

The Marka Experiment

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Last February, Charli Wyatt began working with local partners on an experimental project to create a community garden with residents of a low-income neighborhood in Marka. The aim was to help residents develop a sense of community and cooperation through the experience of working together in meeting a common need – in this case, better nutrition and food security. In getting the pilot project off the ground, she has faced a number of obstacles ranging from bad soil to social restrictions on women to the advice of so-called “experts.” In this first in a series, Wyatt shares the challenges and emotions involved in trying to bring a community together.

This is going to work.

Ten-year-old Adnan comes barreling past me, spinning the old tire in front of him. He reaches the long row of tires, tosses his on top, and races back to get another. He and his friends are helping build their family’s plot in the new community vegetable garden at the Marka Green Park. As I watch the children and their parents hurrying back and forth, straining but laughing, I smile. This is actually going to work!

It’s a far cry from the thoughts I had the first time I found myself standing on this spot seven months ago.

When my friend Dalia at the Center for the Study of the Built Environment (CSBE) first told me about a trash dump in Marka that a women’s society had turned into a park, I imagined a handful of dunums resting between cramped concrete buildings, a green oasis of shade and elbowroom amidst the glaring urban crush. The perfect place to put a vegetable garden and invite the neighbors to feed their families from it.

In reality, the land that the Productive Woman Cooperative Society (PWCS) had rehabilitated a few years



ago is fifty dunums of dusty soil amidst hundreds of dunums of empty countryside at the edge of the city. The drought-hardy trees that the society planted across the site don't even come up to my shoulder, much less provide shade. Yet as I squinted out across the vastness on that blustery February day, my eyes taking in the junkyards and the bleached-out hills in the distance for the first time, it was not the land that I doubted, but myself. Despite the brightness ricocheting off the sand, I was walking in the dark.

Unless you count the handful of tomato plants I had when I was twelve, I've never grown a real garden. So what made me think that I could create one for the residents of this poor and isolated village in what must be the most remote and environmentally inhospitable corner of Amman? Honestly, I don't know. But as I pass a concrete block to Nadia, the indomitable president of PWCS and my partner in this endeavor, and watch her pass it along to Um Abdullah, Um Marwan, and Um Khalil, our intrepid gardeners, I realize why I'm suddenly so confident. What started out as nothing more than a far-fetched personal dream of mine has outgrown me and taken on a life of its own.

It doesn't even exist yet, but this garden has an uncanny ability to make friends. The first was CSBE. They wanted to improve the urban landscape and I wanted to help low-income families improve their food security. We saw in the community garden a way to address both our concerns. But where to put it? There's not a lot of empty space for the taking in Amman, particularly in the poorer neighborhoods. Tightly packed houses take up every bit of land that isn't treacherously sloped. Empty land can only be had at a premium.

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CSBE had worked with PWCS before and saw the potential not just in the park but in the society itself. Maybe the spot wasn't exactly what I had in mind, but it quickly became apparent that it was an opportunity we couldn't pass up. Its very existence, and the fact that PWCS had the municipality's permission to develop it, was extraordinary. Moreover, the community had demonstrable faith in Nadia, and would rally around any effort she undertook.

Nadia and I decided soon after meeting that we wanted to collaborate to build this garden for the community, but after months of subsequent discussions we still had no idea where to start. That's when Habitat for Humanity – Jordan and its national coordinator, Philip, stepped in. Philip and his crew are community development black belts – they've helped over a hundred impoverished families in Jordan build their own homes. One

day, as I was complaining to Philip about another failed meeting with an "expert" who couldn't help us, he spoke up with a simple but powerful idea. Don't create a garden for the people, he said. Create it with them.

Until then I had envisioned the garden as a donor-driven, expert-designed package that I and my technical partners would drop on an undeserved and unsuspecting neighborhood and then say "have at it." Philip saw the limitations of that approach, and he understood the power of the community garden idea better than I did. To me, the key word was "garden". To him, it was "community".

On his advice, Nadia and I began visiting residents' homes. We asked them about their needs and told them about our idea. Our hosts responded first with their concerns – the bad soil, the social rules governing interaction between men and women, the difficulty of working together. But then they talked about what excited them – bringing greenery to the neighborhood, learning new skills, doing something for their children. It was clear – they wanted to give this a try.

It was also clear, however, that we needed to learn a lot more about the people and the land if we were going to make this work. We decided to create a trial garden, a small experiment that would teach us what we needed to know and help us learn how to work with the people. The Summit Alliance for Global Health and the Carl George Bjorkman Foundation stepped forward with \$1000 each, and my friend Diane threw a party that raised another \$600.

I don't speak any Arabic, and Nadia speaks little English, so Ra'ida, Ala', Israa and Enas volunteered to be my ears and voice in the community. When we needed help to design and plan the garden, Habitat for Humanity connected us with an architect, Florentine, and the Royal Society for the

Conservation of Nature introduced us to our organic gardening specialist, Nabeeh.

And all of a sudden, with a little help from our friends, Nadia and I found ourselves building beds for this impossible garden – not for the community, but with it.

I have no idea how it will turn out. The environment may prove too harsh. Frustration may overwhelm our gardeners. We might run out of money before April. But whatever happens, we won't fail. We can't. It's impossible, because it's not about how big the garden is or how much we grow, it's about what we learn in the process – about ourselves, about community, about our relationship to the land and to one another. Maybe we're all walking in the dark, but we're walking hand-in-hand. And that's why it's going to work. **JO**