



Innovations in Peacebuilding

Helping young Egyptians improve their communities

Lack of opportunities for youth

In Egypt, young people constitute 80 percent of the unemployed. Until recently, most Egyptian institutions have viewed youth as passive beneficiaries rather than active stakeholders in civil society.

The national education system does not provide opportunities for students to engage in their communities. Young people can give to charities, address environmental issues and volunteer at local mosques and churches, but civic activism is discouraged. As a result, they often feel they have no way to make constructive changes in society. This prevents them from developing the civic engagement skills necessary for democratic local governance.



A member of the Egyptian Youth Take Action Project stands outside the maternal health facility that she helped establish. *Emily Ardell/CRS*

The CRS response

From September 2008 to June 2011, Catholic Relief Services partnered with the Egyptian Red Crescent Society and the YMCA to implement the Egyptian Youth Take Action Project. The program sought to help people develop leadership skills and to create and implement solutions with decision makers.

The program mobilized youth in nine governorates—Alexandria, Assiut, Cairo, Gharbeya, Giza, Menia, Menoufeya, Qalyoubia and South Sinai. Approximately 9,000 youth participants worked to address the needs of their communities and improved their communication and leadership skills in the process. They learned how to engage other young people in their initiatives, how to manage conflicts and how to present their ideas to community leaders.

Participants formed governorate-level working groups that identified and assessed problems in their communities. Then they developed project ideas for small grants. Community members made donations and worked as volunteers. Local governments also provided key support.

Each working group elected one person to the project's leadership commission. These representatives received intensive training and



Youth volunteers revitalized an unsafe and unsanitary road that passes this family's house. Participants removed trash by the ton and worked with the government to install streetlights. *Jennifer Hardy/CRS*



This doctor (in blue), patient (in black) and nurse (in white) have youth volunteers to thank for their new health clinic. Young Egyptians set up the facility after identifying the community's need for maternal health services. *Jennifer Hardy/CRS*

served as liaisons between youth and the project's advisory committee, which consisted of important representatives from the NGO community, the media, international organizations and donors, and the government.

Results

The youth participants implemented a total of 14 initiatives. These projects improved hundreds of lives and encouraged residents to take a more active role in improving their communities.

For example, youth volunteers learned that women in certain neighborhoods had to travel long distances for maternal health care. Youth in the project wrote a proposal for a new health clinic. They worked with the government to find an appropriate building, clean it and furnish it with medical equipment. Thanks to the actions of these young people, doctors and nurses now provide maternal-child health care to the area's residents.

Another group created a plan to revitalize an unsafe and unsanitary road that serves as the entrance to a low-income community. Before the project, residents threw their garbage in the street because they had nowhere else to put it. The smell was horrible. Assaults were common after dark because the road did not have streetlights.

Youth teams removed trash by the ton and worked with the local government to install streetlights. Participants set up dumpsters, painted the curbs and planted trees along the road. They also recruited residents to monitor the street's cleanliness and safety.

"Now people feel safe walking down this road at night," reported 24-year-old Noha Samy. "The community members are very interested in preserving its cleanliness and safety. They volunteer to take turns watering the plants, and they work with the rest of the community to make sure people leave their garbage in the dumpsters."

Looking Ahead

Some have called the 2011 Egyptian uprising the Revolution of the Youth. In Cairo and across the Middle East, young people rejected the status quo and demanded political reforms and economic opportunities. CRS reconsidered its approach to youth development in Egypt, which was complicated by many Egyptian NGOs' decision not to promote youth activism or partner with NGOs that receive U.S. funding.

CRS faced a critical choice: should the agency focus on youth community service projects or emphasize youth activism? After systematically conducting participatory needs assessments with youth groups across Egypt, CRS decided to promote activities that encourage activism and public decision making. The agency will help youth learn to develop advocacy messages, use social media more effectively and work with peers and adults to bring about social change. Although no one knows how the Arab Spring will ultimately unfold in Egypt, it is clear that youth can and should assume a leadership role in reshaping their country.