



Middle East Youth Initiative

Interview with Nada Hamada

Programs Head, Alashanek Ya Balady Association for Sustainable Development (AYB) at American University in Cairo

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Middle East Youth Initiative (MEYI): Can you tell us a little bit about your personal story and how you arrived at the American University in Cairo (AUC)? How did you decide that AUC was the right place for you?

Nada Hamada: Actually, I am not from Cairo – I am from Al Fayoum, a governate in Egypt one hour from here. I finished high school [studying] math, and then I was going to go to focus in engineering...Then I applied for the LEAD scholarship here, to AUC, and when I got accepted I decided to go here primarily for the high quality of education. So, here I am in my senior year.

MEYI: Do you have any plans for after graduation?

Hamada: Probably I will work a bit in development, and then I will go for my Master's.

MEYI: Are you studying math and engineering now?

Hamada: No, I am studying business and minoring in psychology.

MEYI: That is a big change. How did you decide to pursue business?

Hamada: In my first semester I studied engineering at AUC, and then I did a bit of research, I asked my colleagues, and I went to the career advising office to know more about work [opportunities] and everything ...They asked me whether I could potentially deal with [inaudible] or could deal with people... So, it was clear that I was not the type of person who would work in engineering at all. I decided to go to something that was more people-oriented, so I went for marketing.

MEYI: You wanted something more people-oriented?

Hamada: Yes, because marketing is all about understanding your consumers, understanding what to deliver, how they act, what they want and everything.

MEYI: How did you hear about Alashanek Ya Balady (AYB), and what inspired you to become involved in the organization? Perhaps you can give us some background on AYB, its presence at the American University in Cairo, and how you personally became involved.

Hamada: Alashanek Ya Balady in the AUC started in 2003, it is a project under the student union. It first started with only two programs, I guess micro-projects and...the illiteracy [program]. It has been five years now, we have seven programs running, and we work on two levels. We work on development on campus through different campaigns that target AUC students to change a lot of things: to make them more active, [encourage them to be] more



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involved, or any issue we think should be addressed in developing the students. And the other level is working in the field. For this we have seven programs, which are: the illiteracy program, youth development, language development, computer learning center, micro-projects [microfinance], charity, and the national education program.

This is the overview of Alashanek Ya Balady at AUC. How I got involved was through something called activities week. It is for two weeks at the beginning of each semester where we have a lot of booths for different clubs with different interests on campus, so you just go and see what the club is, its description, and if you want to be a part of it or not. When I first entered AUC I wanted to join a student activity, but I did not know what to join. So, first, [asks interviewer] do you know what 'Alashanek Ya Balady' means? It means: 'for a better country,'...so the name itself is very attractive.¹ It's very unique even now on campus because there are very few [clubs with] names which are in Arabic and 'Alashanek Ya Balady' is in slang Arabic, too – 'for a better country' – so it was attractive for me to go and see what they really do. So I went and I asked the guy: 'what do you?' I was very interested in the theme of community work, because I always wanted to do it, but I never found the appropriate umbrella to do it. So I just joined and I worked in public relations first on campus...

MEYI: So tell us a little bit about that: what were you doing?

Hamada: In public relations, we were basically trying to get media coverage for our events and of Alashanek Ya Balady and what we do.

MEYI: How did you move from that position to where you are currently?

Hamada: For the first year I was a P.R. [public relations] member. Then, for the second year I was a media member. I went and took photo shots of the different programs and I was involved in making documentaries and short movies about AYB. Then for the third year I decided to work in the field itself and go to the different programs and see what they do. I felt that I was detached from the field of work, I thought that I am publicizing for it and doing a lot for it, but without being very involved. I wanted to [make] this transition, so I became involve in micro-projects last year. And after this year I became more aware of the different programs and how they work and, with my background in media and public relations and [all of the] programs I attended for AYB, I decided to apply to be the program head.

MEYI: So you were mainly working in the office and then you decided that you wanted to have more experience...

Hamada: Yeah, it is like two years on campus and two years off campus now.

MEYI: How have you found working in the field? What has been the most exciting or rewarding project that you have been able to be a part of?

¹ The literal translation is: "For you, my country."



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Hamada: ...I was basically happy to be with micro-projects, because I felt making a change in people's lives and giving them money to start their own projects, and... it's not only about improving their economic environment, but also about engaging the different family members in our program. Because this is our main goal and this is what we are trying to do. We saw that a lot of people in our different programs: we have kids in youth development and we have mothers in illiteracy eradication, but they were never connected. We thought that families as a whole should be engaged in our different programs, so that what we say in one program is transferred to another program. So, if we are talking about honesty, we would have in every session a moral or a concept that we talk about, in addition to the reading material and the curriculum we have. So if we are talking about honesty, the whole family will hear about honesty through our programs, so they will have something to talk about and something in common. They will not just go home and find that what we said in the session is much different from the reality in their communities...For me this was very rewarding... giving the family something that they can talk about... It is not only about economically empowering them, but it also getting them to give a hand to help themselves. This was the most rewarding thing, because this is the thing that I always wanted to do.

MEYI: So you basically have these training or educational programs with entire families. Are these the same people that you are working with on the micro-credit program so you are able to provide with them a loan to start their projects, and then you also have this educational program that goes along with it, or is it separate?

Hamada: No, it goes along with it. We don't have a lot of people in micro-projects, or micro-loans, because we have limited funds, but everybody who is a part of micro-loans has to be engaged in our different programs, not vice versa. If we say, for example, we have 50 families and five of them take micro-loans, then five of them will be involved in micro-loans and all other programs, and forty-five will be engaged only in our programs without micro-loans.

MEYI: I imagine that you develop close relationships with the families you are working with?

Hamada: Exactly, and it is really good, for example, if we have a lady in the illiteracy eradication program and her kids don't come to the session of youth development, or if her children don't come to the language development program, we call her, or go to her during her session and ask her. So, we have direct contact with the different family members and always keep track of them. We just started implementing it this year: this year all the programs were working really well, but on an individual basis, so we decided to take it to the second level and get the whole family engaged.

MEYI: How do you recruit volunteers on campus? I know that a lot of AYB's work is done through volunteers. Can you tell me a little bit about that process?

Hamada: Actually, because we are a student activity and not [part of the] NGO, all of our work is based on volunteering we don't have people who work and get paid. So what we do, as I told you before, we have this activities week where people come to our booth and sign up. They have to have this passion to join something like this, then we have the second level of



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selections, which is where we have interviews. We interview people who apply on certain levels...Some people will work with kids and they have to be very good because they will have to be role models for the kids, and they have to also be patient with the outcomes, because the outcomes don't come easily. So we have interviews that can determine whether you want to expand and continue and can do the work or not. So ...each program has a different criteria, because they are not all the same. So we interview people, the students, and we see if they are capable of doing the work or not. Some of them don't have the skills, some of them just have the passion. But if they have the willingness to develop these skills and to do something, we accept them, as long as they are willing to make change.

People differ: not everybody joins the club because they have a vision. Some people join because their friends are in [the club], some join because they just want to have the experience of joining a student activity, and different things. But what we really want to work on is, if somebody is good and is doing the work but he or she does not have the vision, we work on developing their vision...Even people who work on campus, by getting them to visit the different programs to see how work is done and what change they are making in the lives of these people. Especially the people who are working on fundraising and [public relations], they really need to have the passion and knowledge that they are changing something in somebody's life and be able to talk about it...

We have a low drop-out rate, but if we find we have a very high dropout rate we know that there is a problem: either the program is not good, our learning system is not good, or people don't have the vision, we don't inspire them enough or motivate them to be a part of this...but, at the end of the day, it is a student activity: if people don't like it, they must decide they want to continue.

MEYI: How many volunteers do you have now?

Hamada: Now, we have 75 volunteers.

MEYI: What do you think is going to be the most valuable thing for you after having graduated from AUC? Is it going to be your experiences at Alashanek Ya Balady and your extra-curricular involvement, because I know you are involved in other activities on campus too, or do you think your academic experience is really what is going to help you in your career and in your personal development?

Hamada: I think both complete each other. I can't describe one –to have my academic side, my academic education, it helped me a *lot* in Alashanek Ya Balady, and my marketing understanding. I took a lot of community psychology classes and personal growth, so I know how to develop somebody, how to [engage in] a participatory approach, [how to determine] what are the objectives of our program are for him, how to go and do a social assessment for a family that we don't have micro-projects for, how to do a survey, how to do a focus group...all this I learned through my academic side.



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So, my studies taught me how to use critical thinking; I know how to organize my time. I also now know a lot about marketing and consumer behavior. So, whenever I deal with Alashanek Ya Balady, I deal with it as a service that I offer to consumers and my consumers are mainstream people...so I need to have marketing research, research and development, I need to go and see what are their preferences, what are their problems, what are the problems that I need to address through my services.

So, my academic education has helped me a lot in Alashanek Ya Balady, especially because of the combination of marketing and psychology. Alashanek Ya Balady has also developed me a lot and taught me a lot about my personality: it taught me how to work with people, how to trust other people that they will do their work, it helped me to manage my time...it is a big group. It is not easy for a student to be involved in extra-curricular activities that require more than five hours per week, I have a lot of other things. So, it taught me a lot, and it made me part of a group of people that I want to be part of. When you work with people who have the same vision and you work with people who believe a different dream can happen, it is much different. Because a lot of people are so negative: even if they are in AUC [American University in Cairo] and they have a lot of resources and have a lot of things... When you work with people who believe in change, you yourself become more motivated to change.”