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Self Organizations

Tips & Tricks for
Working Together

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Mophradat

Read the Room #3

Self Organizations: Tips & Tricks for Working Together

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Foreword

One of our interests at Mophradat is interrogating ways of working together, the tools and resources available, and how those shape and transform what we do as organizations, collectives, informal collaborators, and communities. From its beginnings in March 2020, it was evident that the COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing lockdowns and travel restrictions would require new understandings of artists' sociability, exchanges, and ways of practicing. Mophradat's Self Organizations program, launched in June 2020, was developed in response to these very specific conditions to help counter isolation, provide a way for groups of artists to pool resources and know-how, and make room for new bespoke ways of working together based on sharing, enthusiasm, and affinity. Moreover, Mophradat wanted to encourage exchanges and experiments around issues such as hierarchical structures, institutional responsibilities, resource management, informal economies, and more. Following three editions of the program, this booklet has been put together to serve as a toolbox of suggestions and advice on how to work together for prospective Self Organizations applicants and participants. More broadly, it is an account of and a reflection on benefits, pitfalls, and strategies of collaboration.

The booklet, written by Daniel O'Connell, Jenifer Evans, and Krystel Khoury, is based on interviews with participants of the program across its three past editions. By listening to their experiences, Daniel interrogates the conditions, practical and theoretical, that give the program its relevance today, Jenifer distills an amplitude of useful insights on collaborating, and Krystel gathers reflections on the program that may be fruitful for future self-organizers. The Self Organizations program has been one of the most exciting learning processes for our organization because it actively challenges our institutional assumptions and understanding of our role. As you will read in this booklet, participants have likewise described the rewards of experimenting and taking risks together, but also of accepting and dealing with obstacles, misunderstandings, and failures. The commitment and energy of these groups is also a testimony to the vast range of possibilities being explored and realized, despite the hurdles and difficulties they face, individually and collectively. And it is a joyful reminder that much is still being done.

Karim Kattan & Mai Abu ElDahab



Something can be done

**Introductory thoughts
by Daniel O'Connell**

Sometimes it is whispered in an elevator, leaving a posh apartment complex, or sometimes it can be found in a self-proclaimed progressive online magazine, masquerading as quasi-political realism, the hardboiled truth. But really it is just a veneer for class panic as old as the state-building project itself: “You know that you should never step out of line again, because, well, you know what happens to those who step out of line...” Come close to let me speak it into your ear, just to make sure we both know what I mean: In our present moment, there is nothing that can be done. It’s an overarching sentiment that stays the same no matter where you are.

In this post-73, post-Oslo, post-89 moment, in the Anthropocene-inflected Global South there is little hope for survival from the coming calamity. They say everything will be fine and smile a toothless lie. And while the crisis in neoliberalism seemed to put historical change back on the table, the revolutions of the early 2010s seemed to give way to a series of reactionary restitutions and credit-rating authoritarianisms.¹ So, what is to be done? Many are outflanked, defeated, and fatigued. Institutions, where they exist, are subject to state violence, deemed terrorist organizations, subject to chronic underfunding or slow bureaucratic death. And even if you had some whimsy, some misguided idea to do “something,” decades of decimation have rendered the concept and practice of political mobilization an all too real meme: Let us move into a future on a sudden subduction, absent any of the material infrastructure to produce our desired futuristic vision.

Is this really all we have, though? Is the space of organization really beset by failure told in advance? Or has this become an overdetermined narrative we tell ourselves? What does it mean to try to do “something” today, to come together

amid admittedly stultifying conditions? In a context where artists and cultural practitioners in the Arab world are often faced with declinist discourses, due to the real effects of uneven development patterns, state violence, and haphazard and precarious institution building, Mophradat launched a program to encourage self-organizing initiatives. Titled Self Organizations, it has had three rounds since it launched in 2020. To paraphrase its cited goals, the program creates

opportunities for practitioners to think through and actualize alternatives to the truism that “nothing can be done.” A key part of Self Organizations has been ensuring a bottom-up approach to the creation of opportunities. Said differently, the program is shot through by an awareness that the exigencies and responses to such



exigencies that obtain in any number of contexts far exceed the ability of any organization to index them exhaustively. A proscriptive approach to self-organizing would therefore not only run against the spirit of the term but would lead to a processing limit. Instead, the guiding ethos of the program has been to set loose parameters in the calls for applications to give room for groups to form and actualize any modality of project. These groups were formed to define and organize around a common need, to craft a protocol for collaboration, to create new art experiences, and more.²

In the summer of 2021, I spoke with some of the groups that have participated in the program in an attempt to understand what questions the practice of self-organizing, as they are doing it, is putting on the table in our current historical moment in the various geographic contexts where they are organizing. These practices point to a potential counterweight to the dream for things solid and well-formed. They occupy a messier space, they are aware that their mode of historical agency may have to grasp at productive failure. These projects take up, each in their respective way, the contingencies of the present moment, not only as a given precarity, although that is clearly there, but as a vehicle of learning how one can dwell, what one can be in a yet-to-be formed community. Sure, there are risks in providing such a wide definitional berth to the term self-organization, as it can also become a neoliberal buzzword: self-organization as a kind of participatory fetish to deflect criticism of harm done, or self-participation as a kind of devolution of power beyond classical state form open to capture by private enterprise. The beauty of this program is its realization that self-organizing is a protean thing. Self-organization can be the occupation of a space, as a group of artists planned to do with a late artist’s ceramics workshop. It can be the creation of a space, whether in person or virtual, as is the case with groups that created recording studios, film distribution avenues, animation studios, or online vocational databases for artist opportunities. It can be a small-scale, site-specific dance performances in the homes of a Cairo suburb, an experiment in living with other people’s families in Morocco, a research group cataloguing histories of violence in Tunisia, a dark room in Palestine, or a cultural magazine in a refugee camp in Lebanon.

Part of the success and space for potential development of an initiative that wants to support self-organization centers on the tension between intervention and withdrawal.³ Some groups also faltered in their early stages, trying to understand their process, implement it, refine the central stakes of their coming together. This self-discovery process is not external to the practice of self-organizing. In fact, it may be the most cogent definitional feature of the process. In each of the conversations I had, which took place in relatively early stages of the projects, there was a sense that the mere act of creating a space to talk about the project together for the writing of this text had been a productive event to prompt reflection. Several groups thanked me, not only out of propriety, but for providing an occasion for them to think through their processes aloud. Can self-organizing become more dialogic without intervening in its natural process of self-incarnation? It is a tenuous balance, but I think explication beyond the genre of grant writing and compliance checks will only add to the experimentation.

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Further, many of the groups were more interested in knowing what their peers in other contexts were doing.⁴ The creation of further feedback loops within the system will do less to contaminate experimentation and more to create greater clarity around the tools and roles each collective is crafting. Many also spoke of the financing provided. There was a divergence between projects that thought of their operations through the prism of low-scale economies and those that approached Mophradat as one organization from which to extract funds in a broader funding cycle. These projects usually differed in the definiteness of their aims. One group, for example, has laid down an infrastructure that will require further funding sources in order to keep the project alive. Another shifted their approach to self-organizing in relation to the funds they would have access to, thus approaching the initiative in a lighter and more experimental way. Both initiatives have value, but tighter scoping and trying to think how to break with funding expectations may promote greater experimentation, if that is a chief aim of the program. These initiatives and the aim to support them suggest that, despite declinist discourses, something in fact is being done. It might

not be what we have been conditioned to expect: permeance, an elsewhere, a success, an overturning of the status quo. It might not be the formation of something like dual power, an autonomous zone, x-nondescript form of emancipation. But there are exigencies all around these practitioners that they respond to in order to bear witness, to care, to commune. The question is thus not so much whether anything is being done but how we align our expectations with what is being afforded by our historical moment.

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Footnotes

1 "A credit-rating authoritarianism shares a lot of institutional features with bureaucratic authoritarian regimes but repression is oriented toward the preservation of macroeconomic stability for the continued access to foreign borrowing on international markets," Amr Adly has written, citing the work of Candace Archer, Glen Biglaiser, and Karl DeRouen. Amr Adly, "Authoritarian restitution in bad economic times: Egypt and the crisis of global neoliberalism," *Geoforum* 124 (August 2021): 290–99.

2 The program encouraged the development of projects across four different categories as follows: Informal Coops – considers how the common need of a few individuals can be better served if addressed as a group; Private Audiences – helps practitioners continue engaging with audiences where public venues are

lacking; Topical Assemblies – helps gain access to specialized knowledge where educational infrastructure is lacking; and Your Ideas – project types that were not considered as the program was being developed.

3 Many of the groups I interviewed expressed a certain gratitude that there was such a willingness to support their ideas, their projects with such little intervention, a rarity in the song and dance of art-funding practices, where proving that one is "using" the money well is a hallmark.

4 If occasions for reflection cannot be structured as a central element of the program, I wonder whether collectives can be paired as sister-collectives that will serve peer-to-peer exchanges.

Tryouts

If you have not worked together before, is it worth doing something small together as a trial? Even just moving furniture around in a house, cooking a meal, making a PowerPoint presentation, or engaging in “creative exercises” drawn up by others in the past. Some people said that their collaborative experience within Self Organizations constituted a starting point, an initial experiment in learning to work together which might be built on in different ways.

Talking vs. acting

If you want to achieve something beyond talking, don’t spend all your time talking. The doing is almost always more revealing than the planning, but this is especially the case when reality is constantly shifting and liable to throw up nasty surprises, like societal misogyny manifesting in unforeseen ways, government policy prompting protests that cut off your exhibition space from any kind of public just before the opening, a difficult landlord, or unexpected illness. Encountering the difficulties of doing something can be more generative than speaking about it, but not speaking about something at all in advance – not thinking it through with the others – can mean that the practice falls apart, overwhelmed by the questions cropping up about why it’s being undertaken in the first place.

Some Self Organizations groups found that their discussions were great, but when it came to actually doing the thing together, it was more difficult – one realized that after all that, they wanted different things from the project and their desires were irreconcilable. At the beginning of a collaboration, in order to give it the best chance of working out, you might feel compelled to behave as if you have more in common with your collaborators, but that is hard to sustain. Try to diplomatically say what you really think from the outset. As individuals, some people prefer talking, others prefer acting; a balance of both is needed to work as a group. In one project, three collaborators wanted conversation to be the focus, but the fourth, a performer, wanted to perform; it was difficult to get the performer into the discursive mode.

Communication

You might set up certain rules for communicating, like what messaging app you use – rather than any and all mediums – and/or what days or times of day you do it. This can help everyone’s expectations align and it can stop the project taking over your life. If you’re working in a group of more than two and you feel you have something important to bring up, try not to discuss it just with one other person; call a meeting or send a group message to discuss it altogether. That way no one feels left out, and if you are angry no one person bears the brunt. A larger and longer-lasting organization will need written protocols for dealing with the potential complaints of team members and those outside; work on these sooner rather than later, however nice you all seem and however unlikely it seems that someone will bring a complaint against you.

Create space for other team members to have opinions and to talk. Be proactive about asking quieter team members what they think. Being courteous is an investment in your future trust in each other. Try to own up to mistakes. Remember to express gratitude when you feel it.

Useful third parties

Learning from an external party, whether a predecessor or peers, or creating a public moment – exposing the project outside of the group – can be productive for your thinking. This can mean talking to an audience, to a mentor, to a funder, to a facilitator, or to other collectives or initiatives. For some, writing an application is very useful for thinking things through, involving a lot of back and forth and active engagement in developing the idea. (One participant cautioned against adapting your idea to grant criteria – is it possible not to adapt, though?) One group said they recommended seeking out and consulting other people who have already been through a similar experience, instead of starting from zero. For example, one project, a forest school for young children, started by forming working groups to discuss organizational structures, visit other alternative educational institutions, and research progressive tuition scales. Another started by writing

a long letter to collectives in their country that had inspired them and with whom they would like to be in dialogue.



Keeping a record

Keeping some sort of document of things can be useful for the future, looking back to see how far you've come or to show people what you've done, but it also has various functions as you go along. Alongside conversations, writing things down can help you to align your definitions and set your parameters. At the beginning, it might be helpful to write a little questionnaire with and for each other, about intentions, expectations, and preferred working methods, which everyone then fills in; the results can help you plan how to proceed in a way that takes everyone's preferences into account. In a meeting, you might all have slightly different ideas of what was said, but if someone takes notes and circulates them, everyone can check they all understood the same thing or suggest modifications. At the end of a meeting, you might write down intentions for the next so that you'll be able to dive right in; you could also set yourselves homework that can serve as starting point. In general, if you get to an impasse, maybe you can write three very simple things down that you all agree on – a, b, c – and then move forward from that.

Unfair reality

Crises that some of the groups participating in Self Organizations had to contend with as they went about working together ranged from uprisings and strikes to military occupation, ethnic cleansing, and xenophobic feeling toward refugees to a huge explosion and COVID-19 to exile, inflation, economic crisis, and infrastructural collapse – more often many of these at once. It probably goes without saying that more individual crises, like one's shaky mental health, urgent concerns for one's child or other loved one, or having to leave the country, also had an impact. Mental health was mentioned repeatedly among the groups, and the importance of offering support to each other in that regard, although no specific modes of support were advised. Encouraging others to feel secure to ask for help when they need it can be a big step in itself.

Hopeful momentum

The hopeful energy of a far-reaching event, like the October 17 Revolution in Lebanon of 2019, can provide great momentum for coming together to work collectively. People who have gone through such an experience together can have an intimacy and a shared ground that is uncommon. But momentum dissipates, and political disillusionment must be dealt with because it will likely include disappointment with each other as well.



Time

Especially working in a group, things can take longer than expected; patience can be crucial. But do not wait too long to do something, because momentum will peter out. One project took so long to start that it never actually happened. Set yourself a schedule for meetings and/or for achieving certain objectives. We all have different speeds and availability, so you need to collectively find a pace that is unhurried enough to be inclusive but steady enough to not be demotivating. In terms of the time of day, try not to meet at a moment when everyone's exhausted; one group said that morning meetings were most productive. If you don't give the collaboration the best time of the day, at least sometimes, it will suffer. It's good to plan for the fact that working during Ramadan can be hard. It can also be worthwhile to discuss the lifespan of your project from the start. A short lifespan can be a great strength; many collaborative projects start with a fantastic sense of humor, light on their feet, but the passing of years inevitably wears this down, stiffens things. But projects for which longevity is fundamental, like a forest school or a farm, will be built up in layers; you are setting something up in such a way that future people can build on your foundations. And some were surprised to experience the feeling that their project could not be one-off – it was so rich and so empowering that it just had to happen again.

Letting go (of people / ideas / places)

Because you're creating one body with many brains, collaborating involves navigating without knowing exactly where you're going. You have to be flexible about next steps. One participant said: "Let go of your amazing idea and listen to what's present." This might be going too far – one group's experiment with living in a shared space never actually took place. Occasionally, due to changing circumstances or changing ideas, a member of a group steps out of a project after amicable discussion. In more than one instance, a member had to leave the country and the others continued without them. Dispersal can also mean bad blood; one group unhappily split into two; one lost "dozens of its original members," so that only one man seemed to be left standing. And if everyone leaves the country, the meaning of the project will change and it will turn into something else – or completely disintegrate. But letting membership and ideas evolve over the course of the project often turned out to be a strength. In multiple projects, the first site had to be given up and another one found instead; one project had to move cities and this turned out to open up new horizons and new types of interaction, although one initial aim – that of institutional critique – became less possible. In another project, one collaborator reported without regret that the idea had shifted throughout the year.

Horizontality vs. hierarchy

Does everyone sign the rental or funding contract, if there is one? Is that possible? Does everyone have the keys to the space, if there is one? Do you need a legal structure? One group needed to officially register as a for-profit company due to a belief that the non-profit sector in their country is corrupt, and because this made it easier to deal with invoices and accounts. But their working process itself was nonetheless horizontal – making animation, they said, needs many hands. Another group spent a lot of time researching various official models of organization in their country (from cooperatives to associations to companies) and what they could mean for horizontal modes of work. Some were surprised by how easy non-hierarchical group decision-making turned out to be.

The success of the projects in Self Organizations didn't seem to depend on the horizontality or otherwise of their structure. Some appear to have been completely horizontal and worked well. In one situation there was a clear leader who was significantly older than the others and coordinated the others' responsibilities; in some projects, one person was the initiator and the other two were clearly participants. They also worked well. In one group, the participants agreed to rotate the lead of the project between the four of them every three months; it made them realize that each of them could actually manage the project with their different skill sets. To make decisions about where to go, one group each wrote down place names and picked them out of a hat. In another, one person came to be in control; he seemed uninterested in collaboration. Overall, the one(s) putting in the most work and being most present for the project seemed to earn an entitlement to make the most decisions about it, although in one project the youngest member had the most free time and enthusiasm, so carried out more tasks without having more say.

Division of labor

In most groups of more than two collaborators, different people have different levels of engagement. There tends to be one or two who lead, or one or two who are more active. Group members, especially those leading a project, generally wear multiple hats. Often, one person manages the project logistically and another takes care of the artistic part, or one person takes on both of those roles. Certain people will have other work or family commitments that mean they can only contribute a small amount of time; they should try to make this clear early on.

Sometimes it will be obvious, particularly if you have worked together before or have specific expertise that you are bringing to the project, but other times it can be good to not determine the division of labor in advance. One group said the first phase of their project was useful (and challenging) because it let them shift their understanding of how to work not only with each other but also in the spaces they were investigating. Some team members might start off shy and not

want to face a public, for example; they might change their minds later on or they might stick to behind-the-scenes tasks. Roles can be allowed to evolve. You might decide to all sit down periodically to check how everyone feels about how they are contributing.

Are some uses of time more valuable, or are activities as diverse as fundraising or the artistic direction or watering plants daily or undertaking lengthy negotiations with landlords and phone companies all equally valuable?

Skills

Combining members' previously held skills can be one of the best things about working collectively but you must understand that some people might not have skills, perhaps because they are very young or lack exposure. Being willing to learn from others is as essential as being willing to donate your own skills to the group – skills that might come from experience as a technician, a film producer, scenarist, designer, translator, or cook. It will be an ongoing learning process. Things might get easier as more people gain more skills, and some less experienced collaborators might grow into other or bigger roles as they gain know-how through the project.

Authorship

Authorship can be dealt with in diverse ways. In Self Organizations, it was mostly collectively owned. In one project, they agreed that if one person worked more on an idea than the others, they would label it as the work of that person within the framework of the collective. In another project, the two leaders acknowledged that legally the musicians involved had rights over the production, but symbolically they felt it belonged to them. Surprisingly few conflicts over authorship were reported. Some people will need to make a more conscious effort to put their own ego aside; try to figure out if you are one of those people and act accordingly.

Motivating (peripheral) others

This often proves a challenge. One group paid external participants, which ensured their interest only to an extent. Could an exchange of skills, time, or artworks with others work in a better or similar way? Some groups made a conscious effort to make peripheral participants feel more implicated in the project's direction. In one musical project, the musicians were not involved in decision-making processes, and motivating them was the main challenge that the two project leaders faced. In another, invited participants could not maintain belief in the collective exercises the core team had prepared in order to de-habituate them, and the project fell apart. People might lose interest over time, especially if things are happening online.

Overall, the right number of participants will depend on the project. If there are too many people, maintaining enthusiasm and good communication can be difficult. One project consisted of two workshops: the first was larger and more mixed in terms of levels of knowledge, and some people withdrew; the second had only six participants and more in-depth discussion. In one project, the three members had the keys to the space but they agreed that anyone from outside the group could also use it if at least one of them was present. If you have an audience or guests or you're providing a service for others, ask for feedback, conduct a formal or informal survey. The ability to generate confidence about a project also impacts relationships with landlords and other tricky but unavoidable stakeholders.

Choosing collaborators

It is good to choose people you feel sure of, but also good to leave it open, take a chance, so you can be surprised by people. Collaborating can be an amazing way to get to know someone new or to have a different relationship with an acquaintance (and with yourself). You can collaborate with friends, but working together is different from nourishing a friendship because there is something that has to get done. People with a prior interest in working in groups can be a boon. Relatedly, be sure you're up for it before you commit yourself – otherwise

you're likely to become a burden. Know that it won't always be easy, and that it will be tiring. It will likely be more work than you think.

Resolving conflicts

Punctual check-ins throughout are recommended – communicating about problems before it's too late. Expressing anger is good in order to diffuse it and be able to continue working together. When you get stuck, giving each other space and time can be generative. When participants of one project disagreed about something, they would leave it for another day or appoint one of the members who had facilitation skills to try to figure out potential solutions. Another project improvised in order to keep moving; forward momentum was their priority, rather than reflection. Another said they started off the project with the involvement of a mediator.

Valuing your own process

Collaborating doesn't mean you should stop reflecting by yourself – ideally you will find a balance. Try to find your own way to do things within the group. Then you can keep bringing more to the collaboration, understand your own opinion about what is happening, and make sure you enjoy the process.

Having a space

Gathering needs a space. Equipment needs a space (some people only realize this after their equipment has been obtained). Stocking material needs a space. Rehearsing needs a space. Exposing to an audience needs a space. The need for space – due to a lack of public or common space, a lack of independent co-working spaces, and the closure of institutional spaces – seems to be one of the main reasons why Self Organizations was an attractive program and why people wanted to participate in it.

Finding a suitable space can be hard. In some contexts, it might be harder if you are women because landlords aren't used to women doing things without men. More than one musical project didn't fully take into consideration the noise

they would create in the neighborhood. Do you need a secure space? A sound-proof space? A space that can accommodate particular disabilities? It's not easy to anticipate all the potential issues when it comes to a location. What if you invest in a space and then the rent goes up? Maintaining a space creates new tasks for the group, and sometimes for peripheral members: not having a clear way to share mundane tasks such as taking out the garbage or cleaning up can lead to a group's undoing.

Do you want to agree on a strict function for your space, or do you want it to be flexible? Some people found their spaces being used by activists during moments of political crisis or activity. One project found that this led to security issues with the police. Elsewhere, a theater project turned into a canteen; when one person put a stop to this because it was a diversion from the project's purpose, some people in the wider group got angry.

Type of activity

What is more possible as a group rather than alone? What activities lend themselves more to collaboration? What are the things you wouldn't be able to do single-handedly but are able to in a group due to sharing skills, muscle, knowledge, equipment, contacts, privileges, time, and money, gaining visibility (even just through each other's social media channels), the feeling of being less isolated, and having emotional support (while acknowledging its flip side, taking responsibility for the others)?

Setting clear parameters can be important. It can be tempting, especially if the vibe is good, to widen and widen your remit until things get unwieldy or vague. One group had applied to re-enact or push further a self-organizing dynamic that had happened organically in the past; when it didn't work out, they confessed that was probably not the best way to continue such an experience. Overall, the few failures that did happen seemed unrelated to the type of activity chosen but the result of personal dynamics combined with external circumstances. Sometimes a project that seemed conventional could be exceptionally transformative, like the cultural

journal in a Palestinian refugee camp; apparently modest projects, such as staying with different host families, re-enacting the process of collaboration at home for a small audience of friends, or organizing a musical gathering in a cafe, seemed to be very generative for the initiators. Of course, growing can be good; a four-session playwriting course organically became a twelve-session course, to everyone's satisfaction.

DIY

Doing things in an amateurish way rather than outsourcing to professionals can be cheaper, a good team-building exercise, and make things more flexible. Soundproofing a space in an improvised way can mean that the soundproofing is portable, should it need to be moved to another space in the future. Scouring flea-markets for furniture helped two members of one group get to know each other better before the work started in earnest.

Translation

Think about the role of translation. In one project, the use of languages handed down by colonialism and resulting questions around language became an elephant in the room and contributed to its undoing. In another, the group members had to take turns acting as live translators, which curtailed their ability to participate; next time, they might hire a translator.

Misogyny

In some contexts, it may be harder to rent a space or impossible to get a landline in your name if you're a woman or your contract is informal; shifting neighborhoods or using a relative or friend as a proxy can be solutions. For one group of women, they found that the process was shaped to an extent by the health of their children, who kept falling sick. One male group found it a challenge, in their society, to bring in or host a female audience.

Cash

We all know about the advantages of having some money. Unsurprisingly, Self Organizations participants tended to express appreciation for the financial support and a wish that there were more open-ended grants out there so that other people could undertake similar experiments. In one instance, having some funding was said to give more credibility to the project among its participants, including those who joined later on, and to their audience, adding to a general air of "seriousness."

Problems that arise include the question of how to spend money, which can lead to conflict if not agreed on clearly from the start. It is relatively common to find costs to be different, often bigger, than initially expected. Making a well-informed budget in advance, or trying to allow for the fact that it might change, is valuable. One group said that money made the landlord or host greedy. And then, for longer-term projects, there is the question of sustainability after the funding runs out – will individual monthly expenses such as rent be paid collectively, or would that not be possible? Do you want to try to monetize your project or set up a business (many people think of cafés) on the side, or would that require too many compromises and/or too much time? Could you set up a membership scheme – would people pay for nicely designed membership cards and a few perks? Would you be willing to invest your energy in regular fundraising events?

Note: A website can become a terrible burden, sad to contemplate after the effort you put into building it, if there is no designated person or group to maintain it in the long-run or funds to pay for the domain name every year.

Benefits

Aside from all the practical benefits, you might find it a great relief, healing even, to momentarily operate outside the general obligation in our current world to be self-sufficient and compete with our peers. The increase in your trust and humility through a good collaboration will be uplifting and pay off in other ways. Also, committing to other people can help you commit to doing a thing, because a joint investment in doing

something is a bigger than a solitary engagement; relying on others and being relied on can encourage and oblige you to follow through. The very problems thrown up by collaboration can also be crucial for generating a starting point. More than one project found that coming from different backgrounds was an asset because it added a productive element of unpredictability and different ways of thinking. It was likewise said that combining different points of view can be a good way to make things grow.

Gardening

Several projects had a preoccupation with gardening or agriculture. One group set up a farm; their challenge now is to figure out how to bring their artistic practices into their agricultural project. A group of animators said that working together was like gardening rather than architecture, in the sense that in order to grow it needed to be not rigid but responsive and collective. They said they organically divided up the tasks of watering the plants, cooking, and cleaning. A participant with a biology background had a prior interest in self-perpetuating ecosystems, and was thinking about how to achieve the right pH for the bacteria, or group, to flourish.

Drawings by Jenifer Evans

Observations and advice

Gathered by
Krystal Khoury

General reflections

- It appears that within each collective there are usually two leading figures. In most of the projects, these participants hinted at the fact that they are not necessarily more active members in the group but more engaged. The more people they are, the more difficult it is to keep dynamics ongoing.
- In general, most groups could not relate to other specific models of self-organizing in the region. Maybe because there is limited written and shared information about such experiences happening in this part of the world.
- All groups spoken to mention the quality and the number of conversational moments that were taking place whether before, during, or after the project. Indeed, it seems like the program succeeded in provoking those conversations among different communities, whether conversations clearly naming self-organizing or dealing with how they were working together within the project or implicitly hinting at how they were artistically producing or making their projects happen.
- In many of the projects, especially the ones taking place in Lebanon, a member of the group had to leave the country during the course of the project. This was not seen as an obstacle in terms of achieving the project but more as a cause for delay.
- Although the COVID19 pandemic was mentioned a few times, it was primarily related to logistics that most groups seemed to have managed to overcome.

Advice from past self-organizers to future self-organizers

- Trust your collaborators and leave room for the ideas to shape the project.
- Communicate what you think and voice your opinion.
- Ask questions rather than make assumptions.

- Give space to disagreements, be OK with conflict as it can help clear the air.
 - Don't be afraid to stop what you are doing and evaluate where you are at.
 - Let the mess happen.
 - Think about the availability and use of time as essential questions in figuring out how to collaborate.
 - Believe in what you do and don't rely on outside validation.
 - Don't lose momentum by taking too much time before implementing your ideas.
 - Agree at the beginning on your common objective so that throughout the collaboration, you can let that guide you in overcoming whatever obstacles come your way.
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- Be honest about your desires and capacities and know your limits.
 - Try to be alert to your own and others' mental health.
 - Be aware that sharing responsibility includes sharing in the accountability.
 - Consider and express your solidarity, and prioritize the feeling of being part of something bigger.

What else can help?

- The existence of a fund that can support ideas that require working together.
- Having a workshop with someone who has experience with self-organizing can support initiatives that are aiming to put such working dynamics in place.
- Having access to a facilitator that can step in when conflicts arise.
- Less difficulties finding spaces outside the private domestic space to work as a group.
- Having readings or other sources available about self-organizing to which the participants can refer.

List of resources

Suggested Readings

Mohsen, Engy and Elwakil, Mai. *Notes on Collaboration*. Self-published, Cairo: 2021. You can read it [online](#).

Palm Trees in the Storm. A story of lugar a dudas. lugar a dudas, Cali: 2018. Chapters: "From the wobbly scaffolding, Oscar Muñoz and Sally Mizrahi in conversation with Karen Devia". "A radical experiment: Arts Collaboratory". The book can be found [online](#).

Schneider, Florian. "Collaboration: The Dark Side of the Multitude," *Sarai Reader 06: Turbulence, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies*, vol. 6. Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Ravi Sundaram, Jeebesh Bagchi (eds.). Delhi: 2006. You can read it [online](#).

Stine, Hebert and Szefer Karlsen, Anne (eds.). *Self-Organized (Occasional Table)*. Open Editions and Hordaland Art Centre, London and Bergen: 2013. The first four chapters can be found [online](#).

Additional references

Bradley, Will, Hannula, Mika, Ricupero, Cristina, and SUPERFLEX (eds.). *Self Organisation / counter economic strategies*. Sternberg Press, The Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art in collaboration with the Academy of Fine Arts Helsinki, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and Montana, Denmark: 2006.

The Combahee River Collective. "The Combahee River Collective Statement", *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Smith, Barbara (ed.), Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, Inc., New York, 1983. The text can be found [online](#).

Croall, Jonathan. *Lets Act Locally: The Growth of Local Exchange Trading Systems*. Gulbenkian Foundation, London: 1997.

Detterer, Gabriele and Nannucci, Maurizio (eds.). *Artist-Run Spaces: Non-Profit Collective Organizations in the 1960s and 1970s*. JRP/Ringer: 2013.

Gumbs, Pauline Alexis. *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. AK Press, Chicago: 2022. Chapters: "Collaborate". "Activities (pod/squad version)".

Khonsary, Jeff and Podesva, Kristina (eds.). *Institutions by Artists, vol. 1*. Fillip Editions, Vancouver: 2012.

Laloux, Frédéric *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness*. Nelson Parker, Brussels: 2014.

Larsen, Lars Bang and Lind, Maria (eds.). *The New Model: An Inquiry*. Sternberg Press, London: 2020.

Publication Studio Portable: A Mobile Publishing Manual. Publication Studio Pearl River Delta and Publication Studio, Rotterdam: 2019.

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