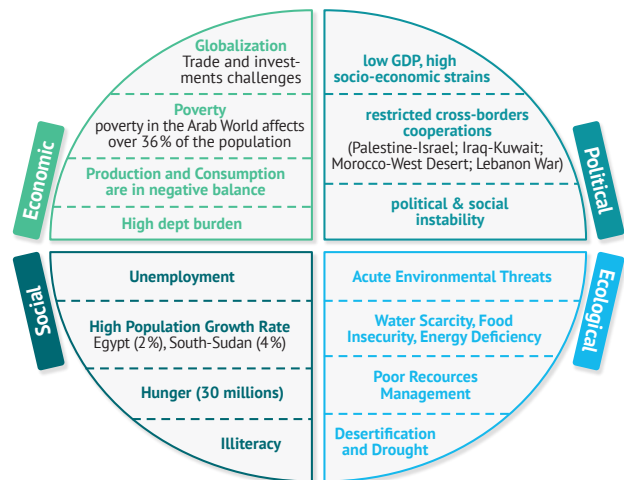
The economic marginalization and socioeconomic disparities in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) were the main reasons for the 2011 uprisings. As a result, illegal immigrants risked the attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea toward Europe, looking for safety and a better life. In fragile States, improvements could be achieved via engagement of both the national priorities (top-down) and smart social innovation (SI) practices led by the public (bottom-up).

SI GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES IN ARAB STATES (TOP-DOWN):

According to the UN Economic & Social Commission for West Asia [1], MENA states are facing serious challenges affecting transition toward SD.

Currently, the UN-2030 Agenda and its 17goals represent a reference for Arab States' policies. The League of Arab States assists governments in advancing the cross-board development, whilst the Council of Arab Ministers develops a regional SD framework and monitors SD implementation. While national SD initiatives by ministries dispersedly exist, participation of private sector and civil society has recently increased significantly [2].

In 2016, many Arab States launched their Vision 2030 for SD. Though there have been significant multiplications in SI initiatives and empowerment of the communities' role after the revolutions, there were no definite national SI-policies facing critical societal challenges. Thus, SI is not explicitly enforced in the ambitious national strategies at the macro level.

Economic
Globalization — Trade and invest-ments challenges
Poverty — poverty in the Arab World affects over 36% of the population
Production and Consumption are in negative balance
High dept burden

Political
low GDP, high socio-economic strains
restricted cross-borders cooperations (Palestine-Israel; Iraq-Kuwait; Morocco-West Desert; Lebanon War)
political & social instability

Social
Unemployment
High Population Growth Rate Egypt (2%), South-Sudan (4%)
Hunger (30 millions)
Illiteracy

Ecological
Acute Environmental Threats
Water Scarcity, Food Insecurity, Energy Deficiency
Poor Recources Management
Desertification and Drought

Challenges affecting SD implementation in Arab World

SI PRACTICES (BOTTOM-UP)

SI practices for SD can address many of those challenges leading to political stability and related transition towards green economy. In Egypt, for instance, there are various societal challenges (i.e. population growth, extreme poverty, food insecurity) that need innovative solutions [3]. State and non-state SI practices shared common objectives including employing/empowering youth and women, disabled and

SEKEM Initiative for SD : 'The Sustainability Flower'

Case Study: SEKEM Initiative
SEKEM was founded in 1977, with the aim of enriching the sustainable human development. Its vision is sustainable development (SD) towards a future where every human being can unfold his or her individual potential; where mankind is living together in social forms reflecting human dignity; and where all economic activity is conducted in accordance with ecological and ethical principles. SEKEM's mission is the development of the individual, society and environment throughout a holistic concept integrating economic, societal life, cultural life and ecology. SEKEM's model for sustainable development integrates different spheres of life to a holistic whole where all parts are at the same time independent and interconnected.
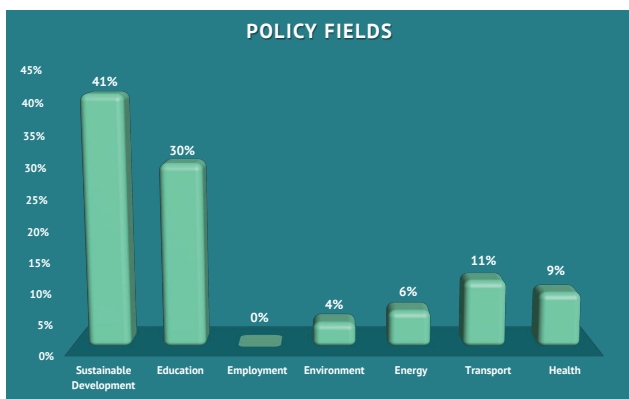
SEKEM Initiative for SD "The Sustainability Flower"

other marginalized groups especially in rural/slum areas, as well as providing them with proper education and services to improve their quality of life. By providing a package of services to beneficiaries, initiatives like SEKEM are built on multi-dimensional practices. [4]
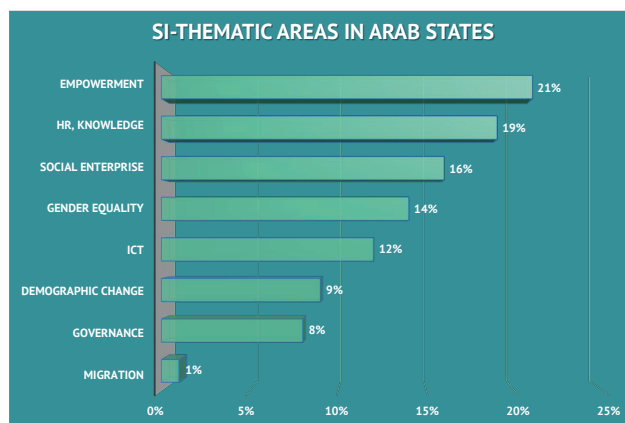
ASSESSING SI PRACTICE FIELDS IN MENA

After two rounds of SI-DRIVE mapping in MENA [5], the results show a predominate interest towards Poverty Reduction and SD as well as Education. Considering unemployment as the main cause of poverty, it can be noticed that it could effectively be solved via SI that provides more jobs. Interestingly, however, employment was not represented. The MENA region is still open for SI practices and promising opportunities are present. After 2011, SI initiatives have emerged tackling unemployment (i.e. with a focus on social entrepreneurship). Consequently, foreign organizations invested millions to fight poverty via employment. Such initiatives are still in the development phase so it is still too early to measure their impacts. While women in MENA are facing many socio-economic

Mapped SI Cases per Policy Field in Arab States

and cultural obstacles (illiteracy, unemployment, cultural restrictions, early marriage, etc.), there is a fairly balanced gender ratio of SI case-founders. Why has this been the case? As SI is a bottom-up approach more often, SI initiatives are, in essence, concerned mainly to tackle immediate needs of the people, whilst tending to ignore the wider societal structures which have caused these social needs. Statistics [5] indicate that MENA women are active and play a significant role in community development. Thus, SI initiatives for gender equity, women empowerment, support of early education for young girls and women's rights in work environments (i.e. wages, sexual harassment, working hours, etc.) are needed to be openly advanced at all levels. Governments and media need to be involved in this process.

Themes of mapped SI practices in MENA
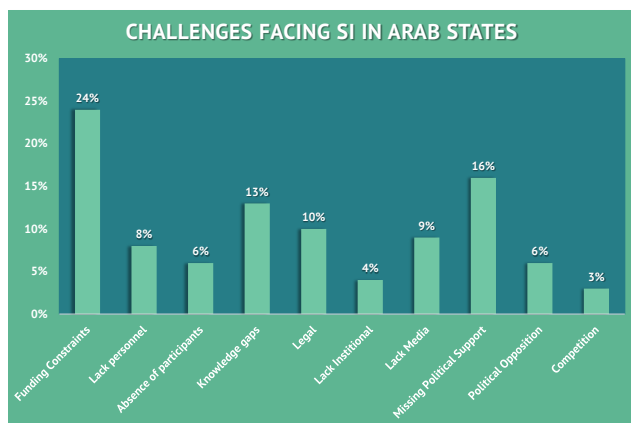
COMMON SI THEMES FOR SD

The analysis of data (see figure 'SI-Thematic Areas in Arab States') shows that 'Empowerment', and knowledge development are the most common themes, aligned with a user-centered philosophy of SI directly engaging beneficiaries and with the benefit of income generation.

Conversely, migration received least attention which could be due to the more social nature of these areas. For governance, limited practices can be seen as well. This might be due to the influence of the central state or the federal structure in MENA countries. [5]

BARRIERS TO SI PRACTICES

The overriding barrier [5], as expected, but not to a far extent, was funding challenges. We underline that there is a distinction even among Arab countries where initiatives in the Gulf States might suffer less from 'funding shortages'. On another note, limited political support and political opposition are highly interlinked, each of which are clearly more likely to affect poverty as the implementation of policies and initiatives might not be enforced at a large scale. Combining both makes them the second main challenge. That draws attention to the importance of governmental (top-down) support in the MENA region.

Also, the knowledge gap is another important challenge. Once again, it is interlinked with a lack of educated and trained persons. This indicates the importance of education to achieve inclusive economic growth and prosperity as diminishing technology/knowledge gaps is highly dependent on skilled personnel.

CHALLENGES FACING SI IN ARAB STATES

Challenges facing SI practices in MENA

In contrast, competition is not as evident in the Arab region as it might be in developed economies. This is not a surprise as the presence of massive challenges leads to a high need for more SI practices with limited competition, except for external funds and aids.

ROOTS BEYOND SI PRACTICES IN ARAB WORLD

The analysis of motivations for social innovative solutions [5] shows that most individual cases have more than only one motive. It is clear that local social demands and societal challenges are considered as beneficiary-centered drivers and that they are clearly the most common motive, whilst inventions and new technologies as drivers are still relevant but less likely. This is again in line with the user-centered SI philosophy of directly engaging the beneficiaries, compared to more traditional and technology-driven innovations. As for barriers, policy incentives have limited impact on driving SI. The gap between governments and domestic SI practices can be recognized. Such a crack leads to a limited impact of SI practices in the Arab world and an absence of an effective social movement.

> ### SI for SD is an effective tool that may solve challenges and achieve national prosperity.

WALKING TOWARD THE FUTURE IN MENA

Since the 2011 revolutions, Arab people have high expectations and hopes. SI for SD is an effective tool that may solve challenges and achieve national prosperity, but with a clear commitment of all actors. In MENA, such an interlink between SI and SD needs to be realized more with the aim of finding solutions to the root causes, rather than just the symptoms. Cross-border cooperation is essential for sharing resources and transferring good practices, aiming at saving time, effort, and finances. Cooperation along with investments in social, economic or environmental (the SD dimensions) areas would alleviate critical challenges that need immediate interventions and which would then pave the way for solving other issues consequently. Domestic SI initiatives need to start from within the local communities. They need to reflect on policies that would ensure commitment of the people who would realize the importance of the undertaken actions, leading to more ownership of initiatives in these communities. When integrated within an ecosystem, there would be supportive actions to engage in international efforts, overcoming challenges that have a common denominator with other countries.

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