



The Village of Doors

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It seemed to me that it was the hottest place in the world that day, when we drove for five hours from Cairo to Assuit governorate in Upper Egypt. And it was! The landscape was devoid of trees, villages, or even any signs of habitation except for a couple of highway rest stops.

Nazet Qarar village, which I call “the Village of Doors”, was our destination, with the goal of visiting Save the Children’s Youth in Action program and meeting its young participants. The village’s chief industry is the reclamation of doors, thousands and thousands of doors from throughout the country. Sort of like the Habitat for Humanity Re-Store of Egypt.

Assuit governorate has the distinction of being the home to 238 villages out of the poorest 1,000 villages in Egypt, which is one of the reasons why Save the Children chose it for its Youth in Action program, a six-year partnership between Save the Children and The MasterCard Foundation. The program aims to improve the socio-economic status of approximately 40,000 out-of-school rural girls and boys, between the ages of 12-18, in five African countries, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda. In Egypt, the program’s target is to reach 8,200 rural girls and boys of two age groups: 12-14 and 15-18.

During this visit, I met Dalia. She was one of the youth who, for me, really stood out. The 17-year-old and oldest of seven children in her family was eager and proud to tell us her story and share her experience of the program. After I listened to her, I realized that my journey to meet her was short and simple compared to the distances she had travelled over the previous ten months as she participated in the Youth in Action. Like all members of the program, Dalia was invited to the program by local facilitators who are well known in her village and who have completed trainings on the Youth in Action curricula. They knock on doors- the figurative ones- that are often closed for many young people, who had to drop out of school for different reasons. Often they wind up having to work at very young ages to help their families bring food to the table or, for most girls; they have to stay at home to take care of their siblings and do house chores. The doors that allow access to education, economic opportunity and larger community participation are often closed to these young people.

Dalia joined Youth in Action with the older teen group - those aged 15 – 18 years. At this critical age, Dalia and her peers spent around five months in a safe learning space where they gained essential knowledge and skills that enabled them to select their livelihood pathways. Through a lively interactive environment they learn how to read and write and do basic math, they identified their own strengths and weaknesses and learnt about the supporting resources within their families and their communities, they organized and implemented many social and community activities, learnt about budgeting and savings. They also learnt how to conduct

business studies and market assessments. Once they selected their pathways they received their small grants and were mentored to implement their pathways for another five months.

But most of all, these youth gained self confidence and the respect of their parents and their community members, and they realized that they had a voice!

Through Youth in Action, youth became aware that they can use this voice to open doors they once thought were locked forever. In the middle of the room, Dalia stood up and said *“Youth in Action taught me that my voice is my way to success”*. Dalia came to the program very shy, lacking the confidence to speak for herself and the skills to deliver her message. Through Youth in Action, she has found her voice. When she told us how important Youth in Action was to her, other members of the group agreed wholeheartedly. This once shy young woman is now happy to stay center-stage, as her peers had to fight to join in the conversation. It was wonderful to see.

In Egypt, the majority of participating youth in this program choose to establish a small enterprise as their livelihood pathway; some choose to enhance their vocational skills through vocational training or apprenticeship and some choose to return to school. Dalia’s cohort mates were all starting enterprises such as raising goats and chicken, buying a sewing machine and operating a sewing service, opening a small grocery, packing vegetables, and others. Through these enterprises, they make significant contributions to their households and begin to become financially independent. Almost all of them were able to save some money to add to the small grants they received through the project to start their enterprises.

Dalia has chosen a different path. With her literacy skills improved through participating in Youth in Action -she will soon sit for her grade eight exam so that she can return to school. Her dream is to become a teacher.

Globally, we know that rural children often struggle with a lack of access to education. For Dalia, that experience was worsened by the fact that she belongs to an economically disadvantaged family. She also suffered taunting for being illiterate. Now that she is back in school, she is proud to use her newfound confidence to be heard, and to become what she wants to be - a teacher. Her future will be opening doors for those that follow her.