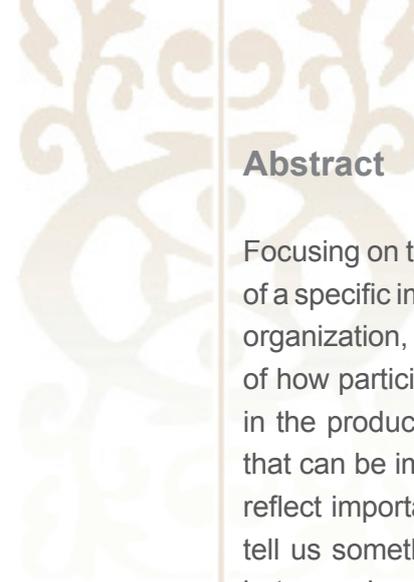


**‘Resala – a Message About Giving’:  
Charity, Youth Voluntarism and an Emerging Imaginary of Egypt**

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## Abstract

Focusing on the time both before and after the Egyptian revolution, this paper explores the formation of a specific imaginary of Egypt among middle class youth engaged in charitable activities in the youth organization, Resala. Through the case studies of two young female volunteers, I present examples of how participation in Resala's activities simultaneously exposes volunteers to and engages them in the production of a certain imaginary of Egyptian society, an imaginary of an imperfect society that can be improved through their voluntary effort. The experiences of the two women furthermore reflect important differences and tendencies within the organization as a whole. These differences tell us something about how the imaginary is understood and practiced in slightly different ways, but more importantly, they demonstrate how a shared imaginary has the potential of uniting young people of various backgrounds and experiences. Although Resala was established with the explicit purpose of assisting Egypt's poor, I argue that Resala is also – and perhaps primarily – a space where a new collective consciousness about Egyptian society was fostered, a consciousness which somehow has prepared these young people for the Egyptian revolution.

## Introduction

'It wasn't like a dream to come true. It was beyond the level of dreams,' explained Dr. Sherif Abdelazeem, the founder and chairman of the Egyptian youth organization Resala. He was referring to the level of enthusiasm, devotion and energy that young volunteers displayed during the initial phase of Resala. To him, this was proof 'that youth wanting to do good are capable of actually doing it.' Resala began as a student initiative at the Faculty of Engineering at Cairo University in 1999. In 2000, a relative of one of the volunteers donated a piece of land on the condition that within three years the volunteers would raise sufficient funds and establish a workable charitable organization. In six months, the volunteers succeeded in meeting this goal, raising materials equal to half a million Egyptian pounds and erecting a six-storey building in the district of al-Haram in Cairo. Since then, Resala has developed into the largest youth organization in the Arab world with 63 branches and almost 100,000 volunteers dispersed across Egypt's 29 governorates.<sup>(1)</sup> It is now a formally registered NGO providing basic services and support to Egypt's underserved groups.

There are several ways to approach a phenomenon like Resala. Throughout my study of the organization, I have often been confronted with questions such as: 'Isn't this just about a bunch of naïve young people providing charity to the poor in order for themselves to feel better?' Or 'Do they really contribute to any long-term development or change?' Instead of answering these questions directly, I will illustrate how organizations like Resala facilitate shared experiences and understandings among the young people involved. Put differently, the question is whether and in which ways spaces like Resala foster a certain 'imaginary' (Castoriadis, 1987) about Egyptian society. I argue that Resala provides the organizational space and discourses allowing people to practice something shared which, in combination with important historical events, society's prevailing ethos and specific intergenerational relations, cultivates a particular shared imaginary of conceivable possibilities within Egyptian society.

More specifically, through an ethnographic study of 'giving' among youth involved in Resala this article will show how possibilities of social change are constituted within a specific group of young people. Through the case studies of two young female volunteers, I present examples of

how participation in Resala's activities simultaneously exposes volunteers to and engages them in the production of a certain image of Egyptian society. This image both reflects back on the volunteers themselves and the way they see their own role in society as givers and contributes to the imaginary of an imperfect society that can be improved through their sadaqa, i.e. voluntary acts of giving exceeding minimal Islamic social obligations towards the poor. The experiences of the two women furthermore reflect important differences and tendencies within the organization as a whole. These differences tell us something about how the imaginary is understood and practiced in slightly different ways, but more importantly they demonstrate how a shared imaginary has the potential of uniting young people of various backgrounds and experiences.

Most data for this article was collected among young Muslim volunteers immediately before the Egyptian uprising in early 2011<sup>(2)</sup>. Then, in late 2011, I returned to Egypt to follow up on Resala and my key interlocutors. I was curious to hear their thoughts about and reactions to the changes in the country. I was not surprised to learn that the vast majority participated in the demonstrations at Tahrir Square in January 2011 and February 2011 and again in November 2012 and December 2012. It is a common assumption that the recent political changes in Egypt will lead to 'a new political imaginary' (Challand, 2011; Hanafi, 2011) and generational consciousness especially among the young generation (Shahine, 2011). This article addresses these assumptions by highlighting the situation of youth during political rupture in light of their prior situation. Although Resala was established with the explicit purpose of assisting Egypt's poor, I argue that Resala is also – and perhaps primarily – a space where a new collective consciousness about Egyptian society was fostered, a consciousness which somehow prepared the young people for the Egyptian revolution and the changes that have followed.

### **'Resala Association for Charity – The Pleasure of Giving'<sup>(3)</sup>**

Since around 2000, a new group of actors has emerged in Egyptian civil society. An increasing number of middle class young people began engaging in voluntary social service work and forming their own organizations. Constituting a minor but growing part of Egyptian civil society, these youth-founded and youth-led organizations represent a phenomenon distinct from other Egyptian youth organizations, as well as from more traditional religious charity organizations.<sup>(4)</sup> They engage in social service activities in ways that differ from many traditional charity organizations. Moreover, while many youth organizations have an explicitly secular approach, for these young people Islam plays an important role. Introducing a new approach to Islam, charity and voluntarism, these organizations combine more or less conventional religious charity and aid provision with a focus on human development, as well as activities associated with awareness-raising aimed at mobilizing young people to participate in civil society.<sup>(5)</sup>

Resala is the largest and most famous organization within this new trend. One of its major branches is in Heliopolis, approximately 15 kilometers northeast of downtown Cairo. It is located on a quiet street, behind one of the main streets in Heliopolis. The building is a five-storey concrete block similar to many of the residential buildings in the area. When this branch first opened in 2005, the building provided space for volunteers, staff and activities. But like all other Resala branches, in the last few years there has been a rapid increase in both the numbers of volunteers and the scale and variety of activities, and most activities and volunteers recently moved into a newly constructed, larger and more luxurious building on the neighboring lot. This twelve-storey building,



painted white and with decorated balconies, is one very tangible sign of the success of the Resala Association for Charity. Land is expensive in Cairo, in particular in upper-middle class areas like Heliopolis, nevertheless every year at least one new Resala branch opens<sup>(6)</sup>. Parallel to this, the number of employees and volunteers has exploded. In 2011, Resala had 4,600 employees and more than 98,000 volunteers, of whom approximately 580 employees and 8,000 volunteers came to the Heliopolis branch<sup>(7)</sup>. Other obvious signs of Resala's success are the commercials on radio and TV as well as the billboards on the Ring Road and other main roads in Cairo. The size and growth of Resala has been facilitated by a steady increase in donations. In 2011, the total amount of in-cash donations to Resala reached 193 million Egyptian pounds for the organization as a whole, and 34.8 million for the Heliopolis branch<sup>(8)</sup>.

The vast majority of Resala's volunteers are college students and recent graduates whose ages range from eighteen to twenty-five. Resala's immediate beneficiaries are poor families and other vulnerable groups; including orphans, disabled and illiterate persons. By providing material aid such as food, shelter and clothes, as well as education, training, and emotional support, Resala and its volunteers strive to improve the lives of Egypt's underserved groups. This is also the message they seek to convey to potential donors and other 'outsiders.' However, on several occasions Abdelazeem explained to me that charity is in fact only a secondary aim of Resala. For the founders of Resala, the main intention in establishing the organization was to foster a culture of giving, especially among young Egyptians. 'My dream is to see the day in which everyone is helping everyone, voluntarily and without asking for anything in return,' Abdelazeem stated in one of his speeches. He saw it as his mission to convey to the young people a message about social responsibility towards society<sup>(9)</sup>. This goal is also reflected in the organization's name and mission statement<sup>(10)</sup>. Likewise, the slogans of Resala, such as 'the pleasure of giving'<sup>(11)</sup> reflect this ambition of the founders. As such, it is not the recipient or even the gift of charity that is the main focus of the organization, but the actual act of giving – and the act of volunteering – which, according to Abdelazeem, is the main pillar of Resala.

In the following, we will meet two volunteers from the Heliopolis branch of Resala. While their cases will provide the empirical data for this article, my analysis and interpretation is furthermore based on long-term fieldwork in the organization and observations among the volunteers, more generally. Safa<sup>(12)</sup> and Marwa are both in their early 20s and have been volunteering in Resala for a couple of years. Safa<sup>(12)</sup> is a volunteer in aid provision for poor families, while Marwa is involved in various activities related to the orphans. The activities in which they engage and how they talk about them offer insight into how giving takes form in practice. Both Safa<sup>(12)</sup> and Marwa see Resala as a possibility to give, and they share the overall vision of engagement and change. However, how they understand and practice this act of giving varies. Below, I will explore these variations not merely to display their differences, but rather to illustrate how the volunteer subject, in various ways, is generated and generates itself through the encounter with poor Egypt. Through specific practices and interactions related to the encounter with the poor beneficiaries as well as socialization into specific discourses on the poor/need and on poverty/need, they and other volunteers achieve a new understanding of society and hence develop a collective consciousness of themselves as youth and social actors within Egyptian society. Furthermore, I argue that Resala has the ability to accommodate a rather heterogeneous group of participants; while some come from rather privileged families, others have in fact been raised in the same neighborhoods as some of Resala's poor beneficiaries. Consequently, there are variations in how to approach the poor and

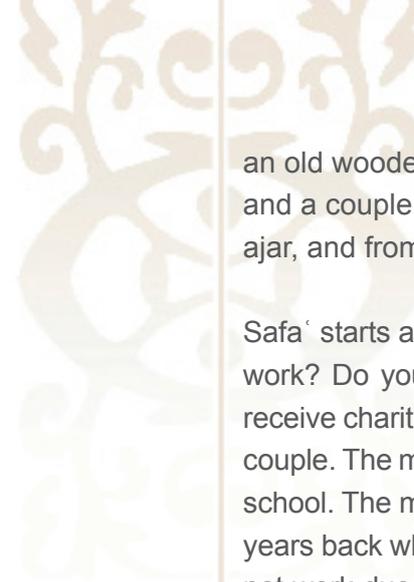
in conceptions of their needs. Thus, by comparing the experiences and narratives of Safa' and Marwa, my purpose is two-fold: first, to show how Resala is a place to engage in and learn about a particular moral and socioeconomic version of Egyptian society and ways of improving it; and, secondly, to show how Resala has developed into an organization which meets the demands of a rather heterogeneous group of middle class youth <sup>(13)</sup>.

## Giving as Community Development – the Case of Safa'

The first time I met Safa' was on a trip with Resala to Medīnat al-Salām, a poor Cairo suburb. At that time, she was 23 years old and had been volunteering in Resala since graduating from 'Ain Shams University in the Faculty of Law two years earlier. Throughout the rest of the fieldwork, I followed her and her group of friends in Resala's aid department. Safa' came to Resala approximately three times each week, depending on how much work there was. She was one of the 'responsible volunteers,' a category ascribed by all participants in Resala to volunteers who attended meetings with employees and leaders and was in charge of distributing tasks among the other volunteers. She was responsible for the aid and project activities in a neighborhood of Medīnat al-Salām called Naḥḍa, and was previously responsible for the project part of the larger aid campaigns outside of Cairo but 'found it to be more exhausting than [she] could bear.' She was very serious about her work and was always busy helping the driver find his way around or sitting with some of the older volunteers looking through the files of the clients. Sometimes, she even helped the employees with administrative tasks, even though she also held a full time job aside from her volunteer work with Resala.

As part of the aid provision program, Resala carried out a minimum of two monthly trips to each targeted poor neighborhood<sup>(14)</sup>. The first trip had the purpose of exploring the area and the particular needs of the families, while the second, usually two weeks later, entailed the actual distribution of aid, such as food, clothes, household items, blankets, medical treatment, roofs and water supply. Only a small group of volunteers attend the first trip, usually between 10 and 20 experienced members, while on the distribution trip between 100 and 200 volunteers participate. Safa' lived with her family in Medīnat al-Salām, and because of her in-depth knowledge of the area, she always participated in exploratory trips. Often, she would go to the houses of people in the same area in which she was raised – a situation that is not that uncommon for Resala's volunteers. In fact, many of the volunteers in the aid department were brought up in Medīnat al-Salām or similar lower class neighborhoods like Shubra or 'Ain Shams. The following description is from one of these exploratory trips in which I participated with Safa' and other volunteers from the aid department. It depicts a typical encounter between volunteers and clients, and gives an idea of how the practices related to this encounter simultaneously reflect and produce a certain image of Egyptian society.

In a dark and stuffy two-room apartment we find a middle-aged couple. The woman is overweight and dressed in a dusty black 'abeya and a simple black hijāb, while her blind husband wears a pair of worn-out corduroy trousers and a shirt underneath a synthetic sweater. They both look unhealthy with... bad skin and yellow and black teeth. Safa' informs them that we are from Resala, and they immediately invite us in. The woman points towards an old couch. Safa', Ahmed and I take a seat in the couch, while Manāl takes a look around in the apartment. The man sits down in the armchair to the left of us while his wife remains standing beside him. From where we sit we face



an old wooden bookshelf with a small television and a few ornaments. It is all very dusty. Posters and a couple of family portraits cover parts of the raw concrete walls. The door to the bedroom is ajar, and from what I see the small room is stuffed with mattresses, clothes and blankets.

Safa' starts asking the usual questions: What is your name? How old are you? Does your husband work? Do you work? How many children do you have? How much do you pay in rent? Do you receive charity from other organizations? Ahmed fills the form with the answers that he gets from the couple. The man is 49 and the woman is 36. They have three children of which two are still in primary school. The man has a technical education and used to work as a welder but had an accident a few years back where he lost his sight on both eyes. The woman is educated at primary level. She does not work due to pain in her neck, back and feet. They receive 145 pounds every month in welfare and he gets an additional 50 pounds from a center for blind people. They get no regular help from Resala, but sometimes they receive a food bag during Ramadan. Safa' asks if the man is able to start a project, maybe do something with his hands. The man replies that he is interested in anything that will generate an income. He could sell groceries from this apartment. What about clothes? asks Safa'. The man replies that people here usually buy clothes on installments, and that they are slow payers. He wants to open a grocery shop. Safa' suggests that he could sell liquid soap and cleaning products. The man nods. Then she asks how much money he needs and suggests 500 pounds. The man agrees to that. She adds that if he agrees to take the project he can no longer receive the food bags. The man replies: 'One has to do what one has to do.' Before leaving the house, we take a look around in the apartment. The small kitchenette/bathroom is in an even worse state than the rest of the apartment with half of the tiles missing on the floor and grease and dirt everywhere. I hear them talking about the condition and value of the stove and refrigerator. The moment we leave the building and head towards the next address, they start talking about the family, discussing whether or not they should be offered the loan.

Micro-finance projects, or simply 'projects' as the volunteers call them, were part of Resala's aid program for poor families. Through these projects, Resala provided a family with the possibility to establish a small business by lending them goods equal to a certain amount of money. From what I saw and heard, a loan would not usually exceed 2,000 Egyptian pounds.<sup>(15)</sup> Most people chose to establish a small shop or street kiosk, selling everything from meat, vegetables and snacks to clothes, cleaning products and plastic items. If people had specific technical qualifications, such as sewing, Resala would sometimes provide them with the necessary machines or tools to establish a workshop. During the explorative trips, volunteers would visit often as many as twenty or thirty potential 'project families.' As the description above indicates, the procedures of the 'exploration' were highly formalized. The volunteers would ask the families several questions related to issues such as family status, health condition, financial circumstances, and educational background, filling out a standard survey for the project application. As the following description of the evaluation of the Medīnat al-Salām cases shows, the volunteers proved to be rather skeptical towards the poor and their needs, and only a small percentage of the families who applied for a project would end up receiving the loan.

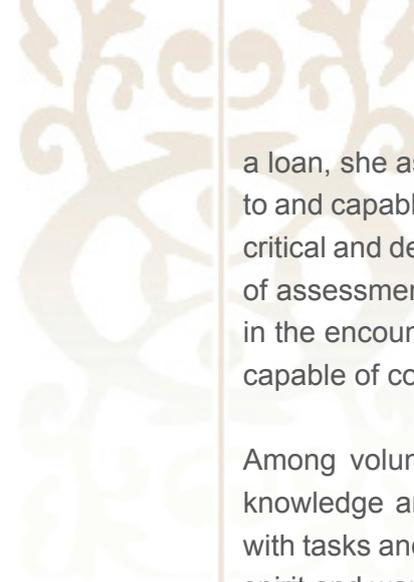
In the bus back to Cairo, the volunteers start a heated discussion about who deserves a project and who does not. Someone asks the question: 'How can we detect if they cheat or not?' The majority of the volunteers participate, most of the time with stories of people who tried to trick them into believing that they were 'more needy' than they actually were. Back at Resala, we meet

with May, the employee responsible for the project activities. Safa' hands her all the filled-out forms. May goes through the files one by one. She reads aloud the name of the household head and asks which of the volunteers went there. The volunteers involved explain the case to the others and they discuss in plenum. The main question is: Should this family be granted the loan or not? Repeatedly, the volunteers mention that there are many inconsistencies in the stories of the families. They seem to enjoy joking about these contradictions. They depict the situation for the other volunteers, and the reaction is laughter. Only one of the 16 families visited in Medīnat al-Salām is granted a loan. Most others are rejected and in three of the cases, Resala will search for employment in nearby factories.

As the above description illustrates, the life circumstances and conditions of the poor in Medīnat al-Salām did not seem to move Safa' and the other volunteers in my project group in the same way as they moved me. In fact, she was able to keep a distance by critically evaluating the information and the stories that flowed to them. The volunteers often framed it as a matter of who 'deserved' the loan, and who would be willing and capable of mobilizing the amount of energy and effort necessary for the project to work. Sometimes, a meeting with a potential client would even develop into an interrogation-like situation with the volunteers continuously and skeptically enquiring about particular aspects of the family's situation, most often related to their income sources. In one case, I observed how a female volunteer continuously asked the same questions over and over again even after the wife in the house had burst into tears<sup>(16)</sup>.

The exploratory trip to Medīnat al-Salām was my second of the kind, and then on the third trip, which would take place the following month, I was counted in as a full volunteer and was asked to write the answers down in the application form. In some of the more straight-forward activities such as second-hand clothes sorting or the actual distribution of aid, volunteers quickly obtained the relevant knowledge and skills, but activities like the investigation of possible beneficiaries of micro-finance projects presented a more complex learning process, requiring specific knowledge and interpersonal skills. For example, in order to assess the situation of a family, volunteers had to have some idea of the standard of living and level of expenses in the particular area. Safa' held such knowledge, in part acquired from her job as a community coordinator in the local Red Crescent organization, but also – and perhaps primarily – because of her own background and upbringing in the community. Due to her father's occupation as an accountant and her and her siblings' college degrees, the family as such could be characterized socioeconomically as belonging to the lower strata of the middle class. However, they lived in a lower class neighborhood Medīnat al-Salām, and Safa's mother, who was from an illiterate family, left school because she married and had her first child at 16 years of age. Therefore, for Safa' (and other volunteers with similar backgrounds), illiteracy and poverty were not alien, theoretical concepts, but instead were lived and experienced realities. This might be one of the reasons why they were much more critical towards the poor and their needs than I had initially expected from young college students and recent graduates. Safa' carefully and meticulously studied the situation of the poor families in order to determine whether or not they lived up to the criteria and regulations set by Resala: 'We discuss the aspects of their situation and whether they deserve (aid) according to regulations here.' Her main concern was providing material aid to those for whom the aid would help the most.

Thus, for Safa' to be 'deserving' was primarily a question of material need, and she emphasized giving as a way to support and develop the neediest families in a particular community and thus contribute to raising the overall standard of living of the place. In order to decide if a family 'deserved'



a loan, she assessed its financial and social situation, inquiring whether its members were willing to and capable of mobilizing the effort necessary for the loan to be used in an appropriate way. Her critical and development-informed approach to giving was based on formal criteria and procedures of assessment and evaluation, and she rarely displayed emotions of either concern or happiness in the encounter with the poor. Put differently, Safa' saw the beneficiary as a responsible person, capable of controlling his or her own development (Bornstein and Redfield, 2008).

Among volunteers as well as employees, Safa' was respected and recognized for her skills, knowledge and effort, and shortly after her entry into Resala, employees quickly entrusted her with tasks and responsibilities. Furthermore, as she described, she immediately felt the communal spirit and warmth among volunteers because of their common mission 'to give and only give.' For as she saw it, volunteering for the benefit of the needy is something obligatory for her as a Muslim: To me as a Muslim, I think volunteering is a duty and not something optional. Not doing any of this makes me feel useless, like I am not really letting out all my energy; it makes me feel like there are many things missing in me. So I feel that this is my place, and I have to do this. Even if I see disadvantages or flaws in the place, I still feel like I have to come, and I have to go and participate. Even if I stay away a little while without coming in order not to get bored from all the work I start feeling guilty. That's it.

The idea that volunteering in Resala is a duty or obligation towards God was common among volunteers in Resala. All volunteers that I talked to listed God's blessing (baraka), rewards (thawāb) and merits (ḥasanāt) as their primary motivation for coming to Resala. Like other volunteers, Safa' was a devoted Muslim. In her upbringing religion was important, and her parents had taught her the importance of praying, veiling and doing charity at an early age. Despite her religious upbringing, she and most other volunteers to whom I talked described her involvement in Resala in terms of a religious awakening. 'I am now more of a giver,' she stated, explaining to me how she does not care so much about looks and instead spends all her free time doing charity. Thus, Safa' shared with many other volunteers the story of her engagement in Resala as a story of personal development. This conception of involvement in Resala as an important personal turning point was even more pronounced in the case of Marwa described below.

### **Giving as Charity - The Case of Marwa**

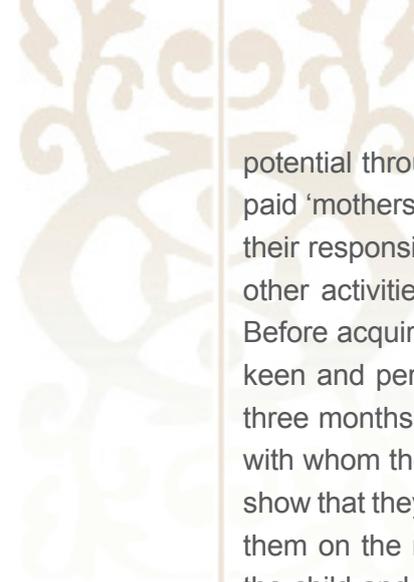
Compared to Safa', Marwa was from a more wealthy family. She and her three siblings were brought up in Heliopolis. They attended private schools, had annual memberships in one of Cairo's leisure clubs, and sometimes traveled abroad during vacations. But like Safa', she had a religious upbringing. Marwa's father started to teach her about Islam when she was three years old, and when she reached puberty, she started to veil, pray and fast. She always wore an 'abaya and a hijāb concealing her hair and neck, and she rarely used any make-up. Her parents also taught her the importance of doing charity and helping people in need, and she started volunteering in Resala when she was 22. When I met her, she was 24 years old and in her last year at 'Ain Shams University studying business administration in the English Department.

Marwa's first experience with Resala lasted for three months. At the suggestion of a friend she started giving extra-curricular lessons in English and Arabic to school children from poor families, but when their parents interfered in her teaching and tried to make her teach more

hours, she left: 'The families of the kids were not cooperative and understanding [of my situation]. I only had three days.' Almost a year later, her mother suggested to her that she go back to Resala. Marwa's mother had been volunteering in Resala's Big Brother/Big Sister project for several years, where she dealt especially with one of Resala's in-house orphans. At first, Marwa was not interested: 'I wanted to go out with my friends, go to the cinema, go to the club.' After a while, Marwa changed her mind and decided to go back to Resala: 'I was depressed anyway and I wanted to get out of the mood, so I went to Nawāl [an orphan girl] and studied with her.' According to Marwa, this was an important turning point in her life. This was when she realized that 'God created [her] for a reason,' and that she could 'make a difference' for others. She wanted to start focusing on developing her relationship with God. 'I'm fortunate to have everything, cars, family and can go to clubs, but some people don't have anything. [...] Our prophet, peace be upon him, told us to take special care of orphans, always help them and smile to them and never give them an angry face.' She started coming to the orphans' apartments in Resala on a regular basis. At first, she was shy and did not talk much to the other volunteers and employees, but as time passed their relationships grew increasingly intimate, and she became close friends with most of the volunteers and employees involved in the activities for the orphan children. 'It's amazing – I feel like it's my home,' noted Marwa.

As mentioned above, Resala also runs several orphanages. In Heliopolis, the fourth and fifth floors of the organization's building were divided into four separate apartments accommodating seventeen one to ten-year-old girls and boys, with two apartments for girls and two for boys. Each apartment had a reception area with soft chairs and sofas and bright colors on the walls. This was also the playing area and where volunteers and others would stay when they came to visit the children. The rest of the apartment was sealed off by a large sliding door. Dining room, bedrooms, kitchen and bathroom facilities were considered private territory for the children and their caretakers, and only close employees and volunteers were allowed to enter. Everything in the four apartments was spotlessly clean and in much better condition than the rest of the building. During the day, when the oldest children attended kindergarten or school, the apartments were quiet. The only people present were the children under four years of age and their employed 'mothers' who worked in shifts and were responsible for nursing and feeding the children day and night. From late afternoon till early evening, the apartments buzzed with life. On a usual day up to twenty volunteer 'brothers' and 'sisters' passed by to play or study with the children. They sat on the floor or in the couches holding the children or playing with them, while the 'mothers' prepared food and tidied up in the back of the apartment. The smallest children would play on the floor or cycle back and forth through the room on small plastic vehicles, and the older ones often watched cartoons or went upstairs to play football on the rooftop of the building. Usually, the spirit was high with an ear-shattering noise of volunteers' chatting and laughter blending with the television and the children's shouting and crying.

The activities related to the orphan children differed widely from Resala's other activities, in particular the aid provision for poor families described above. First of all, the relation between volunteer and child was more intimate. As the name Big Brother/Big Sister suggests, Resala aimed for the volunteers to establish a kinship-like relation to the children; in the words of Abdelazeem, they sought to 'help small children establish normal family relations where the volunteers are like the children's own brothers and sisters.' The primary inspiration to this project came from the Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, a US non-profit organization whose mission it is to help children reach their



potential through professionally supported, one-to-one relationships with mentors<sup>(17)</sup>. Whereas the paid ‘mothers’ were responsible for the nursing and feeding of the children, the volunteers saw it as their responsibility to develop the children socially, intellectually and spiritually. Furthermore, unlike other activities in Resala, there were restrictions as to who could become a ‘brother’ or ‘sister.’ Before acquiring this title, volunteers had to prove to the leadership that they were truly ‘interested, keen and persistent,’ as Abdelazeem described it. They underwent a probation period of at least three months in which they became familiar with the children and chose from among them a child with whom they wanted to build a close relationship. After this, they took a written exam in order to show that they ‘understood the system,’ and finally they attended a speech by Abdelazeem, lecturing them on the responsibilities of their commitment and the severe consequences it would have for the child and themselves if they were to break the commitment. He told them: ‘Either you are with the child for your entire life or you abandon him now.’ Religious references about sins and hell were mixed with stories about children who suffered from depression and fear of commitment after having been abandoned by a brother or a sister: ‘We fear God and are aware that God sees us and that this child would take us to either paradise or hell.’

This strict training and selection process combined with the kinship terminology was unique to the Big Brother/Big Sister program. It contributed to a feeling among these volunteers that they were chosen; they were the ones who ‘passed’ the probation period and the exam and who decided to engage in a life-long commitment to a child. Furthermore, compared to the paid ‘mothers,’ the volunteers considered themselves to be intellectually and morally superior. They were responsible for the children’s development as opposed to the ‘mothers’ who would ‘only’ take care of practical tasks related to the children’s daily life. I often overheard volunteers talking about the bad influence of the ‘mothers’ or how the volunteers had to ‘spread awareness’ among them.

Marwa came to Resala at least three times each week to visit and study with Nawāl, and nearly every weekend and during holidays Nawāl would come home with Marwa or they would go with Marwa’s family to the club or to visit relatives. In accordance with Resala’s policy, Marwa always referred to Nawāl as ‘my sister, Nawāl,’ and often pointed out that Nawāl, ‘was a life-time commitment.’ Furthermore, Marwa was, together with a few other volunteers, in charge of the religious education of the orphan children in the Heliopolis branch. Through speeches, games and exercises, they introduced the children to the Quran, religious rituals and the life of the prophet. According to Marwa, it was important for her that the children learned how to distinguish right from wrong the same way as she did during her own upbringing: ‘When I was 4 or 5, my father used to tell me: ‘Allah likes this and Allah hates that,’ and he used to talk about heaven all the time, not hell, but always heaven.’ Marwa enjoyed the educational activities very much, and she dreamt about working as a kindergarten teacher after her graduation.

In sum, Marwa considered herself to be a role model for the children, and she saw it as her primary role to educate and raise Nawāl and the other children to be knowledgeable, responsible and moral persons capable of supporting themselves. Thus, drawing primarily on a morally and religiously informed discourse, Marwa strived to achieve an intimate and compassionate relation to the children, a relation which somehow differed from Safa’s more bureaucratic and technical approach to the poor families. However, both talked about providing their clients with the means – intellectually, emotionally or economically – to support themselves in the future. Interestingly, when talking about poor people in the street, Marwa would display what seemed to be a very

different approach to poverty, centering on the provision of more immediate assistance:

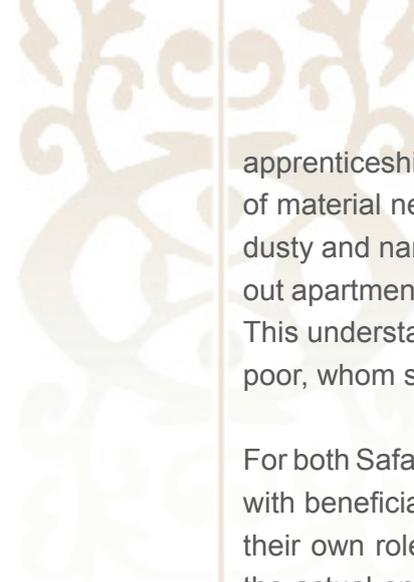
Once, I ate a sandwich but did not finish it, so I wrapped the remaining part and put it in my bag. Then, on my way home, I saw a poor man, and I asked him: 'Are you hungry?' He said: 'Yes'. So I told him, 'Please take my sandwich.' I love doing charity work!

At first sight, there are few similarities between the practice of handing out leftovers of a sandwich to a poor unknown beggar in the street and that of working towards improving the skills and morals of orphan children. However, both reflect an understanding of the poor as someone who is not responsible for the condition of his or her suffering. For Marwa, the financial details of the poor were of less importance; she assumed the orphans and the man in the street to be 'deserving'. Furthermore, compared to Safa', Marwa made use of a more emotional language, and her approach leaned more towards an understanding of giving as alms in return for gratitude: 'What makes me happy is to see them smile and laugh because of something I did.' Both Safa' and Marwa wanted to help out of solidarity with the poor whom they talked about as fellow human beings or citizens. They considered volunteering in Resala a duty or obligation towards God and the nation. But the way Marwa talked about and treated the poor sometimes had a patronizing ring to it, resulting in a relation of hierarchy and inequality because she expected reward as gratitude from the poor as much as God's rewards and blessings. Put differently, her and some of the other volunteers' understanding of the poor as a recipient of charity can be conceptualized within the morally informed framework of 'sympathetic equilibrium,' where empathy towards the sufferer is closely connected to the benefactor's expectation of the sufferer's gratitude (Boltanski, 1999; Chouriaraki, 2010).

## **Egypt, Resala and the Gift of Volunteering**

As the two cases illustrate, the actual encounter with the poor beneficiaries within the institutional framework of Resala is of great importance to the formation of volunteer subject. The materiality of the places, the vocabulary applied, the activity procedures, and the bodily practices before, during and after the actual encounter all contribute to their knowledge and experience of how to engage with and understand the poor/needful and poverty/need within a larger social context. For Marwa and the other volunteers in the Big Brother/Big Sister activity, Abdelazeem's speeches as well as the various guidelines for interaction with the orphan children provided them with a vocabulary for how to talk with and about the children and how to relate to them socially and emotionally. Abdelazeem described a kind of 'formalized' kinship relation, which served as a structure to allow the volunteer and child to develop more intimate and spontaneous interactions. The physical environment supported this approach. At first sight, the spacious, clean and well-furnished apartments of the orphanage looked like an Egyptian middle class home. But the lack of family portraits, books or personal ornaments contributed to the institutionalized character of the place, as did the fact that half of the apartment was open to donors and whoever wished to pay the children a visit.

In the case of Safa' and the other volunteers who participated in the aid program, the various forms and surveys provided them with a specific vocabulary for how to talk about poverty and need in families as well as how to interpret the various criteria for evaluating the families' situations. This particular vocabulary, passed on from experienced to new volunteers through what I have called an



apprenticeship approach reflects a critical and rational conception of poverty as a matter primarily of material need. Again, this approach seemed in accordance with the physical environment: the dusty and narrow garbage filled streets in lower class neighborhoods and the cramped and worn-out apartments of the poor families immediately led one to consider the lack of material resources. This understanding is reflected in the way Safa' approached and talked about the situation of the poor, whom she evaluated primarily on the basis of material need.

For both Safa' and Marwa, their involvement in Resala and the possibility of meeting and interacting with beneficiaries provided them with the opportunity to reflect upon the situation of the poor and their own role as actors within the larger framework of Egyptian society. Put differently, through the actual encounter, an otherwise abstract ideal of giving was embodied and routinized and as such easier to relate to. Safa' and Marwa shared the imaginary about an imperfect society that can be improved through their own voluntary acts of giving. However, how they sought to realize that imaginary varied. For Safa', it was a question of creating sustainable income possibilities for needy families, while Marwa concentrated on providing the orphan children with means – socially, morally and intellectually – to get on in the world despite their unfortunate situation. Thus, as the two cases also show, their particular understandings of need and the poor are formed in the interplay between their personal backgrounds and previous encounters with poverty, on the one hand, and methods and procedures acquired in Resala, on the other. In other words, their diverse life experiences and family backgrounds together with differences in the learning processes between the evaluations of applications for aid and the Big Brother/Big Sister activity allowed for variations in their approaches and practices.

The variations in conceptions of giving and the relation between giver and recipient also showed in the approaches of Marwa and Safa' toward volunteering and to Resala as a whole, revealing something about how the young people saw themselves and their role as active participants in society. They both considered voluntary work for the benefit of the poor as a religious and national duty, and to them Resala offered the possibility of concrete intervention. However, how they understood and practiced this intervention differed. Marwa preferred the warm, personalized relationship with the orphans rather than the more transient encounters with poor families. She did not talk about poverty as a structural problem, requiring initiatives aimed at long-term development of poor communities, but emphasized Islamic values and morality and saw herself as a role model to and educator of younger generations who did not grow up learning about such values and morals. Safa', on the other hand, talked less about values and morals. Based on an understanding of development as economic growth, she measured poverty in terms of material need and (lack of) individual resources, finding the solution to poverty in long-term development activities such as the micro-finance projects she had been engaged in. She was critical towards the idea of giving as short-term relief, and in her opinion the management made the volunteers think too much of themselves and their effort. Unlike Marwa, she did not agree that giving a man a sandwich is equal to doing charity.

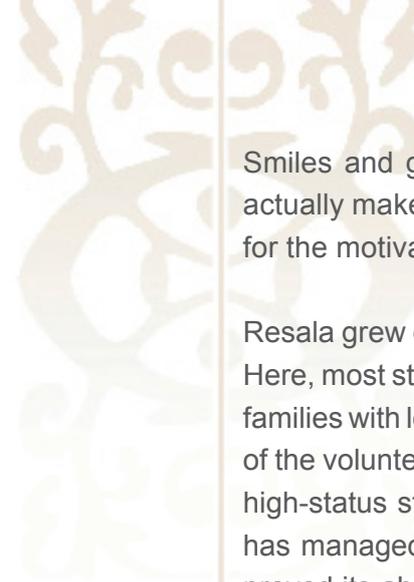
Furthermore, Safa' openly questioned the amount of money spent on the volunteers in Resala. She did not understand why large amounts of money had to be spent on transport and accommodation in order to make campaigns for volunteers as far away as Aswān or Sīwa.<sup>(18)</sup> Instead, she wanted Resala to allocate more money to the micro-finance projects in order to secure life-long earnings for more poor beneficiaries and contribute to the development of the local communities. In her

view, a 1000-pound loan did not change much for a family. In fact, according to her most of the projects ended up as failures. This was in 2010. When I returned to Resala in December 2011, Safa' was no longer there. I called her and asked her why she left Resala. This is what she said: You can say that I got bored or I felt that I am not in the right place. I am not making the effect that I expected. In my opinion, Resala made many people lazy, and it made them become like beggars who don't want to work and just wait for a temporary aid. Resala has a lot of money, but it is not well used. Funds are not well employed in the right place. In Resala, they have to reorganize and think of new activities that will raise the standards of living of the poor families instead of just giving them some aid which does not make a noticeable effect. Another reason is that Resala had many volunteers, many young people and teenagers who had the motivation to reform society and make it better and benefit their country, but they didn't find a noticeable effect or maybe they found other fields of charity or other work through which they think they can work better for the good of the country. I think that the people in charge must work on new plans and new ideas in order to make an effect in society more than before.

Safa' became disillusioned with regard to the effect Resala and the volunteers had on Egyptian society, in particular within poor communities. She told the management about her concerns, but as she put it, few of them shared her vision. So she left. Instead, she entered another organization focusing more on the sustainable development of local communities. Although Safa' enjoyed being with the other volunteers working for the sake of people in need, it was not enough to keep her in Resala. She wanted to see real long-term changes for the people in the poor communities. Marwa, on the other hand, was still there with her group of friends. They were personally committed to their 'sisters' and 'brothers.' Furthermore, for Marwa Resala was about social belonging and personal development more than it was for Safa'. And in this, the organization did not disappoint – in fact, as mentioned above Marwa considered Resala as her other 'home,' and it came to be her primary place for socialization and public participation.

## **Conclusion: Giving, Voluntarism and an Emerging Imaginary of Egypt**

Initiatives like Resala present to young Egyptians ambitious ideals and visions for the individual and the society; ideals and visions which together with the participants' reinterpretation of their sociocultural heritage foster a new consciousness of themselves and their role in society. As the two cases illustrate, participants share the imaginary about an imperfect society that can be improved through their voluntary effort. However, as the stories of the two volunteers also exemplify, there is an ongoing negotiation of aims and visions found in Resala. These differences are partly rooted in the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of the volunteers, but also the learning processes related to the specific activities influence the volunteers' understandings. While the leadership's primary aim is to instill a culture of giving among Egyptian youth, some volunteers expect the organization to focus more on the actual aid to the poor, often inspired by mainstream development approaches to poverty reduction. But Resala prioritizes immediate impulses of social responsibility, solidarity and activism over formalized and professionalized assistance, distinguishing the organization from the world of professional development NGOs (Challand, 2011). In this perspective, emotionally rewarding activities like aid distribution trips and the Big Brother/Big Sister project are more suitable than the preceding investigative work distinguishing 'needy' from 'just poor.' While the latter require volunteers to critically evaluate the conditions of specific families and decide who deserves aid, the former excite and motivate them.



Smiles and grateful expressions of the poor make the young people feel as though they can actually make a difference in the lives of Egypt's less fortunate, and this experience is necessary for the motivation of the volunteers and for assuring their continued participation in society.

Resala grew out of a student initiative at the prestigious Faculty of Engineering at Cairo University. Here, most students are from the upper strata of the middle class and they are raised in resourceful families with long traditions of higher education. During Resala's first years in operation, the majority of the volunteers were of similar backgrounds with the majority being students and graduates from high-status studies such as medicine, engineering and pharmacy. But recently, the organization has managed to reach out to young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and it has proved its ability to accommodate a large and rather heterogeneous group of young people. The cases above illustrate this. In addition, the case of Safa' illustrates how some volunteers have used Resala as a springboard to engage in other kinds of activism, within or outside formal politics. <sup>(19)</sup>Hence, another way to understand Resala, including its internal dynamics and ambiguities, is to focus on the role of youth within the conceptual framework of social generations, in which youth occupy an important position in movements for political change (Mannheim, 1952 [1927]).

Resala is part of a larger movement in civil society initiated by young middle class Egyptians aimed at assisting Egypt's poor and contributing to the development of society. This movement has various manifestations, but overall it bears witness to a shared vision of engagement and change among large parts of the young generation of Egyptians. One of the most important consequences of youth initiatives like Resala is that it has contributed to a growing consciousness among young Egyptians that they as young people have the choice and the possibility to give something to society. It was not Resala volunteers who called for protest on January 25th or even stood there at Tahrir on the first day of the demonstrations. But quickly they were convinced of the possibilities of actually changing the political scene in Egypt. Learning about poverty, need and social responsibility as well as engaging in activities involving encounters and interaction with poor fellow citizens had equipped them with a new knowledge and understanding of Egyptian society, including a belief in the possibility of a better future. In other words, it is not a question of whom or what sparked the revolution but how an imaginary of conceivable possibilities within the framework of Egyptian society could emerge and how it was and will continue to be allowed a space both inside and outside of Resala.

## End Notes

1. Resala also runs a hospital, a primary school and several second-hand clothes stores.
2. The primary fieldwork was carried out from October 2009 to July 2010. I have, however, followed the organization since 2007.
3. Translated from Arabic [jama'iyat risāla li-l-'a'amāl al-kheir – muta'at al-'atā']
4. For more studies Islam, charity and civil society, please see Clark (2004), Deeb (2006) and Hafez (2011).
5. For further information on other Egyptian youth organizations, see Sparre and Petersen (2007a, 2007b), Atia (2009, 2011) and Ibrahim (2009).
6. The eight Cairo branches are in Haram, Muhandisīn, Ma'adī, Heliopolis, Medīnat Naṣr, Medīnat Sittat 'Uktūbar, Helwān and Moqaṭṭam.
7. While volunteers are the ones who deal with beneficiaries and provide them with the food, clothes or services, employees are responsible for the overall planning and administration of activities.
8. To this should be added various in-kind donations, of which some are sold and thus converted to financial resources. In 2011, Resala Heliopolis was the largest branch in terms of the number of donors and the areas covered.
9. This was also the topic of a specific ethics course taught by Abdelazeem at Cairo University.
10. Furthermore, the Arabic term risāla is closely linked to the idea of a revelation of messages from the prophet Mohammed and thus associated with the Islamic tradition.
11. Translated from Arabic [jama'iyat risala li-l-'a'amāl al-kheir – muta'at al-'atā']
12. Safa' is not her real name. Except from Dr. Sherif Abdelazeem, all other names in this article are pseudonyms.
13. For insight into the historical background of poor-relief and developments of practices and policies toward the poor in Egypt, please see Ener (2003).
14. Compared to more traditional Islamic NGOs, Resala assists their beneficiaries in the poor neighborhoods instead of having the poor come to them. Resala is, in the words of Atia (2011), 'mobile'.
15. 2,000 Egyptian pounds is equivalent to approximately 250 Euro.
16. Later, she did however ask me if I thought that she was too hard on the woman.
17. However, according to Resala's leadership they had to make a few adjustments in order to make to system correspond with Islamic shar'ā. For example, if a female volunteer wants to become a 'big sister' of a boy, he is officially a 'cousin' and not a brother because certain rules of segregation have to persist.
18. Every year, Resala arranges several aid distribution campaigns to far-away places like Aswān in Upper Egypt and Sīwa close to the Egyptian-Libyan border.
19. After the revolution, I furthermore have examples of Resala volunteers who started involving themselves in formal politics (such as parliamentary and presidential campaigns) and/or organized political oppositional activism (such as protest groups).

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