

The Marka Experiment

A New Hope

WORDS Charli Wyatt

Last February Charli Wyatt started working with the residents of a low-income neighborhood in Marka to create a community garden. Not always going to plan, things started off badly then they got worse, finally coming to a head just before Ramadan when the residents insisted they could no longer do any work on the project till after Eid. These are Charli's project diaries.

With garden construction on pause for Ramadan, I was expecting to have a tough time finding something to write about this month. But the project has not been hibernating. It has been quietly going about its most important work – getting into peoples' hearts. My own not the least.

I have to admit that I lost some of my enthusiasm when the families decided to postpone until after Eid. I knew the

project would continue somehow, but I wondered if my excitement would survive an empty month, especially after all that had happened.

But with the project on hiatus, I found myself able for the first time to reflect on how far we've come without thinking about how far we have to go. What I realized is that I'm quite happy with our progress so far.

What's become clearer to me is not just how complex social development is, but also how freeing. Yes, it's difficult to let go of our assumptions. But with a project like this, where you are helping people create solutions to their problems, progress is much easier once you let go of your expectations and allow yourself to start from where they are. Happiness is much easier, too. That's what this process is teaching me, *shwai shwai*.



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Peace of mind isn't the only good thing that happened during the break – the garden also made a new friend, one who understands social development. The Royal Netherlands Embassy offered us a grant that covers the rest of our budget. With the project's material needs now met, we can move ahead with confidence.

Joe came into town a couple of weeks later. Joe is the garden project's oldest friend, an urban planning scholar and champion of urban agriculture in the Middle East. He's coordinating a regional training course on urban agriculture for the fall. As part of the preparations for the course, he and his colleague Salwa toured the Marka Green Park, where the

community garden project is taking place. As Joe and Salwa explored the site and interviewed Nadia about the many ways that the Productive Woman Cooperative Society is putting the park to use, I realized what a great time it is for a community garden project. The idea is catching on, and there are dedicated people out there who are moved by the possibilities.

After the visit, Nadia invited us to attend the last hour of a workshop that the society was hosting at the park's solar-powered meeting house. About twenty women from around Marka were learning how to create a home-based business. As soon as we sat down, I noticed some familiar faces among the participants – Um Abdullah,

Um Marwan, and Um Khalil, our three gardeners from the community. I waved to them each in turn.

When the workshop ended, I made my way over to say hello to Um Abdullah. She was talking with Salwa. Her face showed no fear – only welcome. Um Marwan came up to me with a smile in her eyes. “*Eemta, eemta?*” she asked. Um Khalil was shy, but her face asked the same question.

Their eagerness was sincere, and it made my heart leap.

Yalla! **JO**