

Darb al-Ahmar Social Projects

CAIRO, EGYPT

Once construction activities for Azhar Park had commenced in earnest in the late 1990s, the Historic Cities Programme (HCP) began to focus on the development of Darb al-Ahmar, the impoverished neighbourhood adjacent to the future Park. Named after the historic street that passes through this area, today's Darb al-Ahmar is a vibrant but impoverished district that in no way resembles its rich past. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, this part of Historic Cairo saw a steady but continuous decline in living conditions. With the city expanding in all directions, offering improved standards of living to some, Darb al-Ahmar saw many of its wealthy residents replaced by people from poorer parts of Cairo, who had substantially lower incomes and lower education levels than those who had left. This shift in population led to rapid dilapidation of the built environment, as funding for maintenance of landmark buildings was no longer available. A virtual freeze on rent introduced by the government in the 1950s further accelerated the decline of Darb al-Ahmar. Many landlords saw no reason to finance the upkeep of buildings that had virtually no rental value and whose occupants could not be removed. With houses collapsing due to lack of maintenance, few employment opportunities and insufficient availability of utilities and municipal services, the area started to attract criminals and for some time even became the hub of the drug trade in Cairo. By March 2000, when HCP began its first activities, population levels had declined to 100,000 from an estimated 170,000 in 1972–77.

HCP's main objective for the development of Darb al-Ahmar is to improve the quality of life of the inhabitants in terms of their economy, housing conditions and health and education. In addition to this, HCP intends to preserve the social fabric by ensuring that the benefits of its activities will go to the actual population and not to newcomers with higher income levels. HCP realizes, however, that it has limited means at its disposal to counter gentrification.

The socio-economic development of Darb al-Ahmar started with a first phase that was initially designed for a three-year period (later extended by one more year) and that was chiefly co-funded by the Egyptian-Swiss Development Fund and the Ford Foundation. Activities that were identified as having the highest priority during this period were: improved housing; access to micro-credit; vocational



An art class is taking place at Darb Shouglan Community Centre.

Opposite page:

Above, children learn from a poster about recycling methods for the 'Solid Waste Management Project'.

Below, a sight test is given by a Health Programme optometrist.



Project Scope / Objectives

The goal of these projects was to improve the overall quality of life in Darb al-Ahmar. Socio-cultural and economic well-being were targeted through access to micro-credit, business development services, employment and vocational training, crafts development, education, health, environment, and capacity building for local government and civil society organizations.





Above, residents are being interviewed during a baseline census survey in order to provide an accurate needs assessment not only of local inhabitants from a household perspective, but also of the needs of local entrepreneurs to assess their eligibility for micro-finance.

Below, a substantial number of beneficiaries, over the past ten years, have found financial security with the help of the vocational training programme. A young woman develops her skill at sewing to generate income.

training and employment; education; and, to a more limited extent, access to primary health care. Although largely successful during the initial four years, Phase 1 only had a limited reach in terms of its health activities and its micro-credit. Furthermore, most of the vocational training had been limited to the trades that were directly related to the building sector. With the experience gained during the first phase, a more accurate needs assessment was compiled through an extensive baseline survey, which was completed in late 2003. This survey not only looked at the needs of local inhabitants from a household perspective, but also took stock of the needs of local entrepreneurs as potential lenders from a micro-credit programme that, as of 2005, became a responsibility of the Aga Khan Agency for Microfinance (AKAM).

The outcome of the baseline survey of 2003 provided the inputs for a detailed implementation plan for Phase 2. Co-financed by the German Development Bank KfW, through the Egyptian Social Fund for Development, the Ford Foundation and a large number of other donors, Phase 2 started in January 2005 and continued until December 2009. A post-implementation survey of the same households that were first interviewed in late 2003, carried out by an independent external evaluator, provided HCP with a number of interesting before and after observations, showing the results and the outcome of some of the better and some of the less successful interventions.

The post-implementation survey consisted of a household survey and focus group meetings. The survey was conducted in seven core *shiyakhat* of Darb al-Ahmar (the entire district is made up of thirteen *shiyakhat*) during February 2009. The households surveyed in 2009 represent seventy-five per cent of those that were first surveyed in 2003 (the missing 25% having moved out and being replaced by others, often from within the district). In addition to this survey, two focus group discussions were held, one with men and another with women, covering relevant population groups. Although relatively small in size (the people surveyed in 2009 represent just under 2% of the population of the area) the fact that the same households are compared before and after the completion of Phase 2 makes this post-implementation survey relevant.

Housing Improvement

Since HCP started its housing improvement activities in 2000, eighty-four housing units – representing 218 individual apartments for 1100 people – have been completed as either newly built or completely renovated houses. Because families in the area lack cash, this work was carried out with a grant component that could rise as high as eighty per cent.

The 2009 survey found that over the preceding five years the average number of rooms per house had increased. This, however, was not due to an increase in living space, but because of more partitions within the existing space and hence higher levels of privacy within the household. Observations regarding crowding conditions and ventilation showed that de-crowding has improved. However, ventilation had worsened (there was an increase in percentage of non-ventilated windowless rooms), showing a need for more light wells and ventilation shafts.

People's perception of the market value of their house showed a remarkable increase. Estimates in 2003 ranged from EGP 10,000 to EGP 70,000 in 2003, whereas in 2009 they ranged from EGP 70,000 to EGP 250,000 and more.

From the focus group discussions, HCP learned that there is an influx of new residents coming into Darb al-Ahmar who occupy both old and new buildings, but with new leases; some of these new arrivals are originally from Darb al-Ahmar (married, moved out and now returning) and some from other popular districts of Cairo. This phenomenon



seems to be directly related to a perception of improvement in the district, namely the clearly visible rehabilitation of a number of houses and the creation of open spaces. *Shiyakhat* such as Batneyya, however, where little housing rehabilitation took place, seem to continue losing residents due to the dilapidated housing stock.

Children use the library at the Darb Shouglan Community Centre. Surveys have shown a significant drop in illiteracy rates in Darb al-Ahmar after projects began.

Household Economy

The average declared monthly household income doubled from EGP 497 in 2003 to EGP 983 in 2009. In 2003 more than seventy per cent of households earned between EGP 100 and EGP 600 per month, while in 2009 less than forty per cent fell into this category. Taking inflation into consideration, real gains in household income levels between 2003 and 2009 ranged from twenty per cent to twenty-five per cent. Evidence of increased household income levels comes from a noticeable reduction in expenditure on food as a percentage of the household budget. 2009 data showed that fifty-one per cent was spent on food items compared to fifty-six per cent in 2003. In all likelihood, food expenditure as a percentage of the household budget would have dropped well below the fifty per cent threshold (a key poverty indicator) had it not been for the exceptionally high inflation of prices for food items. The cost of food increased by twenty-five per cent in 2008 when many subsidies were removed.

Employment

More than 4300 people have been assisted with finding employment through the programme since 2000, either by finding (new) employment or through job referrals. Not



Computer literacy is taught to young people at the Community Centre and art classes are offered in the evening through the education programme.

surprisingly, most of the respondents in the household survey reported knowing the 'Employment Programme' (second to 'Housing', where only 19% reported not knowing the programme). As a result of HCP's interventions, the percentage of economically active individuals increased from thirty per cent in 2003 to thirty-four per cent in 2009. Of this thirty-four per cent, nearly three quarters (78%) were employees (generally employed by other family members) whereas twenty-two per cent were self-employed (that is, they own their own business, or they work in the family business with no wages). Comparisons with 2003 show that there is a decrease in the percentage of those who work for family members without wages. This change can in part be contributed to the substantial number of beneficiaries who, over the past ten years, found employment with the help of the programme's employment unit.

Education

The 2009 study reports a decrease in the levels of illiteracy among those surveyed (a 5.5% drop in illiteracy for men and a 2.5% drop for women). HCP's literacy classes since the survey have continued at the same level and illiteracy levels are therefore expected to drop even further. School drop-out rates, a measurement of success of HCP's engagement with parents of school-going children who are at risk of leaving school prematurely, went down by 3.5 per cent during the course of Phase 2. However, the success was nearly entirely due to more girls completing primary school (drop-out rates were down from 16% in 2003 to 13% in 2009). Boys' drop-out rates, unfortunately, remained critical with no measurable changes between 2003 and 2009.

Health

Following the creation of a new health-care centre located close to Khayrbek Mosque in Darb al-Ahmar Street and following a review of the principal health development activities (which resulted in a programme change whereby future focus would be on mother and child health care), the health programme saw a dramatic improvement in its outreach to the community during the second phase. More than three thousand children received a health check-up and a large number of counselling sessions were held for teenagers and women on subjects ranging from 'Care for the Elderly' and 'Care for Working Children' to issues such as 'Female Genital Mutilation' and 'Domestic Violence'.

Quality of Life

Disputes among neighbours in the past twelve months, an indicator for local perceptions of changes in the quality of life, showed a remarkable drop amongst those polled (from 18% in 2003 to just 5% in 2009). This reflects positive community participation potential for the future. In direct relation to the observed reduction in the numbers of conflicts, perhaps, comes a measurable increase in the desire to continue living in the same locality. Willingness to stay in Darb al-Ahmar was already high in 2003 (89% wished to stay) and has increased during the course of the second phase, now reaching ninety-three per cent. During focus group discussions where residents revealed general appreciation of the revitalization efforts by the project, housing rehabilitation and open-space development were in particular mentioned as key points.



A health-care centre was set up adjacent to Khayrbek Mosque and the health programme saw a dramatic increase in its outreach to the local population.

Background

BRIEF HISTORY OF PROJECT SITE

The Darb al-Ahmar district, together with the adjacent Khan al-Khalili district, comprises the core of Historic Cairo and hosts the highest concentration of Islamic monuments in the world. The easternmost part of Darb al-Ahmar borders the Historic Wall built by Salah al-Din during the second half of the 12th century. The area prospered until the beginning of the 20th century. It fell into disrepair as Cairo expanded rapidly and wealthy residents chose to move to the city's outskirts leaving poorer migrants to occupy their houses. A virtual freeze on rents from the 1950s onwards, alongside hereditary lease agreements, diminished incentives on behalf of local landlords to keep up their properties. Consequently, living conditions deteriorated rapidly, a process that continued and seemed irreversible until the creation of Azhar Park at the start of the new millennium.

Challenges

PROJECT RISKS

The main risk was the potential lack of sufficient local capital to rehabilitate a significant number of houses. In addition, nearly all the houses had complex, multiple ownership status. Interventions could not proceed without properly identifying legal owners, and wherever possible obtaining financial contributions from those who would stand to benefit. Darb al-Ahmar's limited open spaces also required rehabilitation. Future maintenance of this open space will be a major challenge.

SITE CONDITIONS

Sites for housing improvement generally suffered from poor accessibility, complicating the construction process. The poor status of solid waste collection has been an ongoing problem in the area. Many initiatives were started in the past, sometimes leading to temporary improvement, but those cannot succeed unless there is support at the district government level too. The general tendency, however, has been towards a lack of sustained preparedness by the responsible agencies to collect solid waste. Local civil society organizations have so far failed to successfully pressure government to improve waste collection services.

STATUS OF HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Health surveys revealed that on the household level, poor eyesight is the most common ailment with an average 42% of the population suffering from it. Rheumatism was ranked second with an overall average of 36% in 2003, followed by poor hearing with 13%. Darb al-Ahmar generally lacks quality health services especially in the area of maternity and early childhood problems. Childhood development is of concern along with development of children's life skills.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Drinking water and waste water infrastructure was upgraded in the 1960s, but the quality of the work was poor. Gas-related utilities were also poor or non-existent.

Significant Issues and Impact

DATA COLLECTION/SURVEYS

An extensive socio-economic baseline survey was conducted in 2003, covering health status and household income and expenditure. At later stages of the project new information was added. A post-implementation survey, carried out in 2009 at the conclusion of Phase 2, covered the same households that were first surveyed in 2003. In 2010, at the start of Phase 3, a new baseline survey for the area was conducted.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS/MONUMENTS CONSERVED

Discussions with the Supreme Council of Antiquities resulted in the adoption of building regulations that would safeguard the built environment of this historic part of Cairo. External sources of funding were needed and found in order to help co-finance the rebuilding of almost 90 traditional housing units in the area. These now stand as a model for urban rehabilitation.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

AKTC teamed up with local civil society organizations to ensure that there is sufficient local ownership to maintain the newly created open spaces in good condition, through the creation of socio-cultural events for the benefit of users. Following the completion of Phase 3 in 2013, most activities with an open-ended commitment, such as health and education, will be transferred to local entities with whom HCP is already collaborating.

Other AKDN agencies will remain active in the provision of micro-credit and small- and medium- enterprise development.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING/CAPACITY BUILDING

During the course of Phase 2, a number of new initiatives were added to the vocational training programme with the aim of reaching more women. Administrative training has subsequently attracted substantially more women than men. The 2010 baseline survey served as a benchmark for the Canadian International Development Agency funded 'Cairo Economic Livelihoods Programme', which focuses on vocational training and employment.

Partners

PUBLIC PARTNERS
Governorate of Cairo.

Donors

Egyptian-Swiss Development Fund (Phase 1), Social Fund for Development (Phases 2 and 3), Canadian International Development Agency (Phases 2 and 3), United Nations Development Programme, World Monuments Fund, Ford Foundation, Daimler Chrysler (Egypt), Flora Family Foundation, Danny Kaye and Sylvia Fine Kaye Foundation, The American University in Cairo, Mubarak Kohl Initiative, Industrial Modernization Centre, Azhar Park, Caritas (Egypt).

Authoritative Framework

Overall agreement with the Cairo Governorate for the development of the Darb al-Ahmar district and specific tripartite agreements with Cairo Governorate, Egyptian Social Fund for Development and AKTC for partial financing of project activities during Phases 2 and 3.