

**Walking a tightrope in South Sinai, Egypt:
testing the universality of the community foundation concept**

Abstract

The community foundation (CF) model lays claim to being one of the fastest-growing forms of philanthropy worldwide. CFs were established as major players in North America by the 1980s, using local knowledge to act as brokers between people of means and local NGOs needing support. Critical to their success was the creation of endowed funds. The long-term nature of endowed funds has ensured their sustainability over decades. Now it seems everyone wants a permanent, independent, no-strings funding source with built-in running costs: the Third Sector dream scenario. In the 1980s the idea spread to Great Britain and rapidly to Europe and the rest of the world.

In this paper I examine the claim that the CF model may be universally applicable using a case study based on my experience as a practitioner and researcher in South Sinai. I emphasize the position of CFs in general, and the Community Foundation for South Sinai (CFSS) in particular, as actors concerned with participatory development; and examine ways in which, for CFSS, this emphasis may be in tension both with the model as classically realized, and with the Egyptian state. I consider issues arising from the 'depoliticized' approach required by the environment in Sinai; explain how deeper ethnographic awareness provided by detailed community research is influencing its strategy; and explore the Millennium Development Goals and Amartya Sen's capability approach as a valid rationale for a CF grounded in development rather than donor-led philanthropy.

1: Community foundations: a universally-applicable model?

Eleanor Sacks commented that CFs progressed in ten years 'from being participants in global civil society to being among the creators of global civil society' (Sacks 2005:3). A rise of 24% in a single year (2004-05) in the number of new CFs initiated outside North America suggests the model as an idea whose time has come. By 2005, 1,175 of these local intermediary grantmakers were recorded across 46 countries around the world.

A CF provides a vehicle through which donors with an interest in a specific geographical area can fulfil their philanthropic aims. By investing endowed funds, it creates permanent income for grantmaking to causes chosen by donors, or that meet priority needs in its community. Its endowment enables it to top-slice a percentage of annual income for administration, so that once its fund reaches a given size it can operate sustainably, independent of government or external funding constraints.

The CF model rests on principles that can be applied flexibly in different socio-economic and political arenas. But it does require key features to be in place - primarily local focus, inclusive governance and donor-led endowment-building - to distinguish the resulting organization from a private foundation, development trust etc. This adaptability in structure, governance and operation has led to the model's description as an 'agile servant' to local communities (Magat 1989): each CF operates individually within the general principles set out in Box 1 below.

Box 1

Community foundations are grantmaking organizations that:

- *seek to improve the quality of life for all people in a defined geographic area;*
- *are independent from control or influence by other organizations, governments or donors;*
- *are governed by a board of citizens broadly reflective of the communities they serve;*
- *make grants to other nonprofit groups to address a wide variety of emerging and changing needs in the community;*
- *seek to build a permanent resource for the community, most often through the creation of endowed funds from a wide range of donors, including local citizens, corporations, governments, and other foundations and nonprofits;*
- *provide services to donors to help them achieve their philanthropic goals;*
- *engage in a broad range of community leadership and partnership activities, serving as catalysts, convenors, collaborators and facilitators to solve problems and develop solutions to important community issues;*
- *have open and transparent policies and practices concerning all aspects of their operations; and*
- *are accountable to the community by informing the general public about their purposes, activities, and financial status on a regular basis.*

Source: WINGS-CF (quoted in Sacks 2005: 3)

The Cleveland Foundation now anticipates its centenary; but the US field in general took off after legal changes in the early 1970s made CFs a tax-effective option for planned giving. Whilst the social impact of CF grants is cumulatively significant if not always individually transformative, there is a widespread debate throughout the movement between those who see themselves as community-focussed social change agents, and those whose primary focus is institutional, based on providing philanthropic services for their donors. In the United States CFs have traditionally concentrated on offering sound financial stewardship and a 'safe pair of hands'. Most attract a majority of gifts through professional financial advisers. Recent research

(Irvin 2007) has mapped US philanthropic capacity and spending. Factors in the US thought to have favoured a donor-focussed approach include a tradition of planned giving; tax concessions that benefit the donor as well as the charity; and low taxation leading both to high disposable wealth and a culture of private philanthropy. This climate has seen some 775 CFs established to date in the United States (Sacks 2008). According to a recent survey¹, in 2006 they held collective endowment of at least \$45 billion, with 70 managing funds over \$100 million (Bernholz et al 2005), and annual grantmaking hitting record levels at \$3.7 billion (Hoye 2007). Their disposable income places them among the most significant local funders of community activity and social support in the USA². But financial and fiscal conditions are not solely responsible for the success of North American CFs. Other important factors include the faith-based motivation, attachment to local community, and enthusiasm for voluntary association and community participation first noted by de Tocqueville (1839).

In environments where American-scale assets remain unthinkable, people have varied the model to suit local conditions. Despite downward trends in giving (Hems 2002: 102), UK CFs have grown impressively in twenty years. Although they have not grown on an American scale³, collective endowments will reach £200 million this year, having quadrupled in four years⁴. But British CFs have also played a major role in the decentralization of government grantmaking, and collectively are now the second-largest distributor of grants in the UK after Government. In Germany the legal environment led to an initial emphasis on CFs running their own projects rather than managing funds⁵. In Central and Eastern Europe, where communism left an extreme lack of trust, the fledgling movement adopted a catalyzing role to address community concerns such as ill health caused by pollution, fostering civic engagement as a precursor to fund development.

The example of CFs as generators of active citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe has been a key driver of the movement's worldwide growth, which has not happened everywhere spontaneously or unaided. Perhaps the most potent theoretical influence on a movement so firmly grounded in practice is Robert Putnam's conception of social

¹ Columbus Foundation Survey undertaken for the US Council on Foundations: 645 respondents.

² A significant proportion of grantmaking by US CFs is allocated to education (especially individual scholarships), health and welfare issues that in Europe are publicly funded.

³With the notable exception of Tyne, Wear and Northumberland

⁴Source: Community Foundation Network. www.communityfoundations.org.uk

⁵Source: Transatlantic Community Foundation Network (TCFN); see note 6 below

capital as ‘features of social organization, such as trust, norms [i.e. of mutual assistance or civic engagement] and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated actions’ (Putnam 1993: 167). Widespread discussion of the role of CFs in building social capital by supporting civil society was generated from 2000 onwards by a symposium in Dresden, led by Putnam, of the Transatlantic CF Network⁶ (eg Walkenhorst 2001, Feldstein & Sander 2001, Kilmurray 2003).

This role as promoters of active citizenship has been fostered by international funders. Donors have supported the model internationally; some funding development primarily in the capitalist democracies, while others invested in environments far removed from its origins, in developing democracies and transitional states in post-Communist Europe, South East Asia, East and South Africa, where the desire to encourage citizens to help themselves and each other may owe at least as much to a neoliberalizing agenda as to philanthropic zeal.

There are now CFs on every continent except Antarctica (Sacks 2004:3). That fact alone gives some credibility to the claim of universality: a sustainable resource for community action seems to be universally desired, whether or not it proves universally achievable.

2: The Community Foundation for South Sinai: a case study

In 2005 a family move took me to live in Egypt for nearly three years⁷. I used my time to establish a CF in South Sinai, and start PhD research into the changing lives of South Sinai Bedouin. While living in St Katherine I have interviewed, in Arabic, members of 120 families from every tribe in the region about their lives, aspirations and household economics. In the next two sections I explore why we chose to adopt the CF model, and how we are using my ethnographic research to adapt it to South Sinai’s unique environment.

⁶The Transatlantic Community Foundation Network (TCFN) is a learning network of North American and European CF practitioners co-funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Bertelsmann Foundation. www.tcfn.efc.be

⁷ My husband, an academic ecologist, has done research in Sinai for twenty years with the key Egyptian and Bedouin colleagues with whom we set up CFSS. Together they have promoted Bedouin, recognized their expertise and brought work to the area.

2.1 South Sinai: the case for a community foundation

Apart from its inherent natural beauty, South Sinai is an area of immense cultural, historical and environmental importance. Holy sites around Jebel Musa (Mount Sinai) in St Katherine are equally sacred to Jews, Muslims and Christians. The world's oldest Christian monastery shelters there beneath Egypt's highest mountains. Politically part of Egypt, Sinai forms an ecological bridge between Africa and Asia, and has a rich and unique terrestrial biodiversity as well as magnificent coral reefs. These features attract huge revenues, chiefly from tourism; yet its indigenous population lives in marked poverty. Both the need and the potential are there for creating a CF.

In 2005, when we started researching the viability of a CF, business was booming in South Sinai: in addition to longstanding mineral and oil extraction, construction had mushroomed in the service of tourism. South Sinai has experienced breathtaking rates of tourist development focussed on Sharm el Sheikh and the Gulf of Aqaba coast. In 2004 direct tourist revenue accounted for up to 11% of Egyptian GNP. The Ministry of Tourism plans to increase the number of hotel rooms in South Sinai by over 600% in the next ten years (SEAM 2005). The impact of development on such a scale is dramatic. South Sinai's resident population has doubled to approx 65,000 in the past ten years; now, only a third are thought to be Bedouin. The Government of Egypt (GoE) plans to settle 750,000 more Nile Valley Egyptians in South Sinai. Even if targets are not realized, these new arrivals will generate local economic activity. But the tourist industry is staffed entirely by Egyptian migrant workers⁸; so while national and international hotel chains, private developers and construction companies all generate wealth which they may be persuaded to share, all but the loose change from Sinai's tourist boom bypasses its indigenous population.

The poorest people in Sinai are Bedouin. Inadequate education means they are likely to remain so. Within two generations, they have experienced occupation by Israel, settlement, changes to their traditional livelihood of semi-nomadic herding and a shift from a largely subsistence-based to a cash-based economy (Perevolotsky 1981). Some people have adapted successfully to change, but many live in extreme poverty. Even in St Katherine about one-third of the families I interviewed spend less than £1 per head

⁸According to the St Katherine Protectorate Management Plan (2003: 39) not one Bedouin is employed by a hotel in St Katherine.

per week on food, and some as little as 50p⁹, and in remote desert areas life is harder still, lacking every element of development. Many areas have become overdependent on tourism, leaving people destitute when visitor numbers decrease because of politics or the fall-out from terrorist attacks. Cultivation of narcotics has become widespread in the absence of legal livelihoods (Hobbs 1998). There are no reliable data to quantify Bedouin poverty in South Sinai: the UNDP's Human Development Indicators (HDIs) do not record Bedouin experience separately, leaving them invisible to planners, policy-makers and funders. But many needs of the region's communities (water, electricity, healthcare, schools) are self-evident at even a superficial level. This acute need is heightened by tension between local Bedouin people and the Egyptian migrants whose entirely different culture now dominates the region. Bedouin are seen by the majority population as an uncivilized minority ripe for improvement, or for commodification as a picturesque tourist attraction. Bedouin life is subject to constant intrusion by security forces, generating resentment and distrust. Yet despite this, there is strong social capital in the Bedouin community, aspiration, a will to survive, and a forceful desire to retain the uniqueness of their culture.

We interviewed senior environmentalists, journalists, government officials, funding bodies, business and civil society leaders and diplomatic staff. Collectively they suggested South Sinai would fulfil both supply and demand criteria. In addition we considered other key drivers, which I explore below, in the success of the American model: philanthropic traditions, including faith-based motivation; and an active civil society.

Egypt's philanthropic climate

A number of studies have examined philanthropic organization in Muslim societies, including Egypt (Khallil 2004, el Daly 2006, Atia forthcoming¹⁰). These have concluded, broadly, that CFs can fit within local giving traditions. Khallil suggests that familiarity with religious endowments (*awqaf*) should support building secular charitable endowments. And a CF can be seen as a proper recipient for *zakat*, a charitable pillar of the Muslim faith. Benthall (1999: 31) notes that modern qur'anic interpretation 'now allows charitable institutions to receive *zakat* provided they are set

⁹ Author, unpublished data.

¹⁰ Mona Atia is researching islamic charity in Egypt. She has interviewed 75 individuals from 27 islamic charities.

up to help one of the permitted classes of beneficiary’ – the first two classes being the poor and the destitute, of whom there is sadly no shortage amongst the Bedouin.

Marwa el Daly examined Egyptian philanthropy in 2000 families and 1200 organizations describing themselves as philanthropic (*awqaf*, secular foundations and NGOs), donors and beneficiaries. Her survey revealed annual giving in Egypt of at least 2 billion LE (£200 million; \$350 million), with donations of 35LE (\$5.2) per head.¹¹ At present, most Egyptian giving is Islamic, supporting individuals known to the donor, ensuring its impact is fragmented and *ad hoc*. Whilst this approach fulfils its religious aims, it is axiomatic that a strategic approach to giving is more effective in tackling poverty and its causes in the long term. Daly’s (2005) study prompted the question: ‘..whether or how this injection of privately-donated benevolence can be channeled into planned local development priorities, as opposed to charity, relief efforts, and non-organized services to which the bulk of this amount is currently being dispersed (*sic*)’ (UNDP 2005: 49).

Although Islam frowns upon *rib’* (bank interest), there is no disapproval of banks obtaining healthy returns by investing in successful businesses. Bedouin we consulted had no hesitation in approving of investing funds in endowment rather than spending on immediate needs. ‘If you have a cow and kill her, you’ll have meat for a week,’ one Jebeliya *omda* (tribal section-head) told us. ‘If you look after her, you’ll have milk for a lifetime.’

Civil society: access and inclusivity

A CF should be accessible, and offer small-scale funding appropriate to grassroots community activity. In South Sinai there is a dearth of accessible funding, especially for Bedouin-led initiatives. A recent EU programme caused much cynicism by requiring applications to be downloaded, printed and submitted in English, generating a lucrative ‘development circus’ at the expense of the Bedouin, almost none of whose bids were funded. While remote areas lack education and electricity, and at least half the population is illiterate, such practice is indefensible. But the need to develop and build the capacity of South Sinai’s NGO sector is well-recognized. Estimates of the

¹¹This at a time when 500LE (\$75) per month was considered a living wage and where the poorest local district records 86% of its population as poor or ultra-poor (UNDP 2005).

number of NGOs in Egypt vary between 15,000 and 28,000 (Abderrahman 2004: 6)¹²; of these just 53 societies and two foundations, including CFSS, are in South Sinai. Barely a handful of those are active and effective. Most are locally- or self-funded. 80% address social welfare, and despite endemic poverty just 3% tackle economic development. Three-quarters have Boards with over 40% government representatives, and only 7% have women on the Board at all (SEAM 2005: 232). Bedouin participation is rare. Operating within a model that promotes accessibility and inclusivity, we hoped to build local capacity as well as our own.

2.2 Principles into practice

We applied to the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MoSS) for registration as a *mo'assessa*: a private foundation, but one which we intended to operate as a CF. Choosing the most workable governance model available, we restricted initial Board membership to the five founder donors (an unalterable group, and the legal minimum number of trustees), but with provision for appointing community trustees as time went by. Minimizing Ministry concerns was a priority - a 'tyranny of safety' - in a new type of organization which included foreigners and Bedouin (both perceived by the authorities as a security risk). Initially restricting the Board to its founders avoided lengthy additional vetting, the disbarring of other candidates and the imposition of Ministry appointees. Regulation is heavy-handed in Egypt: an NGO can be closed down by the Ministry and its assets seized if it is deemed in the slightest way to violate the law or social order (Abderrahman 2004: 129)¹³.

Registration in Egypt follows universal principles on paper (although covert police surveillance of trustees took us by surprise), and we were obliged, problematically, to define in advance the projects we would carry out¹⁴. Donations from abroad and grant allocation and distribution would all need approval by the MoSS¹⁵. Eventually we

¹² The Ministry's estimate is 15,000, of which only one-third is active. But Abderrahman notes the unavailability and unreliability of data on Egyptian NGOs (ibid: 121).

¹³ It can also lose registration if the MoSS decides the community 'does not need its services'; hence the value of community research as a grounding principle for CFSS.

¹⁴ Egyptian trustees are liable to six months' imprisonment if their activities are deemed not to comply with their stated purpose, especially if they could be judged as 'political'.

¹⁵ Community Foundation Network kindly agreed to hold our funds to facilitate this process.

deposited the founding gifts and filed our application: the product of a year's work. Six months later our registration came through: Foundation Number 2¹⁶. While I was still resident in Egypt, we planned to attract lead gifts from major donors. By targetting international donors it was hoped to raise endowments adequate to appoint local staff and start grantmaking, with the founding gift as a safety option¹⁷. Initial priorities based on desk research, observation and meetings with local leaders included: sustainable development and job creation; education; health; community capacity-building (ie helping NGOs to operate more robustly); conservation of the environment and Bedouin heritage.

Grantmaking threw up some challenges. Paper-based systems are useless when few young people and almost no-one over 40 is literate¹⁸. Additionally, Bedouin society is founded on networks of reciprocal obligation, meaning anyone serving on a grantmaking panel might legitimately expect a return favour from the grantees. In small, tightly-knit communities, arriving at the right process is a challenge. To date, the funds we have had at our disposal have been small, and have not justified setting up wider structures to allocate them. In future we will work with traditional systems, devising ways to be transparent in western terms and also fair in Bedouin terms. Nevertheless, in year one we revived the great annual Jebeliya camel race, a significant cultural event; provided educational materials for Bedouin children and drinking water to 300 families who lacked it; bought instruments for Bedouin musicians; helped a replicable crop-diversification project; and made numerous small hardship grants. This year we supported the race again, using the opportunity of a major tribal gathering to report on our work to the community; and we focussed on purchasing vital equipment for loan: an olive oil press, and (people's top priority) a portable compressor and generator for digging wells.

We now had an answer for potential donors who wanted to know what we did, and the Ministry and security services were happy with our activity and my research. The next step was to start a serious push to raise endowment. However, despite some small successes we have not enacted our plan. As time has passed our priority for using time

¹⁶ Although CFSS is the first community foundation, a private foundation had been established before us. Its status has subsequently been changed to a *jamiya* (a membership-based association), leaving CFSS as the only foundation of any kind in South Sinai.

¹⁷ The cost of living in Egypt is approximately one-tenth of the UK's. This means that donors get a lot more bang for their philanthropic buck.

¹⁸ Author's unpublished data

- our most limited resource - has shifted away from fund development towards economic development. Working with Faraj, our Bedouin trustee, and other partners, we have set up a project for women to make and sell clothes from local wool (under-used since the demise of the traditional tent)¹⁹. Another project aims to open trade links to the UK for Bedouin fruit and nuts produced in accordance with good conservation practice²⁰. Another promotes sales of local handicrafts. We are exploring creating new local markets for goods made from local materials. In short, we have quietly shifted from trying to *fund* community development to doing it ourselves. This raises a number of questions. Why have we done this? Are we still a CF? And can a CF meet South Sinai's needs?

3: Reviewing the model *in situ*

In what follows, I highlight the role of CFs in general, and CFSS in particular, as agents of participatory development. I explore participation and its goals in the context of local power relations, and examine the Millennium Development Goals as an opportunity for addressing social goals that may be acceptable and appropriate in CFSS' political environment; and I explore whether a CF can provide a vehicle for social change where people are marginalized and civil society weak.

3.1: Community foundations and participation

The CF model can lay three claims to being participative in a broad sense: the first is its aspiration to accessibility and inclusivity in grantmaking. That claim must remain unchallenged here: to examine it in relation to the movement at large is far beyond the scope of this paper; to attempt it in relation to CFSS's grantmaking would be premature.

The second claim lies in its governance. A CF aims to be governed by 'a Board of citizens who are broadly reflective of the communities they serve' (Sacks 2005:3). They make no claim to be representative, but aspire to include voices from across relevant local constituencies. North American CFs have achieved this aim within a donor-focussed model: many of their minorities are established and successful

¹⁹ The Mount Sinai Bedouin Wool has been kindly supported by The Funding Network

²⁰ Work is underway to enrol Bedouin growers in the Operation Wallacea Trust's conservation-linked trading scheme (www.opwall.org)

American citizens, and Boards may therefore reflect community diversity whilst remaining overwhelmingly elite.

In the UK and Europe, a majority of the populations that constitute their diversity arrived more recently, still live in relative poverty, and give according to their own cultural norms. CFs often struggle to recruit wealthy trustees from minority communities, although many become broadly participative by including at other levels (eg grants panels) a range of voices that an elitist model would exclude.

I have outlined above the reasons why CFSS chose initially to restrict its Board membership in its early stages. Our Board is already more inclusive than other South Sinai NGOs, by virtue of having female and Bedouin members²¹, although local culture means a Bedouin woman trustee is a distant prospect. I explain below how we are trying to overcome this, using research to ensure that the voices of women and the structurally disempowered are reflected in our work.

The third arena in which CFs can engage participatively with their communities is usually described in the United States as ‘community leadership’, and elsewhere as ‘catalyst or convener.’ It is in this role that they may be most obviously effective in their own terms; their reach, encompassing the whole social spectrum, lends powerful legitimacy to their claim to involve the whole of a community and thereby to mobilize or increase its social capital. I shall return in the final section to how CFSS seeks to exercise this role.

Drawing on the movement’s positioning of itself as a producer of social capital, one can locate it in Hickey & Mohan’s (2004: 8) typology of participation with the ‘Social Capital’ approach of the mid-1990s: development interventions that build local institutions and support participation in networks and associations²². Whilst not every element of a CF’s work can be described as participatory (or even necessarily developmental), almost all of them work to some degree in public space to address local issues. Whether or not they acknowledge the role, by bringing local people

²¹ CFSS’ Board consists of a Bedouin man, an Egyptian man and woman and a British man and woman.

²² Whether community foundations should in this analysis be theorized as products of *immanent* development or as agents of *imminent* development is a question that deserves discussion.

together and facilitating their involvement in collective action, CFs are agents of participatory development.

As Cooke & Kothari (2001: *Introduction*) point out, the ostensible aim of participatory development is to ‘make ”people” central to development by encouraging beneficial involvement in interventions that affect them, and over which they previously had limited control or influence.’ Other commentators (eg Lewis 2001; Hickey & Mohan 2004) draw attention to the shortcomings of the process in practice. A wide-ranging critique, focussed largely on the practice of donor-driven projects in the developing world, raises issues that often apply equally in First World settings. These include use of standardized participation methods displacing local processes; ignorance of local power structures affecting representation; neglect of group dynamics affecting whose voice is heard; false assumptions made by facilitators about how ‘local knowledge’ is constructed and expressed; and manipulative co-opting of local people into supporting outcomes desired by donors. Chiefly, Cooke & Kothari (2001:14) question empowerment as an outcome of participation where local power relations have been misinterpreted . They call for a more sophisticated understanding of power relations ‘between facilitators and participants... between donors and beneficiaries, but also historically and discursively...’.

3.2: Civil society, empowerment and politics

While this critique may be more relevant to CFs in the global North than many would care to admit, it is of critical value in the global South, where the apparatus of power may interpose itself far less subtly between the goals of development activity and their realization. Empowerment - the bestowing or assumption of power - is first and foremost a political goal. The CF’s aim of promoting social capital by ‘building civil society’, supporting the rights of individuals to associate and mobilize around a concern, is a political act, often explicitly seen by donors as strengthening the foundations of democracy. But as Waddington & Mohan (2004: 221) point out: ‘For empowerment to be transformatory, it cannot be given to a less powerful group by a more powerful one, but has to be fought for.’ That means that the political system in which this happens must be receptive to change; something we at CFSS have learned not to take for granted.

In her trenchant analysis of civil society in Egypt, Maha Abdelrahman highlights the paradox whereby NGOs, while located in the realm of the ‘non-political’, are expected in prevalent neoliberal analysis to deliver the political goal of empowerment. Those that wish to generate political change are hampered by the ‘authoritarian and repressive tendencies’ of the state (Abdelrahman 2004: 1). While challenging the view that civil society is ‘*necessarily* emancipatory;....it should not be automatically equated with notions of freedom and equality’, Abdelrahman stresses (ibid: 3, 4) that: ‘civil society cannot be understood as a separate entity existing outside the sphere of politics....’. Indeed, she critiques the notion that civil society can be ‘built’ at all, seeing it as ‘an ongoing *process* which is born out of the continuing changes in domestic social forces, the State...and its relations with other international powers...’, commenting that: ‘civil society....has been closely linked with the triumph of neoliberal politics in Western Europe and the United States.... with its belief that whatever is governmental and political is ‘bad’, and therefore, whatever is non-governmental and non-political is ‘good’.’ ‘However’ she adds, ‘NGOs are necessarily political. If their claims about representing the poor....are serious, then their work cannot be isolated from the wider political context in which they work’ (ibid: 67).

In the Egyptian environment, to acknowledge this explicitly is to court risks unthought-of by western practitioners. Mona Atia notes : ‘When I asked about political activity or relationships with government, every single organization said categorically: “We are apolitical”..... The government has sent a clear message that combining politics with social work is not desirable or tolerated.’. (Atia, forthcoming)

All this points to the fact that the CFSS is operating in a very different environment to the majority of its peers. There are multiple areas of contestation between the Egyptian government and Bedouin people – land rights, access to services, natural resource management etc – all heightened in South Sinai by perceptions of identity. All Egyptian Bedouin are citizens of the Egyptian state, despite a widespread sense among Nile Valley Egyptians that they are ‘other’: ‘uncivilized and unskilled’ (Aziz 2000: 33). Egyptian officials, according to Gardner ‘can treat the Bedouins with mistrust at best, or contempt at worst’ (2000: 51) Altorki & Cole (2006) suggest that Bedouin are seen as ‘not really Egyptians’ by the general population. In their turn, Bedouin deliberately construct their identity as different from ‘the Egyptians’. Gardner

comments: ‘ I know of no Bedouin who consider themselves, or Sinai, as Egyptian’ (Gardner 2000: 49). For all that most Bedouin remain law-abiding citizens in practice, their identity renews itself perpetually in opposition to Egyptian hegemony.

In our context, then, participation practised with the object of promoting social capital through active citizenship looks like a hopeless case. As David Lewis notes, citizenship is a form of social contract applicable to ‘the vast majority of individuals’ in a nation state. But for the deal to work, ‘people must identify with the state as a legitimate entity’ (Lewis 2001:47). Until 2007, South Sinai Bedouin were, uniquely in Egypt, disenfranchised: their local councils were appointed, not elected. They thus had no democratic stake in the state that governs them, whilst being routinely and oppressively subject to its security apparatus. They have their own forms of social capital, dense networks of kinship and associational ties, and little desire for formal civic engagement. But they have needs as citizens which go unmet, and their circumstances demand improvement. They need work, education, healthcare, utilities; and reliable means of securing them. Can a CF, its operations circumscribed by governmental oversight, contribute anything to tackling these issues?

Hickey & Mohan (2004: 13) note that: ‘it is unrealistic to expect participatory projects to transform existing patterns of power relations’, offering advice that I sometimes feel I stumbled on too late: ‘(A)void promoting participatory approaches at local levels where there is little pre-existing popular agency of or on behalf of the poorest/most excluded, or where the wider political space is unsupportive of such initiatives’. In other words perhaps: ‘Don’t try participation in places where it won’t work!’ But this is not an option for us: we have not chosen South Sinai for this experiment on an intellectual basis, but because of our long-term connection to people and place; and we are committed to working with local people to improve their quality of life in ways that matter to them.

We have chosen thus far to base our claim to be participative on our practice of listening individually to people who normally have no political voice, and basing our priorities on what they say. But we still have to enact those priorities in officially acceptable ways, using methods that avoid the pitfalls of participation, and that equally do not result in our expulsion, imprisonment or asset seizure.

Box 2: The Millennium Development Goals

- *eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*
- *achieve universal primary education*
- *promote gender equality and empower women*
- *reduce child mortality*
- *improve maternal health*
- *combat HIV/AIDS and combat other diseases*
- *ensure environmental sustainability*
- *build a global partnership for development*

3.3: MDGs: a way forward?

Egypt is a signatory to the Millennium Development Goals (Box 2, above), enshrined in UN Declaration 55/2, to ‘uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity’ at a global level (UN: 2000:1). There was a clear fit between CFSS’ initial priority areas (outlined in section 2 above) and the GoE’s stated priorities; if, on our micro scale, we were heading in the same direction as the government, we thought we could take an approach grounded in participation-led development that it would be difficult for the Ministry to object to.

There is no doubting the seriousness which the GoE attaches to human development. The 2005 Egypt Human Development Report (UNDP 2005) – one of the very few sources of demographic data available for Egypt – declares in radical political terms “a new social contract between the Egyptian state and its citizens” whereby “the less privileged half of the people are viewed as dynamic new entrants to the economic scene as producers and consumers, and to the political landscape as active stakeholders in shaping the future.” (UNDP 2005: 1). But there is a problem: Bedouin are invisible in the report, which deals only in governorate-wide averages that, in South Sinai, conflate urban and rural, Egyptian migrants and Bedouin. To illustrate, the HDIs for South Sinai show the highest per capita provision of doctors in the country, and zero maternal mortality. The first figure is skewed by Sharm El Sheikh’s international hospitals, inaccessible to Bedouin; the second is refuted by my own research. Rather than zero, fully 25% (14/57) of my respondents in St Katherine reported maternal mortality in their own family within the past ten years. The few other reports that provide demographic data also misrepresent indigenous experience on the basis of minuscule samples (eg Zanaty & Way 2006). The UNDP’s indicator for poor and very poor people shows a row of zeros for South Sinai, meaning either that there are no poor people there, or that no data have been gathered. The Bedouin voice is unheard in the policy documents providing for Egypt’s future.

This misrepresentation bodes ill for Bedouin – and anyone who might wish to improve their circumstances. On what grounds might we work with them towards MDG targets, to improve their quality of life, when according to the official statistics they are already either better off than other people or without recorded needs? By linking our efforts to the MDGs, far from supporting the GoE’s vision, we could seem to be pulling holes in it, making trouble, being ‘political’. There is a glaring and prejudicial gap between ‘life as lived’ in South Sinai as revealed by my respondents, and the picture presented by the HDIs on which policymakers and aid agencies base their decisions²³. However, pointing this out could be counter-productive at best. We ruled out harnessing CFSS to the MDGs.

4: Participation revisited

By this analysis, CFSS’ prospects for working effectively in South Sinai look bleak. The socio-political environment in which it operates tests the CF model to its limits and beyond. However there may be ways for a CF to work in even these circumstances that offer hope of gradual change. In this section I outline CFSS’ revised strategy, building on ethnographic research and revisiting Sen’s capacity-based approach.

4.1: Participation and ethnography: potential pitfalls

Life in any community is governed by a set of social and cultural norms that may differ from those that apply elsewhere. When development practitioners work unreflexively, applying their own norms to the communities they work in, the results can vary from disappointing to disastrous. Masaki (2004: 137) points to the need for better understanding of the socio-cultural contexts of interventions: ‘For comprehending...social practices....it is crucial for external agents to conduct ethnographic investigations.’ But care is needed in order to avoid an approach that ossifies tradition and culture, thereby siting people who are the ‘objects’ of development in some unreconstructed past.

This is especially relevant in Sinai. The Egyptian tourist industry trades heavily on Bedouin culture as a commodity: camel rides, tea in a Bedouin tent, and so on. Development interventions routinely emphasize ‘maintaining tradition’ despite

²³ I spoke to a project officer from a major US NGO who had been fundraising in South Sinai, but spending the proceeds on projects in Cairo. When asked why they didn’t deploy the funds locally she replied airily: ‘Oh, we don’t work in South Sinai: the people aren’t poor enough’.

evidence of Bedouin adaptability to social and political change (Perevolotsky et al 1989; Rabinowitz 1983). This emphasis on a watered-down, tourist-centred version of Bedouin 'tradition' keeps them firmly rooted in the past, and legitimizes their marginalization by mainstream society as 'backward'. While focussing on people's 'needs' as (mis)perceived by outsiders, it fails almost entirely to address their aspirations for the future.

Participatory development methodologies often address this shortcoming, by involving local people in defining 'community need'. But as Waddington & Mohan point out (2004: 220): '...most participatory development begins by stigmatizing local communities as having a 'problem'', focussing on the most negative aspects of their lives, and creating a perceived dependency on external support. Ngunjiri (1998) insists that the proper role of a development agency is as a facilitator, to help a community to identify its resources, articulate its aspirations, and develop plans which community members can implement themselves using available resources.

4.2: A rare opportunity: participant-observation

My PhD research has given CFSS an opportunity to inform our understanding of people's priorities with detailed research based on participant-observation²⁴. A long-term perspective suits a CF, whose emphasis on permanence and rootedness makes room for immanent development: the growth and encouragement of locally-originated change that takes place in its own good time. Working in Arabic with the help of Mohammed Abu Khedr, my Bedouin field assistant, mostly in people's homes, I've found people willing to share their thoughts freely. We ask them to talk about their life, work and environment, family life, health and education, what they like about their community, how it could be made better, and the issues they think are most important. People are relaxed; they socialize with my companion, and his familiarity with me earns me their trust. In a community where people live looking over their shoulder, nothing could be more helpful²⁵. We have obtained the views of men and women, young and old people, single and married people, the relatively rich and the

²⁴ Fieldwork for the author's PhD study of the impact of conservation and development policy on Bedouin in St Katherine Protectorate (SKPA) has consisted of semi-structured interviews and household surveys of over 120 members of 87 households from the Jebeliya, Awlaad Sa'id, Mzeina, Gararsha, Sawalha, Aleygat and Tarabin tribes, both inside and outside St Katherine Protectorate. The interviews, and numberless informal conversations, have been conducted in Arabic over two years while living in St Katherine for extended periods of participant observation.

²⁵ Space does not permit a discussion of my position as an ostensibly powerful westerner; I am conscious of and do my best to circumvent it.

absolutely poor. This method of consulting a community can, I think, justly lay claim to being participatory: when common priorities emerge - the primary needs for water, proper education and healthcare; concerns about the environment and the quality of food; tensions caused by Egyptianization; above all the need for work - they are all the more powerful because no-one's voice has been lost in the process. Talking in people's homes reveals many remarks that would never be aired in a public 'participation' exercise: a young girl's confession that she hopes to be a lawyer because the Bedouin get such a bad deal; an old woman's anger with 'the Egyptians' for killing her chickens²⁶; a mother's resentment that her son has to find not only the money to build a house for his bride-to-be, but also 'under-the-table' money for planning officials. Participant-observation is a very long-winded method of obtaining information about a community; but it avoids many of the pitfalls of traditional approaches, and enables CFSS to ground our work, solidly and confidently, in what all sections of this scattered and diverse community have told us they want.

What the men want most is secure work. What the women want most is constructive activity, using their skills to earn money at home²⁷. So, rather than pursuing a traditional strategy - raising funds for grantmaking to (largely non-existent) NGOs - we are initiating projects to address those priorities. For the first, men will grow traditional produce in their high mountain gardens - dried fruit and nuts - as they have always done. But whereas they currently lack any market, and can barely dispose of what they grow, we are negotiating a secure market through the Operation Wallacea Trust's conservation-linked fair trade scheme in the UK. For the second, women are using wool produced by their own sheep to make felt to turn into warm clothing²⁸, both for use by their families and for sale to the tourists who come in large numbers, unprovided with warm clothes, to climb Mount Sinai at night. Both projects make use of skills and resources traditionally present in the community, thus reinforcing people's sense of identity as Bedouin and of pride in their skills. Both work within accepted cultural norms: the felting project enables women to work at home or in small

²⁶ In 2006 all domestic poultry across Egypt were slaughtered by order of the Ministry of the Environment in response to the Avian Influenza outbreak in Fayoum.

²⁷ Changes in Bedouin life have left women, once the backbone of household resource management, de-skilled and demoralized.

²⁸ Surprisingly there is no tradition of making clothes from wool, as historically it was all used for tentmaking. The local sheep's wool is too coarse to knit, but ideal for felting.

family groups, generating income without challenging family dynamics²⁹. Both will be brokered through the Foundation as a social enterprise, with any surplus income, after producers have been fairly paid, reinvested in community priorities. We are also seeking western markets for the embroidered handicrafts already produced by local women. These projects do not require a capital campaign. They are not driven by neoliberal ideology, but by people's own ideas for improving their quality of life. While we base our work on the individually-expressed wishes of significant numbers of local people³⁰ we can lay claim to a legitimacy grounded in participation of a non-traditional kind.

4.3: Sen, quality of life and capability

I have explained how flawed reporting of important HDIs, whether produced by accident or design, steered us away from the MDGs. But their theoretical underpinnings, articulated pre-eminently by Amartya Sen (1990, 1999 *inter alia*), view human development as fostering the capacity of individuals to make free choices to improve their lives according to their own norms and values. The Bedouin have fallen through a gap in politically-led human development, and exist in an environment that minimizes political engagement. The aim of a CF is not to address the structural causes of poverty - an explicitly political goal - but to improve quality of life. CFSS needs to achieve that aim whilst keeping our head below the political parapet. Might we find within Sen's capability framework a rationale that is neither politically-led nor donor-led, but which justifies participation-led change? I will turn in what follows to Sen's argument for 'seeing quality of life in terms of valued activities and the capability to achieve these activities' (Sen 1990:43),

What does quality of life mean for Bedouin people in South Sinai? My research has been richly productive of a sense of what people want. They want things we cannot help with (rainfall and good pasture); things we aspire to help with (education and healthcare projects); and things we can start to help with (making a living). By and large, they do not seek wealth or commodities, but restored identity and independence; to earn a modest living by traditional means, taking pride in the skilful management of scarce resources. Most people now have more material goods than they had in the past;

²⁹ We believe a freer role for women will come; but while the men themselves feel marginalized and disempowered, challenging them directly helps no-one.

³⁰ Members of Jebeliya households covered by the author's St Katherine survey represent approx 10% of the upper estimate of tribal numbers (n=250)

but though materially richer, they feel themselves poorer. One old woman summed it up: ‘In the old days life was better. We were hungry, but we were free.’³¹.

Sen describes as a requirement of development: ‘...the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states’ (1999:3). CFSS is not free to tackle ‘systemic social deprivation’ or the heavy hand of the state. But we can potentiate people’s agency – their ability to choose how they live - by redeveloping viable traditional livelihoods as a start. On a small scale this may help address the economic poverty that, in Sen’s words: ‘robs people of the freedom to satisfy hunger, or to achieve sufficient nutrition, or to obtain remedies for treatable illness, or the opportunity to be adequately clothed or sheltered, or to enjoy clean water or... educational facilities’ (1999: 4). While the state fails to provide basic services for Bedouin people, it will always be an uphill struggle for CFSS to promote their capability with no political leverage. That would be true however many donors we recruited, however much money we raised. But even if our solutions can only be topical, not systemic, we can make a difference at local level; and our work will have legitimacy conferred by local voices.

Conclusion

There are many ways to be a CF within the framework of principles shown in Box 1. The Community Foundation for South Sinai aspires to fulfil them all: as we progress we will build our endowment, and offer our donors good stewardship and philanthropic support. I have sought to show, however, that our socio-political context requires a shift of emphasis away from the donor-led philanthropy and reflective governance of the classic model, towards a development-led approach grounded in participative research which brings the legitimacy of ‘voice’ to CFSS. Fostering civic engagement by making grants to NGOs is not generally open to us. Instead we centre our activity in the concerns people express most often, seeking opportunities that are developmental but can be presented as non-political, giving agency to local people and giving our work a defensible rationale. Response to date suggests that both community and donors will support this approach; and that even in this environment - so far away and so different from its native soil – the CF model can take root.

³¹ Author, unpublished data

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