

Start-Up Youth: Successes and Challenges

Four young entrepreneurs from Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia present their stories, successes and challenges, encountered on their path to creating innovative enterprises in the region.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY



PITCHING THE BUSINESS IDEAS

Hoda Mahmoud, from Egypt, founder and CEO of Transito: Explains how after she'd lived for several years in Europe she realized the importance of smart cities and geographic mapping for public transportation and mobility. This was the main reason that encouraged her to found her startup 3 years ago. Transito is a public transport app for the MENA that maps all uncovered areas in the MENA in terms of collecting the data and providing it to the end users in an organized form. After failure of retrieving data from the governments or transportations companies, Hoda and her team decided to crowdsource the info from the users and organize it and optimize it in a searchable manner.

Karim ElOurdani, from Tunisia, co-director of Estifeda, founded his enterprise with 5 friends who were involved in education. "We wanted to reduce the gap between teachers and students (digital natives)"

he explains. The project also aim to put students at the heart of the education process and empower teachers with digital knowledge, which they lack. The first tool is a website: edupronet, which is an information site for teachers and lecturers and professors to discuss e-learning. The second tool is a teaching resource platform which enables teachers to create digital educational content. The third tool is Kissa aimed at creating and sharing stories and encourage young people to be creative and write stories.

Lama Tawk, from Lebanon, manager of *From Beirut to Lebanon*, developed her application through her masters a methodology of participatory geographic mapping, to create a geographic database for Lebanon. Through this online database, urban residents are connected to green spaces and small entrepreneurs outside of Beirut. The project encourages ecotourism as well as small entrepreneurs. The application also enables users to search for green businesses and green activities by locations or sectors, and also to look for landmarks of cultural interests being conserved by the locals.

Saadeddine Said, from Morocco, co-Founder of *e-Room*, is originally a filmmaker. He witnessed a woman giving birth in a remote area in the Atlas Mountains during a snow storm. He affirms that the idea of his startup is based on the principle of "If we can't bring hospitals to this region we should at least bring expertise that can help communities cope with emergencies". The E-room is a platform consisting of putting a camera in a room and connecting it through an application to the mobile phones of a group of doctors. In case of emergency, residents of the villages only need to enter the e-room and click on one button; a message will be sent to the doctors, the first doctor to respond will be the doctor in charge. Saadeddine and his team are planning to use the same platform, to bring assistance in education to these villages and help young people in their studies.

MAIN CHALLENGES FACED

Hoda discussed that the first challenges was the lack of encouragement from her parents who are both entrepreneurs and know the challenges and the risks of failures. Technical challenges is another issue she discussed particularly that the central bank in Egypt doesn't allow international transfers, and startups cannot easily create a bank account. The availability of data is another challenge, as

Governments in MENA do not share information and most institutions working on transportation do not even possess such data.

Lama agrees, as Lebanon has few data about environmental issues. But From Beirut to Lebanon collaborated with local communities to generate the data. She adds that with the political instability in Lebanon, it's been difficult to formalize the database. Lama reminded that funding is indeed a shared challenge where there is no support by governmental institutions and loans are not facilitated.

Saadeddine expressed frustration for small challenges that could be avoided should a specialized personnel be employed in concerned public administrations. He explained that while developing the E-Room and creating the first prototype, they couldn't find material so they had to buy it online. To collect the equipment from the borders, the team had to pass through borders police that have no technical knowledge about the material or the project and placed the team in several frustrating situations. Saadeddine also explained that taxes put on the material, can be too high. Moreover, now that he has left Morocco, contacting official administrations remotely has added to the challenges and limited the progress of the E-Room.

Karim reiterated the challenge of communicating with public administrations, where his startup has not been able to obtain a meeting with the Ministry of Education for more than a year. The Tunisian Government encourages young people to create startups, but actions don't follow; there's an upper hand from big companies on Tunisian administration in terms of IT particularly. When calls for proposals are created, the conditions included in the calls don't provide startups with the chance to respond to such calls and compete with multinationals.

LOCAL LEGISLATIONS AND STARTUPS

Hoda acknowledged that the Government in Egypt has been trying for the past 3 years to create laws that support startups but she added that laws are not enough, there's a need for actions.

Lama agreed by affirming the need to protect Lebanese entrepreneurs because of the rise in competition from the refugee community. All the entrepreneurs are at high risk of not surviving the

coming years because competition is big. On the municipal level, few municipalities have worked on policies to protect local entrepreneurs.

Karim thinks that the first solution would be for Governments to facilitate access to projects for young entrepreneurs.

Saadeddine put communication first underlining the importance of communication between the Government and young people. He also explained that when we discuss IT and enterprises using new technologies, while the Governments are not connected themselves, the pace is not the same. The situation is pushing young people to start their projects somewhere else.

IMPORTANCE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL EDUCATION

Karim says that in Tunisia the educational system trains good technicians. You would find entrepreneurs whose enterprises wouldn't last more than a year. This failure is not due to a lack of training on creating companies but the lack of knowledge as well as means and tools to sustain it, manage it and develop it.

Hoda considers that in recent years education in Egypt has witnessed a growing demand and awareness on entrepreneurship, courses have been introduced in high schools and universities, both public and private. She however stressed on the fact that many young people think they're entrepreneurs because they have ideas, however that the important thing is to know how to implement them. Knowledge alone is not enough.

Lama clarified that public universities don't offer entrepreneurship courses in contrast to private schools in Lebanon. If you are a private school student you have the means to start your own business, you're more likely to access funding.

Saadeddine argues that you become entrepreneur not because of the education you received but for the programmes one's exposed to, the culture and the networks.

Karim's experience is slightly different as his business journey kicked off when he and his team realized that serving education through an association is not viable or sustainable. It was then the option to adopt a for-profit business.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE ENTREPRENEURIAL WORLD

Hoda reaffirms that being an entrepreneur is a challenge. To be a woman entrepreneur is double the challenge. She explained how being a woman, she is sometimes not welcomed to go to certain places or discuss certain topics. She also brought light that some startups hesitate to hire married women because of the maternity leave.

Lama agreed by adding that it is never gender-neutral when dealing with partners or Government: either you get all the help because you're a woman or it is a complete opposite and we're blocked because we're not accompanied by a man.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Saadeddine stressed the need to share good practices and successful stories with the young people, particularly ones that highlight governmental support. This will encourage young people to join the entrepreneurial path.

Hoda gives back to the community by offering free classes for students and connecting them to other entrepreneurs. She agrees that the success stories should be shared.

Lama thinks that having the basic infrastructure and an enabling environment is essential. Cyber security should make it easier to sustain businesses.

Karim's company often welcomes young visitors to learn more about its work.

More, including photos and Business ID Cards [here](#)