



# Making Change Happen

The critical role green social entrepreneurs need to (and should) play at upcoming COP meetings **by KARIM HAGGAR, SHADY KHALIL, and MOHAMED KAMAL**

With the next two Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings scheduled for Egypt (2022) and the UAE (2023), the global climate spotlight is now firmly on the MENA region. Green social entrepreneurs—social entrepreneurs who are developing green solutions to the climate crisis—have a critical role to play at these events. Our interviews with leading green social entrepreneurs in Egypt and UAE suggest how they can make the most valuable contributions to these discussions and accelerate the climate agenda.

It has become increasingly apparent that governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the traditional mainstays of COP conferences, cannot make sufficient headway against the intensifying climate crisis without summoning the expertise and commitment of other parts of society. Consequently, at COP26 in Glasgow, a sharp increase in the number of organizations from the private sector, especially climate-tech startups and various green social enterprises, was to be seen advocating improved solutions and pushing for swifter progress. Their participation transformed COP into a much larger and more significant event that attracted extraordinary interest from the media and the general public alike.

Although the MENA region is one of the regions in the world most vulnerable to the impact of climate change, relevant civil society organizations and NGOs have been much less prominent than in other parts of the world. A growing grassroots movement of green social entrepreneurs in the region ready to develop sustainable models that can generate financial returns, while solving one of the most pressing challenges of our time, has emerged to fill the gap. These entrepreneurs should be considered key stakeholders at the next COP meetings alongside governments and local and international NGOs. They should be invited to play a key part in discussions, and to exhibit their uniquely innovative ideas.

In order to understand their business models and solutions

and find out how they could best contribute to the upcoming COP events, we interviewed more than 20 green social entrepreneurs in Egypt and the UAE. By doing so, we gleaned the five main ways in which these entrepreneurs can add value.

## 1/ PROVIDE PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Green social entrepreneurs in Egypt, the UAE, and the entire MENA region have been developing practical and localized solutions to real climate problems. These solutions range from sustainable agriculture and food waste reduction, to renewable energy, circularity and recycling technologies, and sustainable e-commerce platforms.

There are many such examples. FreshSource, Barnika, and Mozare3 are Egyptian agritech startups that connect producers to businesses and consumers, reducing food waste, and promoting fresher and more sustainable produce.

The Waste Lab is a women-owned startup in the UAE that recycles food waste into compost. Also in the UAE,

Ehfaaz and International Protein recycle agriculture and food waste and provide other circularity solutions. EroGo sells ugly-looking but fresh fruits and vegetables that are rejected by supermarkets and would otherwise end up in landfills. “Up to 50% of the content of landfills in the region is organic,” says Lara Hussein, founder of The Waste Lab. “This generates serious greenhouse gas emissions, including methane, a gas much more potent than carbon dioxide. We want to encourage governments to introduce large-scale schemes to recycle food and agri waste.”

Plstka and Bekia are two cleantech startups in Egypt that provide incentives (rewards or points that can be exchanged for discounts or cash) to residents and businesses who recycle their waste and junk. A similar business in the UAE, ZeLoop, uses blockchain technology to award tokens to customers who recycle. Shamsina in Egypt is another innovative startup that designs, produces and delivers locally made solar water heaters. In the e-commerce space, meanwhile,

Blue Terra and the Green EcoStore in the UAE both offer a wide range of green consumer products to the local market. Elsewhere in the MENA region too, a number of other innovative green social entrepreneurs could usefully participate in the COP discussions. These include 44.01, an Oman-based provider of carbon capture solutions; FabricAID, a social enterprise in Lebanon that redistributes clothes to needy communities; and KESK, an Iraq-based consulting business specializing in green building.

## 2/ RAISE AWARENESS

While all green social entrepreneurs raise environmental awareness simply by promoting their own solutions, some are fully focused on this objective.

There are various such enterprises in Egypt. Greenish sets up environmental clubs in universities and schools to increase awareness and stimulate green entrepreneurship. Banlastic educates people about plastic pollution and the ways it can be reduced. Shagara, meanwhile, transforms school rooftops into green outdoor classrooms. “We are working with the Egyptian government to build a coalition to fund the implementation of Shagara’s Green Roof Classrooms project in 100 public schools,” says its founder Mohamed Abdel Samad. “These not only improve the educational environment for children but also increase awareness, sequester carbon, regulate the city microclimate, and boost urban biodiversity.”

ButtonUp is an Egyptian social enterprise that operates at the intersection of green craftsmanship, female empowerment, and environmental awareness by providing high-quality eco-friendly products made by the hands of women in local communities. Abdelfattah Nada, the co-founder of ButtonUp, believes that climate conferences offer an ideal platform to highlight the importance of this frequently neglected grouping: “COP is an opportunity to promote sustainable business models for women-led craftsmanship,” he says. “These women entrepreneurs drive environmental awareness within their communities through their own craft.” ▶▶



**A GROWING GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT OF GREEN SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS IN THE REGION** READY TO DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE MODELS HAS EMERGED TO FILL THE GAP.







↑ **SHAGARA'S GREEN ROOF CLASSROOMS** project in Egypt

In the UAE, Goumbook espouses sustainable living and green practices, and it recently partnered with the Dubai government in a campaign to reduce single-use plastics, especially water bottles. Several other MENA-based green social enterprises are also playing their part in raising awareness. These include BlueTN in Tunisia, Seeds Platform in Kuwait, Sangha Estidama Hub in Saudi Arabia, BirHakaya in Palestine, and Ecolo in Djibouti.

### 3/ DRIVE AN ECOSYSTEM FOR CHANGEMAKERS

Green social entrepreneurs in MENA fulfill an important role in strengthening the ecosystem and helping green startups to develop and flourish. This category can be divided into three: social impact accelerators and investors, global social

enterprises and accelerators/ investors, and industry groups and educational institutions.

First, several accelerators in Egypt and the UAE such as RISE and C3 provide excellent platforms for green social entrepreneurs to raise funds, receive mentorship and coaching, and promote their solutions. Changelabs in Egypt recently launched programs dedicated to such startups in partnership with the Swiss Development Agency and others.

Flat6Labs, an Egypt-based accelerator, has also been supporting green startups across the region, such as Nadeera in UAE and Lebanon. Moreover, while angel investors and venture capital firms that focus on green social enterprises and climate-tech startups are still rare in the region, interest is nevertheless growing, and many are working on

acquiring the necessary capabilities.

Second, global social enterprises, impact accelerators and investors, are vital in transferring skills, knowledge and funding to the region. YouThinkGreen and Plastic Bank are two examples operating in Egypt. YouThinkGreen is a German social enterprise that promotes environmental awareness and entrepreneurship among young people. Plastic Bank is a Canadian social enterprise that diverts plastics from water to create social plastic, a valuable commodity in several industries today. "By applying our successful social plastic model in Egypt, we drive positive change in the ecosystem by educating people about the value of plastic recycling and waste management in general," says Amr Elkady, Plastic Bank's head of the Middle East and Africa region.

Village Capital, one of the world's largest organizations supporting impact-driven and seed-stage startups, offers another example. The Washington D.C.-based accelerator recently presided over an investment readiness

program in the MENA region in partnership with the International Finance Corporation (IFC), providing unique opportunities to these startups.

Third, relevant industry groups and clusters, and educational institutions, should be strengthened to support the ecosystem. These industry groups include Cleantech Arabia and the Green Energy Academy in Egypt. Successful cleantech or climate-tech clusters, such as Green Tech Valley in Austria, Cleantech San Diego in the US, or Ecotech Quebec in Canada, should be developed in the region, supported by well-managed and well-funded cluster management organizations.

Governments must work with the private sector to build this ecosystem. This role includes developing helpful regulations, adjusting the procurement system to favor up-and-coming entrepreneurs with green solutions, and actively participating in building and financing the ecosystem and clusters through partnerships with research institutions, banks and other key organizations.

↓ **THE WASTE LAB** aims to tackle food waste across the UAE

