

Carlo Volpi & Maria Donata Rinaldi

**“HEROINES WITHOUT PRINCES”
VOLUNTEERS AND PROFESSIONALS AS AGENTS OF
CHANGE IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – A PILOT
EXPERIENCE IN ABU EL NOMROS, EGYPT**



Dialoghi

***Rivista di studi sulla formazione
e sullo sviluppo organizzativo***

Anno III, numero 1, Giugno 2012

“HEROINES WITHOUT PRINCES”: VOLUNTEERS AND PROFESSIONALS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – A PILOT EXPERIENCE IN ABU EL NOMROS, EGYPT

di Carlo Volpi & Maria Donata Rinaldi

Abstract in Italiano

Abu el Nomros, 15 km alla periferia del Cairo, Repubblica araba d'Egitto.

La Community Development Association (CDA) creata più di 60 anni fa, fornisce servizi essenziali per la comunità (pre-scuola, corsi di alfabetizzazione, laboratorio sartoriale, caffetteria) e aggiunge negli ultimi 10 anni nuovi servizi per soddisfare lo sviluppo della comunità (microcredito, community media center, biblioteca, formazione e mobilitazione dei giovani, club delle famiglie) grazie a fondi e programmi di cooperazione internazionale allo sviluppo. Il CDA rappresenta un riferimento per la comunità dove i tradizionali modelli socio culturali entrano in qualche modo in conflitto con le nuove contaminazioni.

I leader religiosi e membri della comunità si trovano ad affrontare comportamenti moderni e laici, le donne si scagliano contro gli stereotipi maschili, i giovani si oppongono gli anziani, le famiglie autoctone chiudono la porta a quelle immigrate dalla città. I social media e la formazione aprono nuove prospettive per il rafforzamento della comunità.

La CDA rappresenta un agente attivo di sviluppo della comunità? I volontari a livello comunitario abdicano al loro ruolo a favore di quello dei professionisti? Come realmente interagiscono con la comunità i project manager, consulenti, formatori, esperti di sviluppo e cosa emerge da questa conflitto di potere? Questo articolo illustra un'esperienza pilota basata su lavoro sul campo in cui viene messo in discussione il ruolo dello psicologo comunità come agente di sviluppo e le dinamiche locali di potere si confrontano con i cambiamenti in corso nello scenario socio politico dei paesi del mediterraneo.

Being agent of change: a pilot experience of Community development

International development cooperation represents for Community Psychology a field where principles and tools can be practiced, concepts of empowerment and community development can be utilized to design and implement local development projects, while an intercultural approach is part of the training process aimed at empowering and professionalizing people active in fieldwork. The somehow ambiguous and questioned balance between development and under-development is embedded in all international cooperation programs, and every project takes into account the interaction between north and south actors and organizations. The globalization process makes these frontiers more nuanced. South-based organizations are increasingly applying transparency,

effectiveness and management policies to their work, proposing innovative patterns of disintermediation, self-empowerment and local development.

This paper illustrates a based on fieldwork pilot experience, where the role of community psychologist as agent of development is questioned and local dynamics are confronted with changes. The project partner organization, while offering undeniable successes in managing microcredit activities and continuous education programs, was still far from incorporating those concepts of transparency and participative management, increasingly considered indispensable to manage a development project. Therefore in this specific situation there was a strong expectation on the expatriate team, selected for their profiles of community psychologist and social anthropologist, to be a driver of change towards the local community.

Abu el Nomros and the Community Development Association (CDA)

Abu el Nomros, 15 km from Cairo in its outskirts, is a town of over 200 thousand inhabitants located near the pyramids of Giza and Sakkara, in the centre of an agricultural area, increasingly integrated with the urban area of Cairo. This condition of rural and suburban community proved to be very interesting for international cooperation projects, challenged by its articulated and somehow controversial geographical, human and socio-cultural environment. In the early 90ies, Abu el Nomros was firstly targeted by an American, then by an Italian program on micro-credit, and reached amazing results in terms of participation, women involvement, reimbursement rates, use of generated surplus to cover social needs (such as repairing the town sewage system, organizing literacy courses or issuing identity cards for girls and women).

The Abu el Nomros Community Development Association (CDA), established more than 60 years ago, provides basic facilities to the community (pre-school, literacy classes, tailoring workshops, cafeteria) and adds, over the past 10 years, new services to cater for community development (micro credit, community media centre, library, youth training and mobilization, family club), thanks to external funds and development cooperation programs. CDAs in Egypt originated in the late 40ies and were consolidated under the Nasser era as popular forms of aggregation at local level (suburban neighborhoods or rural villages) to represent secular entities often opposed to religious fundamentalism, and subject to a strict Government control over their leadership, activities and budget.

CDAs are grassroots associations managed by a Board of Directors (BoD) normally elected every two years by the General Assembly. However most often the members' lists are not updated, deceased members are not cancelled, assemblies are not held and minutes are prepared and signed by government officials, as in Abu el Nomros, where the BoD represents the most influential families of the village and is a reference for the community, traditional patterns conflict somehow with socio-cultural contamination; (religious) leaders and community members are confronted with modern and lay behavior; women emerge against males stereotypes; youth opposes the elders; autochthon families close the door to immigrants; social media and training open new perspectives to community empowerment.

Since its foundation in 1948, the CDA has managed different social services as pre-school, literacy classes, tailoring workshop, a cafeteria, an artisan micro-production of rice straw brooms, and provided the distribution of benefits in cash and necessities to poor families and widowed women. In the last 15 years the CDA has participated in various international cooperation projects which have helped to consolidate existing facilities and open new ones. This collaboration with national and international donors and organizations has exposed its members to a continuous

confrontation with different values and priorities, multiple choices and operational decisions stimulated by the interaction with external stakeholders, who have played the role of project leader, managers, experts, trainers, socio-cultural facilitators, and so on.

During the lifespan of the project we managed in Abu el Nomros, we experienced - at least - two different cultures nurtured by many examples of change/resistance to change, where different roles were played by professional (paid) experts and facilitators, CDA leaders and ordinary people involved in community development. We and our partners were confronted by questions arising from conflicting patterns of development, hierarchy versus democracy, authoritarianism versus leadership, often opposing volunteers at community level to development practitioners.

The project strategy between the dynamic of power and the social change

One of the main factors that limit social and local development in Egypt is acknowledged to be the lack of investment on the human capital and the weakness of an educational system which does not empower the human resources, namely in marginalized communities, hindering their chance to ensure the sustainability of actions aimed at poverty alleviation and raising the standards of living of the population.

The project "*Creation of a pilot training center and promotion of socio-cultural activities in Abu el Nomros*", co-funded by the Italian Cooperation, the European Commission, private donors and implemented by the Italian NGO COSPE (*Cooperation for the Development of Emerging Countries*) between 2003 and 2007 in Egypt, have been indeed a pilot experience for all actors involved and represent a chance of mature partnership between the international team (as external professionals) and local leaders wishing to consolidate their prestige in the community. The project dynamic tried to balance divergent interests channeling toward common goals: providing educational and socio-economic opportunities to marginalized people (women, children, youth), ensuring at the same time transparency, participation, sustainability, in a context where different values could affect operational choices and practical solutions.

The Steering Committee (SC), composed by expatriate (50%) and CDA leaders (50%), was managed in order to enhance the equal participation of all members and represented the front where different concepts of development, community rights and strategies were faced.

The project tried to resume and re-define culturally accepted polarities such as male/female; old/young; lay/fundamentalist; governmental/independent; traditionalist/modern; autochthon/newly settled families; charitable/liberal; paid/volunteers; Arabic/European, by adopting a professional approach based on consolidated competencies in community development, to stimulate and influence a process of mutual understanding. The external stakeholders were part of the dynamic of power, assuming the role of "agents of change" with different styles and strategies, despite moments of alternate success and despair.

This "driving" role is typically attributed to the community psychologist interacting with intercultural dynamic and social change and underlines the contrast between professional and volunteers in community development. International cooperation programs tend to recruit professionals to ensure more efficiency and effectiveness, and to empower youth and marginalized people to guarantee that the projects results and outcomes are equally shared. The choice of supporting the community outsiders to balance the traditional leaders' supremacy often favors the creation of a "new tribe" of local developers and "alternative leaders", mostly chosen for their technical profile than for their political representation. Rarely these professionals are truly recognized as community leaders able to influence choices and decisions; more often they

perceive the project merely as an interesting job opportunity and tend to leave the community when the external funding is over, hindering the actions long term sustainability.

The challenge was thus to work at a different level, empowering the traditional leaders and the CDA members; improving the infrastructure and the standards of the services provided; training women and youth to start-up sustainable socio-economic activities; recognizing the role of the beneficiaries as traditional agents of change within the community and limiting the role of paid professionals to mediators amid the different powers and polarities. At the same time, as CDA leaders accepted that technical and coordination roles could be offered to educated youth and women, the project could act as empowerment tool towards socially marginalized people.

Heroines without Princes: is the CDA an agent of Community development?

Training, at different levels, was the main tool to foster community development and empower people, at different levels: vocational training (tailoring, cooking & catering, crafts making); professional update (teachers' training, ToT, socio-cultural promoters); capacity building (management skills, leadership, gender roles). The project offered many training opportunities to the CDA and the Abu el Nomros community: somehow these sessions became the seed for new leadership and the nest for new agents of change, like in the case of gender awareness trainings. Opposed by the CDA leaders, contested by husbands, brothers and fathers worried about their women's respectability, the sessions were organized behind close doors in cooperation with a women-centre specialized on gender issues despite internal opposition (use of funds and availability of spaces within the CDA) and external pressure (political police interfering with its contents and imposing a prior approval of the names and curricula of trainers). Women and girls attending the first sessions in 2005 were among the promoters of the small clinic initiated in 2007, offering health and psychological support to women and girls over family and children-raising issues.

With the effort of the CDA and the financial contribution of a bank foundation, the project built 12 new classrooms to host the pre-school, besides offering transport service and snacks from the new kitchen. This improvement attracted new dual-career families living in Abu el Nomros for its reasonable prices compared with the capital, asking for more competitive educational services for their children and actively participating to the school meetings. The CDA did not realize quantitative and qualitative change of this increased participation and neglected the power represented by these new families, composed by officials and employees with high qualifications with no relationship or family support in town. Their presence in the parents' council is disruptive for the cosy and informal climate prevailing in the CDA: they call for more transparency in the accounts and modern approach to education, able to prepare their children to enter a highly competitive primary school. In this context, the BoD request to fire for immorality a teacher, who received a bouquet of flowers from her lover at work, became a public case involving the whole community for weeks, to be ultimately rejected by the majority. These families were decisive to push the BoD to convene to court a group of young men (members of the CDA President clan) who had taken by force a child contended by two divorced parents, after beating the school bus driver and threatening the teacher.

The Community Media Centre (CMC) was one of the first activities undertaken by the project, to provide an innovative service to the community, bringing in for the first time computer training, internet connection, films & music production by a youth group. The CMC management was an element of friction between the technicians/instructors, including one of the leaders of the 6th April

movement which contributed considerably to the fall of the Mubarak regime last winter, and the CDA BoD, who claimed to lead the CMC, symbol of modernity, despite their lack of technical skills. Well conscious, even 7 years ago, that the use of internet and the new media could empower people, including women and youth, more than any other political and public activity, as demonstrated in the recent Arab revolutions.

The choice of giving priority to recruit professionals and youth from the community to cover the foreseen positions has been crucial to ensure sustainability after the project, in a context where the labor market is characterized by massive unemployment because of unqualified people and high turnover for professional skills, namely in development work for international organizations, and to empower new leaders at community level, able to discuss and negotiate with the powerful group that controls the BoD.

One of the most visible results of the project was the research and publication of folktales collected directly from popular storytellers. In these stories, partly coincident with the European folk traditions, narrated by old women and men, both Muslims and Christians, the woman is often the protagonist and has the role of finding the appropriate solution with no external help, unlike the European tales where magic helpers appear to support the main character. In the tales from Abu el Nomros the female protagonist cannot rely on any outside helps and needs to save herself without the aid of any prince, hunter, hero or magic helper, as Shaharazad does in the Arabian Nights. The male presence is invariably linked to cruelty and selfishness, and Abu el Nomros women - heroines without princes - seem to reverse the traditional stereotype regarding Arab women prisoners of family ties, at least in tales of imagination...

Culture consequences and (still) open questions

There is a surprising coincidence between empirical observations drawn from the pilot experience in Abu el Nomros and the measurement of cultural dimensions drawn from the works of Geert Hofstede (1980, 1994), underlines, as regards the Arab countries, the highest levels of hierarchy and uncertainty avoidance, but limited individualism and a lower level of masculinity, compared to Latin America or even South European countries. This emerges also from Clara Volpi's research on participatory mapping and gender analysis (2008), where women appear to have limited control of the public and social space, while they experience more decision-making power in their family sphere. At the same time internet and the new media offer to women and youth a new private space of freedom and autonomy open to a wider public network.

Quoting Hofstede, we can conclude that the friction between the two partner organizations was the result of different values given to such cultural variables. While the CDA leaders concentrated to maintain their privileges and control over the community, the new leaders, women and youth with higher level of education, capacitated and trained through the new project activities, represented the drivers for social change, following patterns and ways not foreseen in the project design.

Somehow the role of the external professional was more a facilitator and mediator of conflict arisen within different components of the community, than an agent of social change: this only partially coincided with the project objectives and proved to be determinant in the following years, leading to the revolutionary movements of these last months, where women and youth even in Abu el Nomros emerged as community leaders at neighborhood and village level. The role of the expatriate team during the project implementation was mainly focused on negotiating spaces of empowerment and self-development with the CDA leaders for women and youth as the new

leaders, on keeping them open in front of the institutions' control and favoring their popularity at community level and their innovative capacity, which proved to be a successful driving force in the recent revolutionary movements.

In many other fields this reasoning can be applied, stimulating and facilitating self/help groups, fostering community development processes and handling cultural change in multi-faceted organizations, where the professional and paid specialist, being a community psychologist or a social worker, is asked to promote and support social change taking into account sustainability and empowerment of local leaders.

La "Gamaia" Community Development Association of Abu el Nomros was established in 1948 and registered according to law 32 for the year 1966 under registration number 15. It started to work according to law 84, issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs, for the year 2001. The Community Development Association started to carry on income generating activities by making brooms from 1960 as well as rugs and brushes to clean the floor; afterwards a tailoring center for women and girls was added in 1966, while a nursery for babies and Illiteracy Elimination Activity (2 classes) have been run since 1990. The CDA works in order to create best life by establishing , developing and supporting income generating activities for the community, and improving people's technical and management skills in Abu El Nomros society. The CDA wants to achieve its targets by preparing a management team able to plan, organize, orient and follow up, and a technical trained team able to study, analyse, follow up and achieve the targets, preparing a future plan based on analysis of programs, implemented policies, analysis of the external environment surrounding the association and the variable factors which affect the project.

After a successful experience in micro credit funded by USAID in the 80ies the CDA of Abu el Nomros joined the Egyptian Italian Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP): since 1998, it has participated in the credit scheme amounting to 3,150,259 EGP up to 30/06/2004 with very high performance (payment percentage 100% per month, no delay in payment from the borrowers) and has reached a total number of 1,515 beneficiaries. The PAP provides minor rehabilitation works and two staff salaries, whereas the CDA participates with its assets and furniture. In 2000 CDA and Cospe agreed upon the partnership about the new project focused on Human Capital development: "Creation of a training centre and socio cultural activities in Abu el Nomros" funded in 2003 by the Italian Cooperation, and co-funded by the European Community and Canadian cooperation. It is still active.

References

- Hofstede G. (1980), *Cultures Consequences*, London, SAGE Publications.
- Hofstede G. (1994), *Cultures and Organizations*, London, Harper Collins Business and (3 edition) New York, McGraw Hill, 2010.
- Volpi Clara (2008), *Perception of the peri-urban interface in a suburb of Greater Cairo, Egypt. A gender analysis using participatory mapping methodology*, Dissertation, MSc Applied Development Studies, University of Reading.