

Empowering Entrepreneurs

Youth unemployment in the MENA region is in a state of crisis. Turning peril into promise, the Mowgli Foundation, an entrepreneurial mentoring network led by CEO Helen Al Uzaizi, is equipping young people with 21st century business skills and the power to master their own destinies.

By Nina Glinski

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In the cold reality of today's world, earning a traditional higher education degree no longer guarantees employment. As job markets dwindle with little sign of early recovery, popularity of entrepreneurial initiatives throughout the Middle East and North Africa is surging despite regulatory conditions which are perceived as unsavory at best in some cases. Those seeking evidence of the start-up surge need only to look at the spread of entrepreneur-centric companies emerging on the scene to meet the growing needs of entrepreneurial hopefuls. The Mowgli Foundation, a nonprofit mentorship organization recognized as "Best Mentor Network in the Arab World" at the 2012 *Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Awards for Young Business Leaders*, which is held annually in Dubai, serves as a prime example. For Mowgli's chief executive officer, Helen Al Uzaizi, tackling a global crisis and setting entrepreneurs on the path to success is all in



Helen Al Uzaizi, Chief Executive Officer of the Mowgli Foundation, has made community empowerment the focus of her career.

a day's work. In providing inspirational and supportive mentors to budding entrepreneurs in the UK and MENA region, Mowgli is not only empowering ambitious individuals to achieve their potential, but is also encouraging sustainable job creation as well as social and economic development for a brighter future.

Commenting on the motivation behind Mowgli's establishment, Al Uzaizi explains, "The need for a neutral, objective, experienced and supportive mentor outside of the family realm was evident." While the nonprofit company's headquarters are in London, the CEO and her team operate out of Dubai—confirmation of the organization's core focus on the MENA region. With programs in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Qatar, Algeria and the UK, and an alumni network 540 members strong, the nonprofit's mission is widespread, but Mowgli is by no means alone. Promising entrepreneurs have a host of resources at their disposal, from early stage and seed investment companies such as Oasis 500 and SeedStartup, to education program providers like Bon Education, and business incubation venues including Make Business Hub in Dubai.

Mowgli has carved its niche solely as a mentorship matchmaker, its name-sake being the precocious jungle orphan who was guided by animal mentors in the ways of the wild in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. "The secret kernel of Mowgli's success is in having realized that without engaging passionate and seasoned mentors one can hardly add any meaningful value to the journey of entrepreneurs and mentees," reflects Ali Borhani, a veteran Mowgli mentor, and Founder and Chief Welding Officer of Incubeemea, a boutique strategic advisory firm based in Dubai. He adds, "Mowgli is light years ahead of other programs...The most amazing element perhaps is the seemingly serendipitous but thoroughly thought over and well analyzed methodology of matching mentors and mentees."

Having a mentor is not a complementary need for entrepreneurs, it is essential for their success

Al Uzaizi joined the Mowgli family as CEO in June 2012 from the Jordan River Foundation, an Amman-based nonprofit organization focused on the rights of women and children as well as community empowerment, where she served as the international relations and fundraising manager. The CEO who was formerly an advertising executive with agencies such as Wunderman, Young & Rubicam and Saatchi & Saatchi, first realized her ability to affect positive change through agency-sponsored community activities. "The rewarding feeling I had every time we engaged with the beneficiaries and saw the positive impact our work had on their development made it clear that there was a chance to be a direct part of that change," she explains.

Her new endeavor is no small undertaking. Examining the youth unemployment contagion on a global scale, the figures are disturbing: 75 million young people are jobless, a jump of four million since 2007. Of those, six million have abandoned hope and admit they aren't seeking work, according to the International Labour Organization. Considering the Middle East and North Africa's ignominious claim to the title of highest rate of youth unemployment in the world for ten years running, this year at 26.4%, and the fact that half of the region's population is under the age of 25, Mowgli has no shortage of interested mentees. "Young entrepreneurs are reaching out more than ever...The demand is far exceeding our expectations. We have focused our efforts over the past year on increasing our capacity," says Al Uzaizi intently.

The dismal outlook for youth employment may directly translate to an

increased desire to be self-made, reflective of a disillusionment with the structure of livelihoods that held water for past generations and pre-crisis economies, yet which are now failing the region's youth. A recent Gallup poll reported that 15% of young Arabs want to start a business in the next 12 months, compared to just 4% of those surveyed in the U.S. and Europe. Youths and adults alike are turning towards entrepreneurship as an avenue to escape unemployment, or sub-standard employment.

In an environment where young people need to be cultivated to flourish, mentorship networks offering entrepreneurial education are stepping in to fill the educational gap. Since its launch in 2008, Mowgli has conducted 27 keystone Mowgli Mentoring Experience (MME) programs and three micro-entrepreneur-focused mentoring programs across eight countries. Combined, these programs have matched 250 mentors with 220 startup and growth-phase companies, as well as 30 micro-entrepreneurs. "Having a mentor is not a complementary need for entrepreneurs, it is essential for their success. And when I say mentor, I mean someone who is always there to tell you what you need to hear—not what you want to hear," says Ala Suleiman, a businessman who combined the knowledge gleaned from his Mowgli relationship with seed funding from Oasis 500 to launch his ambitious Jordanian business, Masmoo3, the Arab world's first specialized digital audio books production and publishing house.

The impetus for entrepreneurial education has gripped governments too. The Arab Spring reflected the social and economic consequences of a frustrated and disenfranchised youth. Instead of educating a generation of students for a workplace that may be out of reach or simply non-existent, the agenda for entrepreneurial education has come into prominence as government policy to provide the region's youth with the tools necessary to succeed in business. At the 2012 Global Entrepreneurship Summit



The Mowgli Foundation uses networking sessions to carefully match successful business people with aspiring entrepreneurs in the UK and the Arab world.

(GES), hosted in Dubai in December 2012, expert panelists and policy-makers conjured up plans and signed Memorandums of Understanding, acknowledging the World Bank's analysis that 100 million jobs need to be created in Arab nations by 2020 in order to sustain economic growth.

"All of us in the Arab world have to encourage the role of young people in the business sector, and we have to realize that this generation is capable of launching projects that would change economic and social spectra in the Arab world," remarks H.E. Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Foreign Minister of the UAE, speaking from the U.S.-Arab Chamber following the GES. "We must support and promote advanced policies, stimulate the role of the youth, and facilitate involvement in economic and investment affairs to achieve their dreams and aspirations," he adds.

Realizing that while it may be convenient to place graduates in high-paying government jobs, or to mandate their unqualified integration into corporations, open-minded governments are beginning to perceive such a strategy as unsustainable in the long-term.

The implementation of entrepreneurial

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initiatives are indicative of a new understanding that limited and arguably superficial engagement with the economy is a short-term solution and does not bode well for the region's future in global competitiveness. Still, there's a long way to go. The World Bank-IFC sums the region thusly in its 2013 *Doing Business* report, "The region suffers from a crisis of governance and trust: businesses do not trust officials, and officials do not trust businesses."

Trust notwithstanding, the World Bank estimates about 12 million small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are currently present in the MENA region. A yardstick for entrepreneurial activity, SMEs represent a whopping 95% of the region's private sector. Leading the way with the most number of startups is

Saudi Arabia, which ranked first among MENA countries and 22nd overall in the *Doing Business* 2013 report, (closely followed by the UAE) and was notable as one of the ten most improved countries since 2005, making marked progress in the ease of starting a business. Still, the World Bank-IFC qualifies this progress, "Although economies in the region have made some strides in reducing the complexity and cost of regulatory processes, entrepreneurs across the region still contend with weak investor and property rights protections."

MENA's young people, empowered by their proven success in driving global discourse and change, and disillusioned by a fledgling global economy, are more ambitious than ever. A rising tide of entrepreneurial culture supported by governments and fostered by organizations like the Mowgli Foundation will help them to autonomously shape their destinies, and likewise the future of the region.

Perhaps H.M. Queen Rania Abdullah of Jordan said it best during a plenary session of the World Economic Forum in October 2011: "The skills of an entrepreneur are the skills of the 21st century worker."