



74TH CAIRO CLIMATE TALK REPORT

Sustainable Makers and Local Crafts

4 MAY 2021 // PREPARED BY AMENA SHARAF & LILLY VON STACKELBERG

On the 4th of May 2021, Cairo Climate Talks hosted their 74th panel discussion on the topic of Sustainable Makers and Local Crafts. The conversation aimed to encourage a dialogue about how creative innovation spaces can support achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Two experts in the maker scene shared their insights as to how sustainability is a major driving force for entrepreneurship and how to increase environmental consciousness.

Moderator of the event and Cairo Climate Talks coordinator, Lilly von Stackelberg highlighted the challenging situation many communities are already facing due to climate change related effects, “we are now speaking of the Anthropocene, the age in which humanity alters its environment to non-reversible degrees”. This means communities are faced with many new challenges, and need to adapt quickly, innovatively and as a community in order to react to and interact with an ever and fast changing environment.

In his opening remarks, Philippe Maupai, Head of the Science Department at the German Embassy in Cairo, highlighted the potential of Maker Spaces. He explained that Maker Spaces, FabLabs and HackerSpaces – communal workshops that have been opening in growing numbers – are “places designed to facilitate the access to traditional and new tools and technologies, like 3D printers or wood-working equipment, that individuals might not have access to in their own homes.”

In terms of the environment, he explained that in order to tackle climate change and reach the SDGs “grassroots development of new technologies and innovative ways of working together in a sustainable way have an important role to play.” Various German institutions have over the years recognized and supported this so called “maker movement” which supports Do-it-Yourself and open innovation processes. Initiatives such as the [“Make Light”](#) initiative exemplify these efforts and sum up the underlying idea in their slogan “if it can be imagined, it can be made”.

CREATING VALUE IN A PLACE CAN BE A GREAT INCENTIVE TO CONSIDER THE ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

Dr. Yousria Hamed, opened the event on behalf of the Ministry of Environment of the Arab Republic of Egypt by introducing the Egyptian-Italian Program which she manages. This program revived local crafts and traditions in [Al Nazla Village in Fayoum](#), by supporting the unique local pottery tradition and building 20 workshops. This created added value, new revenue streams and economic opportunities. Additionally, an established visitor center adds revenue and educates visitors and students about local craftsmanship.

According to Dr. Yousria “the local community of Al Nazla has recognized the value of their place” and have hence an incentive to sustainability: “they now aim to develop the site through considering the environment in all their activities, from sorting and collecting garbage and operating the oven with more environmentally friendly materials.”

Aravinth Panch, Co-founder of 7 different start-ups in various fields, one of them the DreamSpace Academy, has a similar approach to creating valuable and feasible solutions for communities in need, environmental approaches always need to consider the economic opportunity and social potential they have.

This is best achieved when learning from local needs to create such new value. After many attempts to find the right niche and path to enable young and curious minds in his native Sri Lanka, he realized that the best solutions are found by those who are victims to the challenge itself. An important part of supporting them is not just a 3D printer but to give them the ability to tell their story, identify the challenges and embrace the mindset of a solver. While many Maker Spaces in the West became playing grounds for project-based learning, he saw that this does not help to create meaningful change or revenue on the long run. Rather challenge-based approaches bring out the needed solutions for communities, from within the community.

CHALLENGE-BASED INNOVATION CAN LEAD TO GREAT LOCAL SOLUTIONS THAT HELP COMMUNITIES AND NATURE THRIVE

Omar Essafty, one of the early supporters of FabLab Egypt, and the Co-founder of its parent company San3a Tech, shared similar insights from Egypt. In the beginning they tried to recreate a FabLab modelled as an exact replica of the US archetype, but quickly they realized this would never succeed in their home context, so they decided to pave their own way. Following the example of many other initiatives in Egypt and the region, they realized the struggle of being a donation-based NGO. Registering their space as a social venture instead opened them new paths of localizing the space and becoming financially independent: both important aspects of sustainability.

THE ABILITY TO THINK AND ACT IN AGILE WAYS CAN HELP US CREATE AND PRODUCE FAST SOLUTIONS TO ARISING CRISES

The announcement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 was an important paradigm shift in the development sector. Instead of looking at problems as single-factor issues, or one-size-fits-all-solutions, it highlighted the importance of solving challenges with a holistic, long-lasting, localized, and community-based vision. Sustainability incorporates social, economic, and environmental factors and hence allows for such vision to gain ground.

Aravinth highlighted the importance of creating intricate knowledge of a context and situation in order to implement the above-mentioned meaningful visions, rather than replicating models. As an example, he highlighted a project in Kenia aimed at supporting Plasma-based Malaria treatment through the same model of his Sri Lankan based organization DreamSpace Academy. But after days of training with the local women's group, they realized a different issue was much more urgent and could be supported instead: the production and distribution of sanitary pads, so they adjusted the project accordingly.

Omar shared similar contemplations from Egypt, highlighting how many in the scene had originally worried what the unexpected changes brought along by the pandemic would bring, but realized that having learned to learn from a challenge was quite useful in coming up with quick solutions such as producing 40.000 face shields direly needed by health care personnel, due to the ability to create quick solutions and the tools at hand. Another example of localizing production, decreasing CO2 footprints of products, and creating economic opportunity is the Egyptian Ramadan light called "Fanous", which used to be mainly produced in China for the past years but has been brought back to Egyptian makers thanks to technical training and accessibility of workshops and tools.

While we still have a long way to reach the SDGs, Aravinth encouraged young people to use whatever access they have to networks and online sources, to gain new skills and perspectives to go build up one's own ideas. Omar doubled down on this, stressing how the main aim of the Maker Spaces and FabLabs needs to stay alive: make innovation easy, because "if you make the process of innovation difficult, the less ideas and the less innovators you have" and this should be avoided as everyone agreed: we need people to believe they can, so they do.

OMAR ESSAFTY

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Omar El-Safty is an entrepreneur who believes in the Maker Movement, which becomes very apparent in his continuous passion and dedication to support the Egyptian maker scene. He has been supporting Fab Lab Egypt since day 1 and worked as General Manager at Fab Lab Egypt. He is also a Fab Academy Graduate which is a digital fabrication diploma provided by Center of Bits & Atom – at MIT.

In his various roles and responsibilities, he has brought the first Maker Faire to Egypt and the Arab World and together with Fab Lab Egypt's Co-Founder co-launched San3a Tech to be the parent company behind Fab Lab Egypt, San3a Hub.

He is an avid supporter of STEM schools in Egypt, supporter of social entrepreneurship, and dedicated to help set up more maker spaces and fablabs in Egypt and has supported the Goethe Institut Cairo in setting up their own Creative Space – a maker space located at their library in Dokki, Cairo.

Aravinth Panch is a serial entrepreneur, an engineer, expert, educator and advisor. He is a researcher in many fields, from sustainability, engineering and development, to Artificial Intelligence. He worked in 2 big corporates in the telecom sector and for 8 tech startups in the sector of education, smart home, media, agriculture, energy, healthcare & water, in Asia & Europe. And co-founded 7 organisations in diverse fields in Asia & Europe.

He is affiliated with 23 organisations and supports individuals, startups, accelerators, incubators, innovation hubs, and more in over 50 countries. And maybe most importantly, as a community builder, he co-created and has been curating several communities for startups, sustainability, education & art, in Asia, Europe & Africa.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Cairo Climate Talks are conceived, organized and hosted as a cooperation between the German Embassy in Cairo, the Egyptian Ministry of Environment, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ).



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