

The Bellagio Initiative

Global Dialogue Summary

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Freedom and Wellbeing: Cairo

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The Global Dialogue on Freedom and Wellbeing was held in Cairo on 3 October 2011, co-organised by IDS and our partner Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS), Egypt's leading think tank. The meeting was attended by actors from different political and social backgrounds with substantial representation from youth activists affiliated to different political parties and forces, and representation from civil society activists involved in development work as well as gender and workers' movements.

Politics prevailed over the course of the discussions which is not surprising given that the region is undergoing a period of extreme political, social and economic transformation. This reconfiguration of political powers is generating new opportunities for reimagining wellbeing to include generational dimensions (the youth), to promote social justice (in particular for marginalised groups) and to remove the insidious nodes of corruption from state and society, and which had negatively affected human relations on a micro and macro level. However, the new political openings also threaten to undermine wellbeing in deeply disturbing ways: the backlash against non-Muslim minorities that Egypt has experienced, the restrictions on political freedoms that Egypt and Tunisia have witnessed and the severity of the economic downturn as a consequence of declining internal and external investment as well as a decline in tourism – all of which have in turn affected people's quality of life in very tangible ways. Such downturns risk undermining the gains made in securing freedom and dignity because they are making many citizens rethink: freedom at what cost for ourselves and our children?

Moreover, it is important to note that there are different political trajectories unfolding in the

region, with varying levels of success at challenging the status quo. In some countries, the struggles have become very bloody, risking civil war and the possibility of military coups that would instate new dictatorships. Consequently, most participants agreed that since the region is still undergoing a revolution, it is too early to talk about frameworks and strategies for engaging with the relationship between freedoms and wellbeing.

Regional and Egyptian participants emphasised that the political predicament of Egypt and the kind of state it chooses will not only affect how wellbeing and rights are understood and advanced but will have a ripple effect on other countries in the region as well.

It is noteworthy that the concept of wellbeing was not being directly used in how demands for political and social change were articulated during the roundtable in Cairo; nonetheless, the meanings of wellbeing were very much conveyed throughout the entire Dialogue. For example, participants spoke about the importance of operationalisation of the concept of social justice in ways that speak to people's realities, whether it is in setting a minimum wage, granting social entitlements to marginalised groups such as quarry workers, or supporting the workers in the informal sector.

The concept of dignity was seen as a critical dimension of wellbeing. Participants highlighted that the people who rose against the regimes were fighting for dignity as much as for bread. The struggle for dignity took on different meanings on the ground: being free from the terror and humiliation of an oppressive security apparatus; having the right to a job that enables people to meet their needs; living in a society in which relationships are not all tarnished by the

Freedom and Wellbeing: Cairo

insidious nature of state-supported corruption, and the fact that the stereotypical reporting of the region as a source of terrorism and conflict was being challenged by people power.

In view of the wider geostrategic factors influencing the region, international philanthropy and development were seen as marginal to determining the political processes or outcomes of ongoing struggles. Nonetheless, participants had very clear and concrete suggestions for international development and philanthropy projects wishing to play a role in supporting local progressive forces on the ground. The most important of these was seen as support for local knowledge production for addressing local problems. This was deemed as the area where innovation is most likely to emerge because local actors would be forced to think creatively about dealing with issues that they are experiencing first-hand, the context, complexities and nuances of which are familiar to them. In order to endorse such a knowledge production initiative, philanthropists will have to be willing to take risks in backing nascent initiatives through unusual suspects and through support for the process as much as the outcome.

Other areas put forward by participants where philanthropists can play a positive enabling role in Egypt and the region included support for higher education and broadening the understanding of civil society to include a wider range of unconventional actors and approaches to civil engagement.

There was a repeated emphasis on the importance of exchange programmes, experience sharing and capacity development, both for civil society and for reforming the institutional set-up of existing state entities.

One key message that came out strongly to be conveyed at the Bellagio Summit is how do we seize this historic opportunity to support progressive social and political actors in the Arab world, in such a way that we are able to listen to alternative voices, adopt new ways of working, and take new risks that do not take us back to doing business as usual.

Bellagio Initiative

The Future of
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The Bellagio Initiative is a series of global consultations to produce a new framework for philanthropic and international development collaboration in pursuit of human wellbeing in the 21st century. The project is led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the Resource Alliance and the Rockefeller Foundation.