



## Middle East Youth Initiative

### Interview with Imane Helmy

President, Alashanek Ya Balady Association for Sustainable Development (AYB) at German University in Cairo

November 21, 2008

**Middle East Youth Initiative (MEYI):** How did you arrive at the German University in Cairo and how did you decide that it was the right place for you?

**Imane Helmy:** First of all, I am studying management technology at the German University in Cairo: it is like business information systems, and business law and related topics, and economics also. I really appreciate the major in economics, and I think that next year I will major in this field. I think that with the German University in Cairo I was attracted to the way of education: learning with new technology and applications, cases, projects, and so on. It is an interactive way of educating: it is not the traditional way where we have to study from books and so on, but it is really full of [practical] applications and cases. Also, I was attracted the extra language, because we learn German from level 1. So it is really nice, and actually I am continuing now [to] study the German language in the Goethe Institute in Cairo. So I wasn't limited to the study of German at the university only. I thought it would be an extra option for me, because in today's workplace, in Egypt, in order to enter the market, we have to know a lot of languages...it is like something basic in education. So this was a little bit about what attracted me to the German University in Cairo.

**MEYI:** Are you in your third year now?

**Helmy:** Yes, I am in my third year, and my major will be next year.

**MEYI:** And you are planning to focus on economics?

**Helmy:** Yes, because I am really attracted to basics of economics and economic development – I really like this subject – and how we can fight poverty in developing countries, and so on.

**MEYI:** Do you think you want to stay in Egypt after you graduate?

**Helmy:** I may go to Germany or to another country in order to have a Master's degree or a PhD degree. However, I can never live outside my country. Because I think that if I learn and I receive a lot of good education, I have to apply this education in my country in order to solve its problems, and not to just run away and say 'I will leave Egypt. I will leave the economic problems and all of the problems that we have, because I would like to have a better life in another country.'

**MEYI:** That is a very important point. A lot of people are getting very high quality education – such as at the American University in Cairo or the German University in Cairo – in the region, then a significant number of them end up leaving and living in other countries. Is that right?



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**Helmy:** Yes, we have a lot now in foreign countries because youth are usually attracted to, as I said, the high quality of education. Because the marketplace is very demanding, and we have a competitive market, and we have to cope with new changes.

**MEYI:** I am interested to hear your story of how you found out about AYB and what inspired to you become involved.

**Helmy:** I heard about Alashanek Ya Balady from Raghda [El-Ebrashi] because she was working at our university: she is a teaching assistant and she is preparing for her PhD at our university. So I heard about the organization and I was in my first year, I was a first-year student, so I [had] just graduated from high school and I wanted to do something through my community. I wanted to do something to develop my community: not only to live for myself and for my life, but also to live for others and to cooperate with other people, to see the poor's problems and how these problems can be solved.

I heard about [Raghda] and her organization and then I filled out an application and had an interview in order to join the organization. [In the beginning], I was a member in the micro-credit unit, which gives loans to poor people in order to have a better life and to have self-employment instead of only depending on charity and charity organizations. And then I was responsible for human resources part of the micro-credit unit, and currently at the NGO I am the assistant manager for this micro-credit service. Besides this, I am responsible for Alashanek Ya Balady at the German University in Cairo.

**MEYI:** Have you been working in the field on the programs at Alashanek Ya Balady or have you mainly been working at the university?

**Helmy:** First of all, I wanted just to volunteer at the NGO, and then we opened Alashanek Ya Balady at the German University in Cairo just beginning this semester in October. But I have, for two years, volunteered at the NGO. I was also responsible for the human resource management department of the micro-credit unit, so I was responsible for motivating members and recruiting them. It was really a very challenging task.

**MEYI:** How did you balance studying at university with volunteering at the NGO?

**Helmy:** It is a lot really, but I think that I am able...When we grow up, we have a lot of responsibility, but we should also be able to cope with all of this. And also because now I am involved with the strategic level more, I am not at the operational level, so therefore I am not responsible for a lot of cases, and so on. At the strategic level, I am responsible for planning, organizing, and coordinating between units. I am working also at the micro-credit unit at GUC [German University in Cairo] and I don't think that they [the NGO and the university club] conflict with each other, but rather are completing each other. Because I am responsible for the micro-credit unit, so I think I am able to coordinate where people would go to, and which days, and so on, so I am able to cope...



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**MEYI:** So you are still working at the NGO as you are managing the new club on campus at the German University in Cairo?

**Helmy:** Yes so, also at the German University in Cairo, beside being the president I am also responsible for the micro-credit unit. So I am coordinating between the volunteers from the NGO with the volunteers from the German University in Cairo, which is an advantage.

**MEYI:** How many volunteers do you have now on campus at the student club?

**Helmy:** At Alashanek Ya Balady at the German University in Cairo, I think we have more than 45 volunteers. Mainly we have development units and supporting units. Supporting units are working on development, public relations, and so on, and they are responsible for administration, and paper work, and so on. But for the development units we have three: we have the micro-credit [unit], that gives loans to poor people; we have the children program for people who are dealing with childrens' development, and how to educate children and teach them some ethics and morals; and we have the Youth Leadership Initiative, which is organizing courses and seminars at the university in order to increase the volunteers' awareness about community development, social responsibility, and these issues. Approximately, we have twenty [volunteers] in each one: in the development unit we have fifteen for micro-credit, and twenty or so in the childrens' program, and for the youth leadership initiative we have about ten.

**MEYI:** Do you work with the other Alashanek Ya Balady student groups at American University in Cairo [AUC], and at Cairo University, and the others?

**Helmy:** Yes, of course, we are coordinating our activities. If we have an event, we will coordinate all together to implement this event, and it is very, very good to have all of these volunteers working together and to get to know each other. The students from the American University in Cairo, and the German University in Cairo, and the student volunteers from the NGO, and all these branches from Alashanek Ya Balady could just meet together to know each other. In the future, we could have a very strong event that combines all of us together.

**MEYI:** So in your opinion, how do you think a student decides to volunteer for Alashanek Ya Balady, either for the NGO, or for the student club at GUC: what motivates them or what inspires them to become involved?

**Helmy:** I think that one of our competitive advantages is that we are not like a charity organization. Because here in Egypt we have a lot of charity organizations, but the competitive advantage of Alashanek Ya Balady is really that it is aiming for community development. We are not aiming at giving the poor just money, and at winter giving them clothes, and so on, and then leav[ing] them, but we are aiming at community development – at helping the poor to self-employment, to do projects, to develop children, and a lot of things. So I think that people will be motivated toward our competitive advantage – that we are aiming at community development and helping the root of the problem, and not only having a short-term solution for



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this problem. [It] is a long-term solution which is not only charity and instant aid and so on, but we are aiming at a very, very long-term process, which is development.

So I think they are being motivated toward us because they will think that if they are doing something very strong and very great: not going to the poor and then leaving them after one month, or after one year, but we are continuously dealing with poor people and having direct interaction with them. Also, we have a lot of organizations in Egypt, charity organizations, they just collect money from people or they just want volunteers for one day or for one week, but we are not like that. We are motivated because we are continuously dealing with poor people and with poor children through direct interaction that creates real enthusiasm and excitement [among] the volunteers.

**MEYI:** And do you find that that is a challenge, to talk to students about the difference between real development work and charity? Do you find that a lot of them are open to this?

**Helmy:** Maybe this is a challenge, because many people are very involved in [their] education, and we usually have a lot of exams and quizzes and assignments, especially at the German University in Cairo, so it's very often challenging to convince people. But when I tell them the other side – that it is a very great experience, and you will learn a lot of things when dealing with these people... when I try to motivate them by talking to them, and trying to convince them, they are a little bit convinced with my point of view. Also, I find that a lot of Egyptian youth are now really interested in charity work and community development, maybe society [as a whole] will have this trend in Egypt.

**MEYI:** That was another one of my questions: do you notice this trend in Egypt, outside of universities even, among young people in general?

**Helmy:** Yes, I can say that a lot of people are really directed to charity or community development organizations, because I think the situation is getting worse. We now have more statistics about poor people in Egypt, more statistics of the people who die each year because they cannot find the minimum requirement for living life like clothes, or shelter, or food. So this problem has arrived in Egypt, and over the past four or five years it is a trend that is increasing everyday. So people in general, especially youth or young people who are age fifteen to twenty-five and even thirty, are really motivated and interested in this kind of work. They think that 'we have to do something to solve this problem. We shouldn't only be living for ourselves, but we should be living for others.'

**MEYI:** Do you find that this work is rewarding to you for your career? You are studying business, you are studying management technology, do you find that what you are doing with Alashanek Ya Balady is going to help you as you try to build your own career and find your own job?

**Helmy:** I think there is a major difference between Imane from two years ago, when she was not a volunteer at Alashanek Ya Balady, and Imane now. Because I gained a full range of skills: now I am able to deal with people and I have better communication skills. Also, you feel like



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something has changed in your life. You now feel that you have an objective and you have a very big goal. And also sometimes I feel that I am applying actually what I am studying. As I said...I am studying macroeconomics or economic development, but I am not *just* studying. I think, yeah, when the professor is explaining something as an example about developing countries or about poverty in developing countries, I say, yeah, I saw this problem in 3ayn al-Sira [neighborhood] and I dealt with a woman who refused to save money – as an example, because our culture in Egypt is not to save but to increase our consumption. I say yeah, I have seen this problem before. I am able to apply what I am studying at Alashanek Ya Balady. And when I am studying, for example, a human resources course, I am able to apply the skills that I gained from my education and from my university in order to improve the performance of Alashanek Ya Balady.

So I think that they both complete each other, and I can never graduate from university without having an application of the skills that I gained from studying. But also, I have to have some activities on the side: in order to not be a student who studies only, but I have my life, I have my activities, and so on.

**MEYI:** What do you hope to do after graduating?

**Helmy:** I hope to pursue my Master's degree, I don't know if it [will be] in Egypt or in Germany, but I would like to have my Master's degree in economics. And then I would like to see that Alashanek Ya Balady is a bigger place and improving itself, so I hope I will continue working and volunteering at Alashanek Ya Balady NGO, or even at the German University in Cairo. Then, I hope that I will be working at a multi-national company.

**MEYI:** So you would volunteer and work in the private sector hopefully?

**Helmy:** Yes, I think that I will be addicted to Alashanek Ya Balady. I don't think that, after [having] working for two years, I don't know how one day I will find myself only living for work or for education. I think that it is really a critical part of my life: these activities, and development work, I think it is really important for me...

**MEYI:** In general, with Alashanek Ya Balady what has the most rewarding project that you have been a part of?

**Helmy:** We have had a lot of successful cases. I can remember one of them who had a project, and you know that [in the micro-credit program] we give them a loan and they have to repay this loan during, I think, eleven or twelve months. So, one day, one of my cases called me and she told me 'OK, I took the loan for three months, and I know that I still have seven or eight months to pay. However, I would like to pay the rest of the money now in order to receive another loan and to have a bigger project.' ... I felt like we had had a very successful case. I can remember this woman, and I was really happy to see her enlarging a bigger project into a more successful project.



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As for my next plan, I have a plan for AYB at the German University in Cairo. I hope that I will be able to have it next semester, because this semester we finish our exams in January, so I don't think we have enough time. So, [I am] aiming at starting the semester with a campaign for community development or for social responsibility. I think that we have a lot of youth at our university and they want to do something, but they don't know how, and when, and what to do. So I hope that I will do something like a campaign at our university to increase social responsibility and community development awareness of our people. It will be something like a campaign with video, and sketches, and so on, and flyers and posters hanging around campus.

Also, we can organize some course given by professionals in order to give examples of people who had very, very bad conditions in their countries, and the situation was very bad, however, they resisted and they did something successful. And I think we have a very successful example like Muhammad Yunus [Founder of Grameen Bank] and a lot of others in developing countries. They weren't convinced with the bad situations that their countries had, and they wanted to do something. So I think that something like these courses or conferences where we can communicate to people that there is still hope, and you can start by yourself: be positive, never lose hope, because there is still an opening in Egypt.

Also you can do something like a competition...like a competition after the courses. The competition could be, [for example], if you have a new idea to fight corruption in Egypt or to help any problem, you choose any special problem you want, and then try to find a solution for this problem. And it would be a competition among all the students at university, and we will do something like prizes [that] are distributed to the winners.

**MEYI:** Those are all great ideas. Maybe I'm wrong, but you probably don't have a lot of courses in community development or things like that available at university, so this is a new perspective that is made available to students.

**Helmy:** Yes, and as I told you, a lot of students want to do something, but they don't know how and when and what to do. So when they learn what to do, it will be easier to discover potential in themselves that they did not know about.