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## The Right Time For Change Waits On Collaborative Frameworks

*Iman Bibars was honored as an Ashoka ChangemakeHER, Changemakers's inaugural celebration of the world's most influential and inspiring women. Find her fellow honorees' voices [here](#) [1].*



**by Iman Bibars, Leadership Group Member, Ashoka Vice President and the Regional Director of Ashoka Arab World**

Collaboration is the key to making large-scale and profound change. At Ashoka we have something called collaborative platforms. We bring together people working in the same field who can complement each other. We start by bringing Ashoka fellows together and then we expand out. We want to include everyone working in a particular sector.

This is one way we are advancing the idea of “Everyone a Changemaker.” Collaboration is how we will achieve that vision.

Right now in Egypt, we have collaborative platforms in housing, disability rights, and education. And we are bringing together as many innovators working in each of these sectors as possible. But that’s just the beginning.

To encourage and advance collaboration, you cannot just make an introduction. You can’t simply say to a social innovator, “You know, I want to put you in touch with someone else doing great things in your field. I think you could really help each other achieve your goals.” That won’t work.

Instead, we enable them. And it’s a process. I spend time with them, and observe them. And I write up a treatment of their program. I identify the element of their work that will complement the other efforts in the field.

And I ask each of them, “What is it that separates you, that makes your work unique?” I then document their unique idea, put it down on paper with their name on it, and copywrite it, so they have ownership of that idea.

Because they are entrepreneurs, the ownership of their idea is very important to them. And if you start talking about collaborating, you need to assure them that their idea – what makes their work unique – remains their own. People want to work together and they are certainly not selfish, but you do have to convince them that, “yes, there is something in this for you.”

Then I begin putting together these people that complement one another.

And this way, when they come together for the first time, the framework is there for them to begin collaborating right away and in a very effective way. They each present that unique idea – that’s been documented as their own – and the others comment on it.

We’ve all been to meetings where it’s a very open-ended discussion, and a lot of “blah, blah, blah.” Because social innovators are so bright and so quick, and have so many ideas, there is a risk of that. You don’t want that. Nothing will happen if you don’t give them a framework for collaboration.

Another way I shape that framework is to have them work together to choose one significant goal, as a group, per year. They all have many things they want to achieve individually, but if they choose one main goal as a group, they will have a big impact for their entire sector.

So, for example, with our collaborative platform on disability, the group has chosen an ambitious plan to significantly strengthen a key law regarding

the employment of people with disabilities. This gives them a focus, which as a group they are both passionate about and well equipped to achieve.

Part of that is because collaboration also results in much more powerful lobbying. If each person working in the sector is lobbying on his or her own and bringing two or three advocates to a meeting, of course that's not going to work. But when they collaborate – when large groups of activists are lobbying together – that's how they change the sector. That's how they change the world.

The main thing that prevents collaboration, without question, is time. If I say to someone, "You've got a great project. I know some other people working on the same goal and I think you should work together," most people will say, "great!" and then nothing happens.

This is especially true for women. Women don't have the time. They have a job and a husband and kids.

So if you want to foster collaboration, you have to lay the groundwork: creating a framework, doing the work ahead of time that will make their collaboration effective, being an enabler.

Once you enable them, they immediately see the value of collaboration and it takes off on its own, very quickly.

And we women business owners, activists, and social entrepreneurs in Egypt, who are older, are mentoring the younger women, training them, visiting with them so that they are not afraid. We tell them: if men can, they can.

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*Iman Bibars [2] of Egypt is a globally revered veteran social entrepreneur, women's rights activist, and an [Ashoka Vice President](#) [3] and Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa. Her passionate mentorship of fellow social innovators ranges from one-on-one guidance for young activists to the spearheading of widespread collaboration across entire sectors. Here she shares her insights about how to initiate and nurture powerful, systems-changing collaborations.*

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