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From Tahrir Square to Open Space: Practical Experiences with Open Space Technology in Egypt

1 Introduction

The Egyptian revolution started literally with an open space: at the Tahrir Square in the heart of Cairo. Here it was where many Egyptians for the first time in their lives made the experience of freely talking about politics in public. Since January 2011, many young Egyptians are trying to keep up this "Tahrir experience" by experimenting with new forms of political debate and civic education in Egypt. It was this spirit that resulted in the idea of introducing the Open Space Technology (OST) as a new format of civic education in Egypt. In March 2011 the authors of this article, both working in Egypt for many years, organized the first Open Space in the country. This event encouraged many other national and international institutions and initiatives to adopt and further develop OST in Egypt and other Arab countries. The unexpected popularity of OST in revolutionary Egypt proved that it is in fact the right methodology at the right time in the right context and the right place. OST is a meeting format that fosters dialogue and exchange in a democratic way. It is easy to organize and non-costly. It invites for sharing opinions, discovering common ground, discussing and tackling differences. It helps generating ideas and reflecting about their implementation. This article argues that Open Space (OS), therefore, is a format that perfectly fits the transforming political environment and the socio-cultural setting of Egypt and – most probably – other Arab transformation-states.

2 Egypt after the revolution: political debates on high demand

Egypt is currently facing a very difficult transformation period. After thirty, some might even say after sixty years of authoritarian rule, new and old political actors are competing for influence and power. The culminating confrontation between the new Islamist government and its liberal and secular opponents is characterized by a general lack of a political debate culture. This comes with no surprise. For many years the Mubarak-regime systematically oppressed free speech, public political debate and independent political interest-aggregation. 'Divide and command' was the main

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principle of governance.

Authoritarian rule was supported by a strong tradition of hierarchies and social classes across the whole Egyptian society. Egyptian children are not brought up in the spirit of free thinking but rather in a tradition of dependence from and of subordination under people of higher status. Many younger Egyptians are frustrated with events in which they are only asked to listen (which often enough is used equivalent to "obey"). In governmental schools and universities, knowledge is often simply passed from the elder to the younger. Education is synonymous to rote learning and memorizing. In religion, politics and as well in the families, it is similar: Leaders, authorities and heads have to be respected and should not be put in question – they have the last word. Egyptians are now free to talk and discuss their personal and political opinions and the current political and religious developments and day-to-day life offer enough material for engaged and often heated discussions and debates – and again the general lack of a culture of dialogue and exchange is prevalent since two years. Still, in the majority of cases, open spaces for debates over differing opinions and controversial issues are not provided for.


The consequences of these underlying political and social conditions are even more negative if the strong oral tradition of Egyptian culture is taken into account. Since its very beginnings, the Arab-Islamic culture is very much based on the spoken word, as e.g. in the tradition and reliability on verbal contracts. Public speaking skills and respectful verbal sparring are highly appreciated in Egyptian media and academia. How an argument is presented becomes sometimes more relevant than the argument itself.

When a strong oral tradition meets strong political and traditional constraints on free speech then frustrations, polarisation and dissatisfaction are inevitable. Therefore, the Egyptian revolution itself was based on the desire to speak up. The desire to express themselves on topics like politics,

religious diversity, social norms, gender and environment remains and seems to be increasing. It is channelled in arts, graffiti, jokes, songs, Facebook-pages, blogs and many other formats.

No surprise, that since the revolution any format that provides opportunities to talk and exchange fell on fruitful ground. Since February 2011 numerous NGOs and social initiatives were established. Universities, Think Tanks and cultural institutes organize discussion panels, "Tahrir-dialogues" and public debates. Institutions like the Goethe-Institute established so called "Tahrir-Lounges" in several parts of the country. Here, young people can get together, discuss and exchange freely.

However the lack of a public debate culture is still evident. The recent clashes between the Islamist government and its opponents clearly indicate that Egypt still lacks a sense of community. In this critical phase of political transition, the country is in dire need of a culture of dialogue. For many Egyptians it is still a learning experience that disagreement does not mean the end of a friendship, marriage, co-operation or co-existence. OST might serve as a tool to provide this experience.
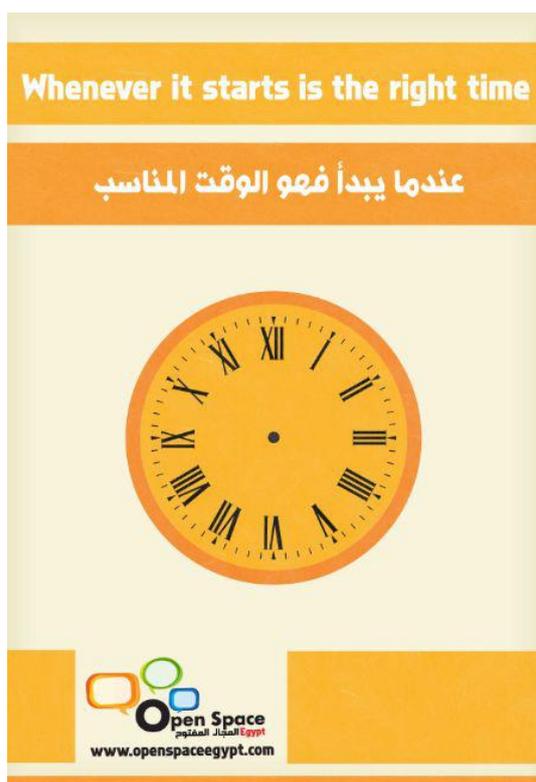
3 Open Space at work in Egypt

"This is like on the Tahrir Square" says 24 year old Kazem and looks at a painted poster with the slogan "Whenever it starts, is the right time". Kazem who additionally to his job as pharmacists is engaged in a youth initiative which creates political awareness amongst young Egyptians, is one participant of the

supposedly first Open Space in Egypt. "This was unknown to us: No agenda, no speakers. I had never believed that this would work". After three days of conversations, discussions and collection of ideas, he is amazed. As the majority of the youth activists who have met in March 2011 following the invitation of the Egyptian Youth Federation (EYF) and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) for the first OS in Egypt he is keen on applying this new format in his own initiative. "We young Egyptians have done this revolution because we had enough of others dictating us what to do and what to think", says May who works in her semester break in a political youth initiative in Alexandria. "The Open Space method suits us since it demands and fosters creativity, openness and initiative".

3.1 The idea of open space

What is Open Space about? Open Space is a simple form of group facilitation originated in the US in the 1980s by Harrison Owen[1]. After having organized a conference over a period of months, the evaluation of this event revealed that the participants appreciated most the part he did not plan at all: the really interesting talks took place during the coffee breaks. So why not creating an event out of the coffee break and drop anything else? Owen called his idea Open Space since his main concern was about literally creating open space in which movement and action are possible and in which topics can be defined without constraints, issues can be talked over and solutions can be developed.

Open Space is a simple method to run productive meetings in any kind of group and organization, in every day practice and ongoing change. It enables self-organizing groups of 5 to 2000 people to deal with hugely complex issues in a very short period of time. What does not exist in Open Space are speakers, group facilitators, defined talking times and predefined topics for conversation. Only a proper introduction by a facilitator who opens the space, and practical support by a core team are important. The facilitator also explains the few principles. However more important is voluntariness, openness, concern, heterogeneity and a broad and complex guiding theme. The few principles painted on big posters are explained fast: Everyone comes and goes, no one is forced or obliged to do anything. There is no fixed timeline but time slots which provide room for conversations and discussions. One poster close to the door sends the participants on their way with a well-intentioned admonition: "Be prepared to be surprised".

How does it work?[2] In contrast to usual events, all participants are sitting in concentric circles of chairs; this event has neither a key-note speaker, nor power point presentations, nor a pre-set program. A white wall is titled "agenda" and the only information it contains are time slots. The facilitators briefly introduce the theme, process and guidelines of the Open Space. Then they invite the participants to come to the middle and to announce the issues or

questions they would like to discuss in the following breakout sessions. Participants then choose those issues which, individually, are of most interest and importance. These topics become the focal point for all the subsequent break-out sessions, dialogue and action planning.

Open Space operates under five principles and one law. This "Law of Two Feet" says that "If you find yourself in a situation where you are not contri-buting or learning, move somewhere else where you can." In conventional meetings you might have experienced that your mind has already left the room while you had to stay seated, in Open Space you would follow this call and move to a more productive place. In contrast to other situations where this behaviour would be considered impolite and even rude, in Open Space it is regarded as disrespectful if you stay in a group although you actually do not contribute or learn from it anymore.

The four original Open Space principles are:
 - Whoever comes is the right person.
 - Whenever it starts is the right time.
 - Whatever happens is the only thing
   that could have happened.
 - When it is over it is over.

Inspired by the Arab Spring and the demonstrations on Tahrir Square, Harrison Owen has developed a fifth principle:
  - Wherever it happens is the right place.

In many Open Spaces in Egypt the street sign of the square is used as a symbol to visualize this new principle.

The conveners of the breakout sessions take the responsibility that the outcomes of their discussions are captured on documentation sheets by them-selves or participants of their sessions on documen-tation sheets. Those are displayed on a Breaking News Wall close to the coffee break table so everyone can have a look at the points discussed and outcomes generated in the different break out sessions that have already taken place. Based on the discussions and the ideas of all participants, potential next steps are identified and discussed in groups of people interested in contributing to the realization of the respective idea. All sheets are collected in a report called "Book of Proceedings" which will be handed over to the participants or made accessible online. Follow-up meetings are scheduled and participants continue cooperating and implementing their ideas and initiatives long after the Open Space has been concluded. So the end of an Open Space event is actually a starting point.

Harrison Owen says Open Space always works – provided certain conditions are present: For an Open Space meeting to be successful, it must focus on a real business issue which is of passionate concern to those involved. OST works best in situations characterized by a diverse group of people with a rich variety of opinions who must and is ready to deal with complex and potentially conflicting issues of concern in innovative and productive ways. It is particularly powerful when nobody knows the answer, and the ongoing participation of a number of people is required to deal with the questions.

The 5 preconditions for an OST are:
 - There is a real business issue,
 - a great deal of complexity,
 - lots of diversity in terms of people and points
   of view,
 - real passion (people care!) and probably also
   conflict and
 - a decision time of yesterday (genuine urgency)

3.2 Debating the revolution: the first OS in Egypt

The idea for the 1st Open Space in Egypt was created in fall 2010. At this time, an authoritarian machinery of power had lock on the country. Hereby but also by traditional thinking and structures, civic education rapidly had reached its limits. Hierarchy, seniority and surveillance were order of the day. In the front, professors, teachers or experts lecture, the often young listeners are allowed to ask questions, all of this in most cases carefully monitored and observed by employees of the abhorred state security service "Amn Dawla". So why not introducing a new format that attracts young people, overcomes hierarchies, encourages self-organization and opens space for creativity? In the middle of the prepa-rations, the Egyptian revolution of January 25th barged in. Suddenly, the Egyptians could say what they thought and were called upon to reshape and reform the future of their country. It was quite plain: The Open Space method matched the revolutionary atmosphere to a tee. The motto was obvious: "Egypt at the Crossroads". Less than two months after Mubarak stepped down, 20 young Egyptians and ten young Germans sat together in a Middle Class Hotel some 120 kilometres east of Cairo to test the format for the first time.

To begin with, the participants were introduced in the Open Space Technology. Then every participant had the opportunity to write down her/his burning issues and to announce them together with a chosen time slot on a wall called "Community Bulletin Board". After the first round, the participants had

defined 22 issues, some more were added later.

With every round of conversation sessions, the Breaking News Wall located close to the continuous break buffet was filling more with new documentation sheets. While having a cup of coffee or tea, the participants read what was discussed so far. Additionally a contact list was developed. Every morning and evening, the participants gathered to speak about the daily news and announcements. After three days, 22 documentations of the conversation sessions were on hand, 13 new project ideas were born and their next 3 steps are recorded, a video clip was taped, a facebook group established and many new friendships were gained.

What were the outcomes in detail? Analogue to the "Model United Nations" one participant wanted to develop a "Model Tahrir" with the aim of representing and reflecting the positions of different political and social groups and associations in Egypt in a role play. A female student from Alexandria wanted to use the idea in women's rights projects: "Open Space is ideal to tackle taboo issues and to train gender equality, especially in Upper Egypt". And an NGO activist from Cairo planned to use the method particularly with regard to the reduction of prejudices.

"We Egyptians believe too often in conspiracy and hidden agendas. But a format which by definition has no agenda does not have a hidden agenda. This must be convincing for everybody. By this method, we can also reach people having a fundamental scepticism towards everything new or foreign". Three weeks after the event, the idea of freeing a Cairene rooftop from its waste and to create a space for leisure assumed already a concrete shape.

The first Open Space in Egypt in March 2011 clearly indicated that a discussion method which focuses on mentioning own issues and their discussion falls on fertile soil. Supposedly, the Open Space method would have worked out before the Tahrir demonstrations. But after the revolution with the gained freedom and the drive to test new things,

it seems even more as a fitting format.

3.3 Following up: A new format is gaining ground

The first OS, organized by EYF and KAS, showed the way forward. The very general title "Egypt at the Crossroads" was intentionally chosen in order to capture the atmosphere present in Egypt right after Mubarak stepped down. And it provided space to identify more concrete topics for follow-up events. Here, two issues were immediately obvious: the role of women in the Egyptian society and the need for jobs. Consequently, the following OS targeted exactly these issues.

During the first Open Space a small group of participants showed interest in learning more about the technique and its backgrounds. They were interested in spreading the method and the OST know-how all over Egypt and in facilitating Open Space events in Arabic. After having attended the first three Open Space events facilitated in a row by

Claudia Gross, one of the authors of this article, some of the participants organized and facilitated their own Open Space events in English and in Arabic. This happened in cooperation with social initiatives or international and local NGOs on themes that were relevant in the respective contexts such as: Interfaith dialogues, refugees in Egypt, voluntarism, informal areas – just to name a few.

Open Space Learning Exchanges (OSLEX) were organized regularly as a common practice in order to share experiences and learn from each other. One of the main outcomes of the OSLEX was not only the need for Arabic material and Arabic speaking facilitators but also for sponsors. Given the limited financial resources of average young Egyptians it proved to be of high importance to make OST attractive for international donors. All together, eleven Open Space events in English and in Arabic have been organized in 20123. Over 400 young women and men from over 20 Egyptian governorates have participated in the events. They are still in contact and are now working on the next steps initiatives they have identified.

Eslam Erman, one of the participants of the first Open Space, joined and supported Claudia Gross during the set-ups and coordination of the coming two Open Spaces and documented all steps by photos and text. Additionally he created a website to serve as the platform of the internet-based social initiative Open Space Egypt (OSE) which he together with a group of Open Space enthusiasts and Claudia Gross founded in mid 20113. OSE basically wants to establish a network amongst Open Space facilitators to further promote Open Space Technology in Egypt and the Arab region. All services and materials related to an Open Space event, such as Open Space posters, checklists, forms, etc. are provided by this network on their internet platform. Of particular importance for the work of OSE are the translation of manuals and posters to Arabic and the training of Arabic speaking OST facilitators.

As already mentioned, the first OS had already highlighted the need for trained facilitators who are able to hold an OS in Arabic and under basic conditions. Therefore in December 2011, Claudia Gross designed and facilitated a Train-of-Facilitators (ToF) workshop held before an OS event that was

facilitated by participants of the ToF in Arabic. The theme of this OS was "Informal Areas", a topic that by principle called for participants who would feel more comfortable to discuss in Arabic, their mother tongue. This Open Space was documented by the first clip on an Arabic Open Space and can be found on youtube under the key words "Baladna Kullina"[4]. The ToF was followed by regular coaching sessions for the whole group of 13 new Egyptian OS facilitators during and after the OS event. After this ToF workshop, Claudia Gross was frequently asked for recommendations for OS facilitators and was happy to recommend the participants of her training. In 2012, the newly trained moderators facilitated successfully 19 OS events for clients such as the Swedish Institute in Alexandria and German Agency for International Co-Operation (GIZ).

In 2012 OST gained further ground, even beyond Egypt. The year 2012 started with an Open Space on Dec 31st, organized by Khalil El-Masry, a newly trained facilitator, who invited a group of activists to discuss the perspectives for their work in 2012. Two months later, in February, Khalil El-Masry, Eslam Erman and Claudia Gross travelled to Jordan for a company retreat in which an Open Space day was embedded, supposedly one of the first OS to be held in Jordan. The company had invited all team members, from senior managers and advisors to the driver. During this day, the unexpected happened: Right after the introduction of the Open Space principles, when the participants where invited to come to the centre to write down their issues and then create the agenda, the driver Moussa stood up, walked slowly into the middle of the circle, wrote down his issue and there it was: the topic that was just naming the Pink Elephant, the main issue dominating the company's performance which no one else would have mentioned so clearly, focusing on the allocation of management responsibilities in the company. He was applauded for bringing this issue up. Later the driver convened his session which was attended by all company owners, the senior management staff, discussing frankly and in depth this really existential topic.

In September 2012 Claudia Gross went to Lebanon for an assignment and used the time to present OST to a group of representatives of Lebanese youth initiatives and NGOs. The reaction was very positive and triggered a lively exchange about first hand experiences with OS and their possible application in Lebanon. With some concrete plans to train the first Lebanese facilitators and to run a first OS in spring 2013, Lebanon seems to be the next country in the region where the Open Space Technology could be spread. Or it might be in a refugee camp in Jordan where starting on the International Women's Day on March 8th, 2013, an OS will be held with female Palestinian refugees.

Until December 2012, the newly trained facilitators have facilitated 17 Open Spaces by themselves after their training with more than 550 participants: Over 420 young Egyptians from all over the country have participated in OS events facilitated by the newly

trained facilitators. Additionally, around 130 participants joined OS events in Germany, Spain and Jordan facilitated by the newly trained facilitators. They covered a variety of clients of the development sector, Egyptian Institutions, NGOs, social initiatives. Even Egyptian and international companies started to make use of OST and the services that are provided by the internet platform OSE.

Albeit the deteriorating political conditions the plans of the Egyptian OS community for 2013 are ambitious. The main focus is on a broad campaign to introduce OS as a method for local NGOs and initiatives all over the country and on the establishment of a community of OS practitioners. Eventually they will repeat the OS at the New Year's Eve for an outlook to the year 2013. A far more ambitious idea is to organize several OS events parallel in various Egyptian regions or even governorates. Additionally, more facilitators will be trained to cater for the high demand of OS events all over Egypt and in the whole Arab region.

However, OS activities do also have to adapt to the changing political environment. With the crackdown on several international and Egyptian NGOs, including the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, at the beginning of 2012 the Egyptian authorities again marked the red lines of independent civic education activities. The OS community reacts to this increasing political pressure with a double strategy. On the one hand, more and more OS events will be organized for national and international institutions in "safe" places and within social initiatives and NGOs private places. On the other hand, many activists try to establish OS as a technology that also caters for the needs and aims of official and governmental organizations, with some success. By the end of 2012, the Egyptian Social Contract centre, which is affiliated with the Think Tank of the Egyptian government, asked for the facilitation of an Open Space related to the development of the National Youth Policy and an OS facilitators training.

3.4 Lessons learned. OS in practice

The almost two years of rich experiences with OS in Egypt and some neighbouring countries showed a couple of promises and constraints. After all,

it made clear that OS works very well in a non-Western environment and can be easily set-up under different political conditions; however some limits and adaptations of the technology have to be considered.

3.4.1 Promises

The experience with using Open Space Technology in Egypt has clearly shown that the equation of the revolution "The people want … The people decide … The people lead" can simply happen by creating an inviting theme, attracting the right people (in Open Space, whoever comes is by principle the right one), and creating the proper space. In an Open Space environment, diversity is welcomed, expression of personal and political opinions is encouraged, exchange and discussion is fostered, and common ground is discovered jointly in dialogue. The whole Open Space is governed by self-management and self-responsibility in action.

Discussing beyond hierarchies and borders

Characteristic for Open Space events is the Circle (or in bigger groups many concentric circles) in which all participants come together for the opening of the event and the smaller circles in which they gather during the breakout sessions. The circle itself has no top and no bottom, no beginning and no end, and it symbolizes the equality amongst the participants. They all have in common their interest in the theme of the event, their readiness to take responsibility for their issues and to convene a session, talk about and contribute their ideas which they are truly passionate about. So coming together in a circle (in contrast to a U shape or a normal theatre style conference seating format) lays the fundament for the conversations without hierarchies or borders and within the group of people who really care about the theme.

This particular format fosters networking amongst all participants who pollinate and cross-pollinate their ideas while bumbling from one group to the other. Women and men use the chance to bring up their deep problems to the surface. The participants' moves connect the different participants and symbolize the network of interests and talents present in the room. Diversity is discovered as a rich

asset necessary to jointly find solutions for complex issues. The freedom to choose the sessions they want to convene and to participate in and the bumble-beeing foster the establishment of professional and community relationships across sector and age groups. Many participants report to experience this freedom and connection for the first time. To keep in touch after the event, all participants are provided by with a list of contact details of everyone who's joining the event.

Open Space Technology transforms the control by one leader to self-management by all participants themselves, including the organization's or community's traditional leaders then being part of the participants' group. Everyone is considered the right person who can contribute important experiences, information and opinions. Therefore an Open Space event describes a deeply democratic meeting experience. "I have been heard", is how Egyptian participants often comment after Open Space sessions, realizing that the group they were discussing with really seeked to understand. The participants often feel a deep sense of peace, gratitude and reconfirmation, as participants often state in closing circles of OS events "I am so happy to have met you all and to be part of this community. I feel relieved that this kind of conversations is still possible, even given the current political situations. I thank you all."

In Open Space people work together across hierarchal, historical and group-related lines, and indeed when everyone gets back to work it is probable that they will continue to work and communicate in a way that is different than the on-paper organizational structure or the ways a society has been set up, historically. Experience, also in Egypt, shows that participants of Open Space events integrate this unique experience and insects it into their day-to-day life. They keep on referring to them and find them supportive in their professional and private life.

Experiencing (religious) diversity and common ground

In contrast to other forms of meetings usually practiced in Egypt, in an Open Space event, all participants share their individual opinions. All voices are valued and appreciated. While there are no keynote speakers, no experts, no leaders speaking from the podium or panel in a one-way communication to a mainly passively listening audience, all participants are invited to convene and actively participate in the session on topics they consider important. By principle multiple facets of a theme are represented by the issues proposed by the participants and discussed during the sessions where they discovered common ground. Meaningful conversations take place in multi-way dialogues. Often enough this safe space is used to discuss openly and freely about issues the participants are passionate about, but normally wouldn't speak-up about. Especially with regard to religious diversity, experience has shown that participants of different

religious backgrounds and orientations, sometimes for the first time in their life, took the chance to speak with each other instead of about each other.

In July 2011, an OS with the title "Unity in Diversity" was organized in Wadi-.Natrun, close to Cairo. One of the telling stories of this event is the following: Due to the variety of religions present in this event, the young organizers had taken special care regarding the list of who is going to share the sleeping room with whom. A sophisticated list was developed before-hand – and ignored by the receptionist once the bus with the participants arrived. Ahmad Khallaf, the facilitator of the event, was shocked when he realized that people were now mixed in a random order. When he asked Claudia Gross, who supported him in the set-up of the venue, for an advice she referred to one of the Open Space principles "Whatever happens is the only thing that could have". Then they focused further on the preparation of the Opening Circle. During the event the organizers realized that during the situation in front of the reception, a young Coptic man had been looking around for a partner to share the room with. He chose someone shaved. They later they realized that the one he had chosen had just shaved his beard to present himself to the military service, but actually belonged to the so called "Salafists", an ultra-orthodox Islamist grouping. Without the receptionist ignoring the organizer's list, both participants would have never shared a room with each other for two nights, seizing the opportunity to really talk with each other and eventually become friends.

Another example of this Open Space event is related to the acceptance in diverse religious groups of participants: In this event the usual closing exercise of any OS was almost dropped. Since this exercise included all participants holding hands, the organizers considered it to be inadequate given the variety of religious backgrounds and the presence of women and man. However, after a while of thinking, another idea came up: Holding hands maybe would not be possible but holding something else would be okay. And what if the "something else" were pieces of a ribbon in the colours of the Egyptian flag? An exercise that was close to be dropped turned out to be a real symbolic closing: in spite of their diverse religious backgrounds, all Egyptian participants were united by their national flag.

Taking the initiative, overcoming stagnation

The principle "Whatever happens is the only thing that could have" formulates a general acceptance of everything that happens. And it also includes an invitation to the participants: they are responsible for what is happening in the event. Everything they bring in will be discussed and shared amongst the participants. If they realize after the event that certain topics they had expected to be mentioned where not addressed, it has been in their sole responsibility to raise them. This principle is an invitation to take initiative and be responsible for what they consider important. After the facilitator

has explained the Open Space process and the principles, she/he invites the participants to come to the center to write their issues and names on a piece of paper. After joining the OS event at the first place, standing up and coming to the center symbolizes the second step of taking responsibility and being part of the solution.

Taking the initiative and contributing whatever the participants consider important is also basic for the breakout sessions. Instead of sitting passively on their chairs and receiving information while being stuck and mute, they have the chance to bring themselves in. During the agenda creation and the breakout sessions they feel that they are moving forward, increasing their connections with like-minded people, generating new energy and creating a new momentum. This process continues when the participants take responsibility for the documen-tation of the topics discussed by typing it down in the newsroom and in the action planning session at the end of a two and a half or three days Open Space event.

A lot of surprising learning happens in Open Space in Egypt. This required and generated creativity: New solutions are found as in the ribbon exercise described above. Issue and documentation sheets need to be clipped on laundry ropes in rooms where the walls cannot be used (or in bedouin huts where the "walls" are made out of straw). Also, an Open Space event in a historical mosque, where nothing could be stuck to the columns, lead to the realization that the posters can also be laid on the ground. Seeing ideas facing the open sky created another connection and frame for the whole event.

3.4.2 Constraints

Need for spaces and sponsors

In Egypt after the revolution, those who wanted to organize events for 50 participants and more had to realize that there are very few appropriate places to rent. Social initiatives and NGOs experience a lack of public space for gathering and events. Apart from governmental facilities, there seems to be only expensive options left: renting halls in hotels. Downside of this option are the high price, the lack of enough breakout areas, the inappropriateness of the formal setting of hotels for events such as e.g. an Open Space on informal areas, and the usual lack of daylight in the meeting rooms.

In general, finding a sponsor for an Open Space event and being invited to facilitate one is a major constraint. Therefore, Eslam Erman from Open Space Egypt developed another proposal for Open Spaces on education in Egypt which luckily was accepted and supported by the Swedish Institute in Alexandria in May 2012. The team of Open Space Egypt has again prepared a proposal for an Open Space against sexual harassment in Egypt and is currently looking again for a sponsor. To tackle this issue, a broader marketing campaign to promote the Open Space Technology and sharing its success stories in Egypt might be needed. Another experience shows

that inviting potential sponsors as participants of one Open Space event can convince them successfully to sponsor an event within their scope of work in the future too.

Defining the event's theme and not its outcomes

Harrison Owen always stresses that "The only way to bring an Open Space gathering to its knees is to attempt to control it. Emergent order appears in Open Space when the conditions for self organization are met" and he continues "Open Space requires real freedom, and real responsibility." Therefore finding sponsors and potential clients needs to take the spirit of Open Space into consideration. There is no room for manipulation and interfering into the agenda creation, the topics to be discussed will be brought in by the participants.

Consequently Open Space is not the right technology when the organizers/participants have a certain target/agenda in mind! Also, like in Egypt, a highly charged political situation and a lack of trust in the sponsors needs to be taken in close consideration when planning an Open Space and eventually be the reasons why another format will be chosen first. Another problem emerges when people who hold power and authority try to control the way that people work together. In this case OST is not an appropriate approach. Experience shows that if key leaders believe they are the only people necessary for the organization to do its best work, the space for "best work" never really opens. As a result, whenever sponsors think they know the answer, have an agenda, wish to control outcomes and be in charge, and are not prepared to change as a result of the meeting, the facilitators won't be able to facilitate such an event and will recommend doing another meeting format.

Assuring the event's follow-up

In the planning phase of an Open Space event, the follow-up needs already to be integrated and scheduled for 6-8 weeks after the event. Ideally these dates are already announced at the end of the Open Space event so the transfer and follow-up is eased. In practice, this need for a follow-up often seemed to be not attractive for external sponsoring. Donors usually perceive OS as a one off event, rather than part of a value-creating process. If the outcomes of an OS event are not taken into consideration and business-as-usual continues, the opportunity for change is missed. Participants carrying the experience of having opened up and spoken up in the Open Space event and then finding themselves back in their closed NGO, company or community will face a high amount of frustration and de-motivation. Once the staff feels resigning and desperate, it will be a lot more difficult to motivate them again and to start another change management initiative or event.

Therefore the commitment from the group, community and/or management to continue the spirit of the Open Space and make room for the

newly developed ideas is decisive for the events success after the participants returned back. The group', sponsor's and/or management's readiness to support the projects that emerge is crucial including the provision of sufficient time, energy, influence to realize the project discussed, identified and created in the Open Space. They cannot be solved by a few people; they will need the contribution of a whole team.

Technical and practical challenges

When setting-up an Open Space, a relatively big room is needed, ideally in a shape that allows establishing concentric circles easily. While organizing OS events in Egypt it surprisingly appeared to be a problem that staff of venues is "not able" or even reluctant to prepare a real circle of chairs. Although told otherwise (and sometimes having received a sketch of a chair circle in advance), they often prepare a setting with tables in the beginning. Once the facilitator arrives and asks for a circle, first they make a big square with round corners, then an oval/egg-shape, always leaving space in front of the imaginary screen, expecting speakers and presentations – which of course does not happen in Open Space. When finally following the instruction to form a circle of chairs, they establish a real circle, shaking their head full of doubts and disbelief about the nature of this event.
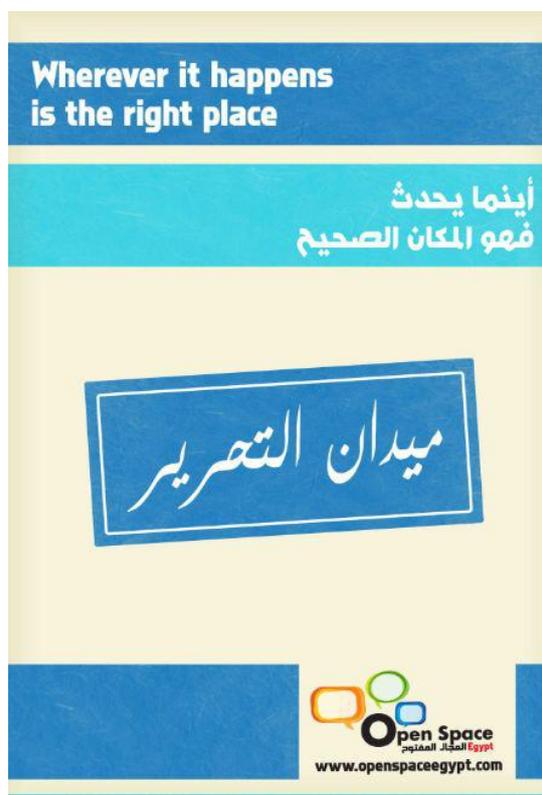
It might also happen that the budget does not include the renting of computers for the Newsroom where all participants would type their

documentation sheets. A potential solution is to ask the participants to bring their laptops, to provide them with the form and ask them to share their laptops with other participants. Another situation might be that the event takes place in a remote area without copy shops to copy the Book of Proceedings. Possible ways to deal with this is taking pictures and/or scanning the documentation sheets and uploading them when back in Cairo.

Certainly the high rate of illiteracy could be a problem for the written documentation which is normally used. Potential solutions include e.g. using drawings, sketches, and role plays, taping interviews or videos, using symbols for the different issues raised when developing the agenda by participants, as e.g. a water bottle for water problems, a book for education issues, etc. All these measures are also ideas when facilitating Open Spaces with children who cannot read or write.

Acceptance and cultural challenges

The authors of this article have often been confronted with the argument that Open Spaces might work in Western but not in Muslim countries. After two years of practicing OS in Egypt and some other Muslim countries, this assumption was empirically proved to be wrong. OS activists can now refer to these experiences where participants of mixed religious backgrounds came together, where Arab women were particularly invited to join and where even a peace initiative comprising of members of all religious backgrounds was establi-shed as an idea of an Open Space event. Just recently the authors were addressed by a colleague who plans to organize an Open Space event in Somalia. Unfortu-nately, the sponsor of this event rejected the OS idea because he believes that it does not work in a Muslim culture. Immediately, one experienced Egyptian facilitator offered to act as a reference person.

Another problem is time and punctuality. Especially in cultures with a polychronic time concept the principle "Whenever it starts is the right time" might be very well known and practiced. Unfortunately, the issue of punctuality regarding the beginning of the events and its consecutive days is of high relevance for the event's success: Ideally when all participants who care are there during the opening, the discussions can start. Events in Cairo started up to 1 hour late since participants just dropped in within the first hour of the event, cursing the traffic, while others were there in time. Therefore, scheduling the event one hour earlier than it is planned to start might be a measure of self-defence. A registration time with a coffee and tea buffet might be the culturally accepted answer to this issue. When the event is taking place in a remote area and all participants arrive together in a bus, the event can start in time and with the majority of people.

On the other hand, experience shows that when the OS takes place in Cairo or wherever the participants live, this measure of staying there / not

travelling and not staying overnight increases the number of female participants, especially from more traditional backgrounds. Women can often only participate if they can sleep at home. Therefore it is highly recommended that Open Space events are not organized in remote places when you want to increase the number of participants, especially of girls and women participating.

4 Conclusions

The consent regarding the first OS events in Egypt is a thought provoking impulse for political and civic education in transforming Arab societies. Especially in phases of political transformations with an uncertain outcome it seems to be important, not only to reflect topics, but also forms and methods of their implementation. "Conventional" confe-rences, seminars and workshops are without an alternative when specific knowledge shall be imparted and exchanged. This is nothing an OS can do. However, where creative potentials shall be awakened, soft skills trained and the structural issues of a society reflected, OS is on a new and cost-effective way. It was a stroke of luck that in Egypt quasi a whole nation had its Open Space on the Tahrir Square. Here, the new democratic rules of the game were tested and practiced. And what works in Egypt can also function in Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, Lebanon and hopefully soon in other Arab countries too. At present nowhere else will open spaces for discussions of societies' political future be of more need than in the Arab world.

Endnotes

1 For a detaild description of OS see Owen, Harrison (2008) Open Space Technology: A User's Guide. 3rd edition, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco

2 For OS online resources and databases see www.openspaceworld.org, www.openspaceworld.com and www.openspacetechnology.com.

3 This OS is documented on
www.youtube.com/watch?v=_l7iZ955QH8

4 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9v5qjRFJ2k