

# The Bellagio Initiative

The Future of Philanthropy and Development in  
the Pursuit of Human Wellbeing

## Global Dialogue Report

### Freedom and Wellbeing: Cairo

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IDS

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# Freedom and wellbeing: Cairo

**Mariz Tadros and Linda Waldman**

## Executive summary

The Global Dialogue on Freedom and Wellbeing was held in Cairo on 3 October 2011, co-organised by IDS and our partner Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS), Egypt's leading think tank. The meeting was attended by actors from different political and social backgrounds with substantial representation from youth activists affiliated to different political parties and forces, and representation from civil society activists involved in development work as well as gender and workers' movements.

Politics prevailed over the course of the discussions which is not surprising given that the region is undergoing a period of extreme political, social and economic transformation. This reconfiguration of political powers is generating new opportunities for reimagining wellbeing to include generational dimensions (the youth), to promote social justice (in particular for marginalised groups) and to remove the insidious nodes of corruption from state and society, and which had negatively affected human relations on a micro and macro level. However, the new political openings also threaten to undermine wellbeing in deeply disturbing ways: the backlash against non-Muslim minorities that Egypt has experienced, the restrictions on political freedoms that Egypt and Tunisia have witnessed and the severity of the economic downturn as a consequence of declining internal and external investment as well as a decline in tourism – all of which have in turn affected people's quality of life in very tangible ways. Such downturns risk undermining the gains made in securing freedom and dignity because they are making many citizens rethink: freedom at what cost for ourselves and our children?

Moreover, it is important to note that there are different political trajectories unfolding in the region, with varying levels of success at challenging the status quo. In some countries, the struggles have become very bloody, risking civil war and the possibility of military coups that would instate new dictatorships. Consequently, most participants agreed that since the region is still undergoing a revolution, it is too early to talk about frameworks and strategies for engaging with the relationship between freedoms and wellbeing.

Regional and Egyptian participants emphasised that the political predicament of Egypt and the kind of state it chooses will not only affect how wellbeing and rights are understood and advanced but will have a ripple effect on other countries in the region as well. If Egypt fails to consolidate a democratic system of government that institutes socially inclusive and just policies, this will have a detrimental impact on peoples in other regional contexts that are striving to build democratic political orders and the kind of freedoms that they will be able to secure.

While participants expressed their hope that people's uprisings will culminate in a real Arab renaissance that will capture the imagination of the entire region, it is unlikely that the fruits will be reaped within the next ten years or so. In this current phase in Egypt and Tunisia – the two countries upon which so much hope was placed that they would pioneer the successful transition to democracy – the people's aspirations have been stalled by ineffective transitional governments showing all the characteristics of bad governance. Many participants agreed that it is not the

people's uprisings that led to the deterioration of the economic situation and the lax security situation on the ground, but the mismanagement and weak leadership of the current transitional governments.

It is noteworthy that the concept of wellbeing was not being directly used in how demands for political and social change were articulated during the roundtable in Cairo; nonetheless, the meanings of wellbeing were very much conveyed throughout the entire Dialogue. For example, participants spoke about the importance of operationalisation of the concept of social justice in ways that speak to people's realities, whether it is in setting a minimum wage, granting social entitlements to marginalised groups such as quarry workers, or supporting the workers in the informal sector.

The concept of dignity was seen as a critical dimension of wellbeing. Participants highlighted that the people who rose against the regimes were fighting for dignity as much as for bread. The struggle for dignity took on different meanings on the ground: being free from the terror and humiliation of an oppressive security apparatus; having the right to a job that enables people to meet their needs; living in a society in which relationships are not all tarnished by the insidious nature of state-supported corruption, and so forth. The Arab people's pride in their own uprisings was also a dimension of dignity that was reiterated throughout the Dialogue. This pride emanated from the fact that people's victories over authoritarian regimes were being celebrated and, in the process, the stereotypical reporting of the region as a source of terrorism and conflict was being challenged.

In view of the wider geostrategic factors influencing the region, international philanthropy and development were seen as marginal to determining the political processes or outcomes of ongoing struggles. It was clear from the discussions that the focus was on indigenous political and civil actors and the role of the military. Nonetheless, participants had very clear and concrete suggestions for international development and philanthropy projects wishing to play a role in supporting local progressive forces on the ground. The most important of these was seen as support for local knowledge production for addressing local problems. This was deemed as the area where innovation is most likely to emerge because local actors would be forced to think creatively about dealing with issues that they are experiencing first-hand, the context, complexities and nuances of which are familiar to them. In order to endorse such a knowledge production initiative, philanthropists will have to be willing to take risks in backing nascent initiatives through unusual suspects and through support for the process as much as the outcome. Local knowledge production for innovative solutions to local issues should be endorsed because it creates the space for innovation, because locally owned solutions tend to receive more support and because it challenges the knowledge hierarchy which has assumed that international expertise is always superior to the existing local repertoire.

Other areas put forward by participants where philanthropists can play a positive enabling role in Egypt and the region included support for higher education and broadening the understanding of civil society to include a wider range of unconventional actors and approaches to civil engagement.

What is needed is a new contract between international development and philanthropists on the one hand and local actors on the other that is founded on power relations that are less hierarchical and that recognise the value of supporting local responses to local problems and is based less on blueprints. Nevertheless, there was a repeated emphasis on the importance of exchange programmes, experience sharing and capacity development, both for civil society and for reforming the institutional set-up of existing state entities.

One key message that came out strongly to be conveyed at the Bellagio Summit is how do we seize this historic opportunity to support progressive social and political actors in the Arab world, in such a way that we are able to listen to alternative voices, adopt new ways of working, and take new risks that do not take us back to doing business as usual.

## Introduction

The Global Dialogue on Freedoms was held in Cairo on 3 October 2011. It was co-organised by IDS and our partner Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS), Egypt's leading think tank. The idea was to bring together activists, practitioners and thinkers – who are not necessarily in regular conversation with each other – to explore through dialogue the key issues on rights and wellbeing in the Arab region, now and in the future.

This all-day meeting was attended by actors from different political and social backgrounds. There was a substantial representation from youth activists affiliated to different political parties and forces including the leftists, the liberals, the Nasserites and the Islamists and who assumed leading roles in the uprisings that erupted in Egypt on 25 January 2011 and which are ongoing to this day. There was also representation from civil society activists involved in development work as well as gender and workers' movements. Philanthropic organisations were also represented as were some academic voices. Members of the Islamist movements were invited, but declined to participate for unknown reasons.

Participants were as follows:

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Area of expertise</b>
Wael Gamal	An economist writer in <i>Al Shorouk</i> newspaper	He is a renowned and respected activist who had an organisational role to play in the uprisings and who champions workers' rights and movements
Mohammed el Agaty	Executive Manager of Arab Forum for Alternatives	He is an active member of civil society on rights, development and South–South engagements
Eman Ahmed Ragab	Researcher in ACPSS	Specialises in Islamist movements
Rabhha Seif Ellam	Researcher in ACPSS	Islamist political parties and their membership base
Amal Mokhtar	Researcher in ACPSS	Arab states and regime consolidation
Ahmed Kamel el Beheiry	Researcher in ACPSS	Member of the revolutionary youth coalition and active member of the left
Ali Mohammed Ali	Researcher in ACPSS	Works on civil society and citizenship
Sameh el Borki	Member of the revolutionary youth coalition	Expelled member of the Muslim Brotherhood
Mohammed el Gabba	Organiser of Abd el Moneim Abou el Fotouh's presidential campaign (out of the Muslim Brotherhood)	Expelled member of the Muslim Brotherhood

Farid Zahran	Member of the political office of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party	Veteran political activist from the left
Dr Nader Fergany	Author of the first two Arab Human Development Reports	Human development, education, scientific and technological advancement
Dr Montasser Kamal	Acting Regional Director of the Ford Foundation in Cairo	-
Dr Gamal Sultan	Former director of ACPSS	Professor of Political Science at the American University in Cairo
Mavie Maher	Film director and campaigner for Hamdeen Sabahy – a presidential candidate of the Nasserites	Looks at the role of film in inspiring youth uprisings
Hossam Mouenis	Member of the revolutionary youth coalition and campaigner for Hamdeen Sabahy – a presidential candidate of the Nasserites	A key organiser in the youth uprisings
Dr Ayman Abd el Wahab	Head of the civil society studies unit at APSS	One of the most renowned writers on civil society in Egypt and undertakes much capacity support for local civil society organisations
Dr Hania Sholkamy	Deputy Director of the Social Research Centre at the American University in Cairo	Convenor of the regional hub of Pathways of Women's Empowerment
Raeda El Zo'by*	Director of Tanmeyah - Arab Development Consulting Group	Specialist on gender and ICT in the region
Basma Kubati*	Care Yemen	One of the pioneers in development policy and praxis in Yemen
Mwihaki Kimura Muraguri *	Rockefeller Kenya	
Mariz Tadros *	IDS Fellow, Participation, Power and Social Change team	Egyptian, writer on democratisation, gender, religion and civil society in the Middle East (focus: Egypt, Yemen, Jordan)
Linda Waldman*	Team Leader, Knowledge, Technology and Society team, IDS	Researcher on nationalism, identity and environmental health

\* these participants represent regional and international involvement

# The future of freedoms in the regional and Egyptian context

The situation in the Arab world has been shaken so violently that no country has been immune from the ripple effect. Understanding the political dynamics at work in the Arab world today is integral to understanding current and future prospects for promoting wellbeing. Dr Gamal Soltan, a professor of political science at the American University in Cairo and the former director of APSS, gave a thought-provoking presentation of the region in motion. It is important to note the contextual nuances across different countries. Within the Middle Eastern region, there are three different kinds of struggles at the moment on a country level. The first group of countries, such as Egypt and Tunisia, have successfully managed to remove their leaders and are in transition. In the second group of countries, such as Jordan, elites have been forced to induce political reform as a consequence of increased internal pressure arising from the example of neighbouring countries. The third group of countries, such as Yemen, Libya and Syria, are those where revolutionary activism has plunged the country into protracted violence.

In this new regional setting, the political predicament of Egypt is crucial not only for the success of democracy internally but for its likely political ripple effect on other countries. If Egypt's democracy aspirations become consolidated, it will no doubt destabilise authoritarian regimes whose people will press for revolutionary change. Moreover, Egypt itself may wish to assume a regional leadership role in supporting people's uprisings in other countries or it may choose to detach its own political trajectory and engage with states in a way that does not undermine its interests. Whatever the outcome, whether a democratic transition is successful or not, it will affect the power configurations in the Middle East, in particular with respect to the role of Iran.

In such a highly volatile context, there are several possible scenarios possible for the region: (i) political settlements between different forces in the country characterised by a high degree of instability and turmoil; (ii) military coups that are empowered by the failure of people's uprisings; (iii) sustained and protracted civil strife; (iv) internal struggles that lead to the disintegration of the state and bring in international actors who play a directly overt role.

As things stand now, the prospects for Egypt becoming a full democracy that respects the rights of all, including non-Muslim minorities, seems grim. The Islamists are likely to play a prime role in governance against the backdrop of their likely success in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. While Islamists need to be integrated into any political order, their assumption of leadership will nevertheless undermine the integration of a politically plural, inclusive system. The most likely scenario is that the military will exploit the existing political fragmentation as an excuse to institute a dictatorship that brings stability and security to the Egyptian population and that enacts a system of political pluralism that is heavily controlled and ruled by them. Such a scenario will seriously undermine the prospects for supporting a holistic approach to wellbeing and therefore jeopardise the political and civil freedoms that affect people's quality of life and whose violations had catalysed the Egyptian revolution.

Dr Nader Fergany, author of the first three Arab Human Development Reports, said,

I see that the Arab liberation wave will be complete in ten years and it will bring an end to despotic regimes. And this will provide an opportunity for the renaissance of the human being in the Arab world. Some countries will become republican, some will become constitutional monarchies but all authoritarian regimes will be toppled and this is a historical time for us to study Arab liberalisation. For example, we cannot read the Saudi King's decision to allow

women to vote as disconnected from what is happening in Egypt and the region. There are both threats and opportunities in this. We are on the verge of an abyss.

Participants responded differently to this historical moment that they were living through: there was a fear of regressing and a fear that agendas will be hijacked. However, there was also a very strong spirit of resistance. Everyone around the room, whether s/he was from Egypt or the region, was politically engaged in some way.

## Challenges to wellbeing

Participants related to the concept of wellbeing through different lenses and from different standpoints. It seems the four most common ways in which participants spoke of wellbeing was in terms of freedoms, dignity, social justice, and an inclusive democracy. Specific and tangible operational policies were not put forward because the context is still a political vacuum: Egypt is in a state of transition and the overwhelming perception is that it may be too early to talk about specific challenges to wellbeing as the dust has not yet settled. For example, it is still unclear what kind of state we will have in Egypt and the Middle East: will it be a developmental state, a minimalist state or what? Since the characteristics and configurations of power have yet to evolve, it is still too early to decipher the relationship between state, society and wellbeing. In fact, many participants had a strong perception that we are still in a state of ongoing revolution, which is evident in the sustained protests that continue to bring many back to the streets.

There was a strong consensus among Egyptian participants that one of the key challenges to promoting human wellbeing and freedoms at this stage in Egyptian history is the poor quality of governance on the part of the armed forces during this transitional phase. This has had a tangible impact on people's lives, who have witnessed a decline in wellbeing on multiple levels. The lax security situation and absence of protection for citizens against petty and organised crime has made people feel fearful and vulnerable. This has been attributed to the absence of police officers on the streets and lax enforcement of the rule of law. From an economic point of view, inflation has been high, and the country has witnessed a 34 per cent drop in investment. The lax security situation and the state of turmoil have led to a decline in rates of tourism, which has directly impacted on people who work both in the formal and informal sectors. Moreover, the imposition of political restrictions on dissidents by the armed forces has sent signals that there are new red lines being imposed. The country has also witnessed a backlash against progressive policies that supported women's rights and a backlash against Copts (Egypt's largest non-Muslim minority, representing 10 per cent of the total population), leading to questions regarding the impact of bad governance on social inclusiveness and cohesion.

Yet despite these tangible declines in wellbeing, the number of citizens joining protests is falling. Many citizens are very tired and no longer sympathetic to the continued recurrence of protests which they now see as disruptive and as undermining their ability to earn their living. While the protesters are telling them to continue to support political activism to elicit real change, some participants noted that people are anxious about what this would mean for their livelihoods. At the same time, there are fears that without sustained pressure on the ruling order to elicit real structural change, it will try to get away with cosmetic reforms that will not deal with the root problems.

It is not only the general population who are reducing their participation in demanding their rights, and so threatening to undermine securing freedoms in this current and next phase – the youth who organised and mobilised are also withdrawing from active protest. If there is a regression to



business as usual, there is a risk that they will once again feel politically excluded and socially marginalised, and this will impact on the prospects for building an inclusive democracy. This is because one of the key challenges that the Arab uprisings has brought to the fore, whether in Egypt, Yemen or Tunisia or elsewhere, is the extent to which approaches to wellbeing on the ground have proven to be neglectful of generational differences. While gender and class were sometimes taken into account as social categories that require careful analysis in any policy formulation, the generational differences were often neglected. In Egypt and Yemen, according to the views of several participants in the Dialogue, it was clear that whatever youth policy strategy had been drawn up on paper many years ago, it was in effect frozen and never enacted. The challenge now is how to develop wellbeing policies in the region that do take youth into account, not only as objects of interventions but also as actors and leaders. In view of their widely recognised roles in instigating the people's uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and beyond, the new youth leaders that have formed coalitions and movements are not likely to accept anything else.

Moreover, wellbeing in relation to social justice featured prominently in the discussions. A recurring perception among many participants is that while social justice was one of the main slogans of the uprisings (bread, freedom and social justice), how this translates into policies has been greatly disputed. For example, while people have advocated for a minimum wage that would guarantee a dignified life, the transitional government has not positively responded to this. Furthermore, many activists ask: what about securing the minimum requirements for a dignified life for informal workers, who constitute a significant majority of workers and whose economic predicament has not been put on the table?

In many regional contexts such as Egypt and Yemen where social and economic marginalisation has meant that large populations are illiterate, in particular among women, there is a need to engage in a new kind of literacy, participants urged. They referred to cultural illiteracy (not having opportunities for social engagements), political illiteracy (lack of knowledge of the political processes, political actors and their agendas) and in particular people's lack of knowledge of their own rights, as real challenges to wellbeing that need immediate action.

There is a distinct risk to the promotion of sustained wellbeing in the context of Yemen where foreign donors channelled significant funds into the Yemen Social Fund for Development at the expense of strengthening the state – in other words, as a parallel structure through which to support human wellbeing. Such a structure was under the direct control of the Prime Minister. When the uprisings erupted, he had the power to freeze the disbursement of funds. This had an immediate negative impact on people's wellbeing. So foreign funding must go towards strengthening the state in delivering welfare to people and promoting wellbeing rather than supporting counter structures that come under the complete control of the ruling elite. This money is then diverted from the Social Fund for the purchase of weapons. There should be more support for local communities and their capacity development in order for them to play a more active role in responding to their people's needs.

# The potential role of philanthropy and international development in supporting an enabling role in the region

From the very outset, it was clear that there was a general tendency among participants to classify philanthropy alongside bilateral and multilateral aid without recognising the differences between them. In addition, it was noted that aid was also confused with philanthropy, and both associated with Western involvement rather than Arab or local. Moreover, this meant that all such initiatives are seen to be driven by hidden agendas with assumptions that they are also linked to foreign policy and security interests.

Nonetheless, there was a sense that the uprisings that had erupted across the region had not only challenged the relationship between rulers and subjects but also between the people and Western policymakers. One participant noted that for many years activists have urged the West to recognise the Arab region in its own right, yet they consistently represented it as the Middle East or grouped it with West Asia or Africa. But the recent events made the world see the Arab region differently, reference to the Arab Spring or Arab uprisings became more prominent, and by default this meant a recognition of Arab agency – an affirmation that the Arab people have the power to define themselves in particular ways and that their representation is legitimate.

At this political juncture, a new partnership based on a new contract between civil society and international support for progressive political and social change needs to be established. Participants offered very concrete ways in which the terms of engagement would make such a new contract viable.

First, philanthropists and international development actors must abandon their old blueprints that were exported to Arab countries as best practice, and instead listen to what people on the ground have to offer in analysis of their context and the possible ways in which social change can be promoted.

Second, philanthropists and developmentalists should not revert back to the same old crowd, the same donor darlings that they have partnered with before. Rather, they should seize the opportunities presented by the Arab uprisings to take new risks in supporting unconventional actors and initiatives. One participant suggested that risk-taking may require leaving conventional work and comfort zones, but that this is the right time for this.

Third, just as there is a need to rethink the partners, there is a need to rethink how good change is being promoted. One of the main challenges that was being debated was the fear that development policies based on fashions and fads would continue to dominate thinking about wellbeing and rights, to the detriment of engaging with people's own priorities. The continued attempt to match fashions with perceptions of reality risked undermining the possibilities for the adoption of effective policies. This would also encompass going beyond band-aid solutions and support actors who are pressing for holistic structural changes to the entire system of government and how it engages with its citizenry

One of the main recurring themes during the day's discussions was the need for philanthropists and international developmentalists to revisit how they have understood the concept of civil society. There is a need, many agreed, for there to be an acknowledgement of the multiple roles

and multiple actors and their relationship to questions of promoting wellbeing. One participant proposed that one way to expand the understanding of what constitutes civil society is to consider models, configurations, arenas and actors that go beyond the conventional donor conceptualisations of civil society, which are often based on Western models. For example, one participant pointed out, discussion of civil society has often overlooked locally sustainable models of addressing livelihoods issues such as the Endowments (Awqaf) system which has historically served as one of the cornerstones of indigenous forms of financing poverty alleviation and promoting wellbeing among the marginalised. Similarly, the tradition of establishing cooperatives as self-help units also needs to be examined in relationship to sustainability and wellbeing.

Yet participants also cautioned that international developmentalists and philanthropists are used to recognising civil society in all its richness and complexity – it should not be seen as the panacea for all sociopolitical and economic ills. As one participant explained, ‘I believe that civil society was overburdened and was doing things beyond its task. In the past there was no political society so the burden of doing politics was put on civil society’. Following the ousting of Mubarak, the role of civil society is now being reconfigured in Egypt, and the arena is subject to a different kind of pressure: it is now trying to carve out a space where political society (parties, forces, movements and coalitions) have taken centre stage and the political has prevailed over the civil. Further, if civil society organisations are going to play an important role in bringing about positive change, there is a need to rethink the nature of capacity development: it will have to be done in a way that is different from the conventional technocratic approaches pursued in the past.

Many voices at the roundtable were in favour of philanthropy supporting innovative and unconventional local initiatives. One participant suggested, for example, that international support for local actors should not exclusively fund service delivery where there is very little room for innovation. It should also be channelled towards the production and sharing of local knowledge to respond to local priorities and needs. Many participants strongly supported the role that international development and philanthropy can play in supporting higher education, in terms of exposing Egyptians to new innovations, new approaches to learning and quality control. It is in the realm of education that there is scope for capacity development that will make a difference, said more than one participant.

One participant reminded the discussants that the role of private flows of funding was successful in Europe when it actively supported the things that no one else would fund. This was funding that would take a risk and it would be a bold risk. It was also funding for local initiatives that was based on local priorities. In this current transitional period, participants noted that there has been a deluge of international experts from Eastern Europe sharing their experiences with Egyptians on how they sought to establish democratic systems of government. Yet many of their Egyptian counterparts would have told them that reference to some Asian and African countries would have been more relevant to Egypt and more useful in terms of convergences with its historical and political trajectories.

# Key messages

At the end of the day, participants expressed a number of key messages that they would like to share with philanthropists, leaders, researchers and policymakers.

- How do we build a new contract with the progressive social actors in countries in transition that are based on a recognition of new voices, new agendas and new ways of working? There is great pride in Egypt at the moment about how the people were able to mobilise for change and overthrow the regime so a top-down approach by international development actors that expects local actors to implement blueprints for democratisation is unlikely to appeal or be successful.
- Acknowledge the centrality of dignity as a priority of the people. It is suggested here that dignity as a dimension of quality of life and quality of relationships be explored in more depth.
- The uprisings in the Middle East and in Egypt created a new excitement about new ways of activism, new ways of thinking, and it has meant that for the first time people want to hear about what happened and how it happened, and this is an opportunity for donors to come in and develop their agendas according to what people are saying rather than dictating an agenda about how they should make change happen.
- There is a perception that initiatives pursued by philanthropy are also driven by hidden agendas, with assumptions that they are also linked to foreign policy and security interests.
- Take into consideration that it is not only governments in need of reform, but also consider that international organisations (such as the UN) need reform.
- Consider ways in which leading and influential philanthropists can expand South–South cooperation for experience sharing, technical support and exchange of ideas, given that most forms of cooperation supported by philanthropists tend to be based on the transfer of knowledge from the West to the South.