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AT THE EDGE OF THE FUTURE: NOWCASTING AMONGST CITIZEN EXPERTS FOR ACTION-ORIENTED FORESIGHT

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Abstract

Grass-root activism is recognized as a positive force for change all over the world. Despite obvious potential, in many countries all over the world activists struggle to make an impact as their individual projects and aspirations fail to connect and coordinate into higher-level social dynamics. Associations, forums and networks for the organized civil society have blossomed over the past 30 years or so, but that does not seem to have changed the terms of the problem.

We report on an attempt to mount a new kind of response to this issue in the course of a project called Spot The Future. Deployed in Armenia, Egypt and Georgia under the aegis of UNDP-CIS, Spot The Future adopts a stance based on inclusiveness, horizontal networking, orientation towards real-action solutions instead of pure networking. All the participants of the on-line and off-line discussions are perceived as experts, and the project team was taking a role of facilitators, encouraging involvement in on-line and off-line discussions, offering assistance, but leaving the decision-making role for the participants.

The engine of collaboration in Spot The Future is peer-to-peer, many-to-many online conversation. Ethnography and social network analysis are run on the conversation to add another level of understanding of the ground environment of the social actors, which is itself shared back with the participants. Such analysis revealed that social activists in these three countries are not satisfied with prevailing top-bottom approach to social challenges, are disappointed by the quality of vertical cooperation with governmental institutions, international organizations and other main top-bottom approach players, are challenged by the traditional market economy. They showed preferences to horizontal cooperation, innovative approaches, localized initiatives, collective action and informal economy. These results allowed us to formulate future policy recommendations for the UNDP and other institutional development players in Armenia, Georgia and Egypt; perhaps more importantly, they prompted new awareness of what activists can do themselves to develop collaborations with each other.

Keywords: ethnography, social network analysis, spot the future, grass-root activism, Georgia, Armenia, Egypt

Introduction

This paper is based on a project called *Spot The Future* implemented by Edgeryders in the aegis of implemented under the aegis of UNDP-CIS. The idea of the Spot The Future (STF) project came from the outcomes of the global My World 2015 survey. This survey was launched

by the UN which aims to capture voices, needs and priorities from citizens around the world. Such wide survey should serve as a background for post-2015 development agenda of the UN.[i]

The respondents of this survey from the countries selected for the STF project (Armenia, Georgia and Egypt) mentioned the same five topics as their priorities: good education, an honest and responsible government, better healthcare, better job opportunities, protection of crime and violence.[ii] As the only cross-country difference was the order of importance of these issues, the research put more emphasis on commonalities than differences between Armenian, Egyptian and Georgian STF participants.

As a follow up, to the UNDP Europe and Central Asia together with the Edgeryders started a short-term project to see not only how people imagine their future, but what is already being done to achieve it. The main goal was to consult the local innovators, without taking their credentials into account.

Social innovators from Armenia, Georgia and Egypt were invited to participate in online conversations on the specially-designated internet platform. The STF project was simultaneously running three different tasks. The first goal was to identify cutting-edge trends that are happening in these countries and to see what are people on the ground doing in order to overcome challenges which surround them. The second goal was to create a network of peers from different countries where they could exchange their ideas, insights and experiences. The third goal of the STF project was to uncover hidden knowledge from these online conversations through combination of qualitative (online ethnography) and quantitative (social network analysis) approaches.

The online ethnography is not a completely new discipline.[iii] However, the current research combines online ethnography and social network analysis, which provides more complex data set for further analysis. Moreover, as the ethnographic coding is performed online, it is relatively easy to access the raw dataset and to perform further analysis of it.

Methodology

To start with, one of the purposes of the STF project was to create a platform where social innovators from Armenia, Georgia and Egypt could interact with each other, hoping that such interaction will lead to future cooperation. As it will be demonstrated further, this proved to be successful, as cooperation was one of the main themes of these many-to-many and peer-to-peer discussions. Discussions were slightly moderated by the project team, however, the main idea was to treat each participant as an expert and encourage them to share their personal experiences and stories.

In addition, this platform served as a field for qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative analysis of STF-related content was partially conducted online (the coding part)iv which allowed us to merge the qualitative dataset with SNA data.

The research was based on the following questions:

- How does the scene of social innovators look like in Armenia, Egypt and Georgia?
- What are the challenges that the social innovators face?

- What are their needs?
- How do the social innovators interact with each other?

Qualitative data was retrieved from 161 original posts and 782 original comments[1] from the following groups on the Edgeryders platform. The coding started on May 2014 and finished on June 10 2014, hence later comments and posts are not included in content analysis. The posts and comments with clearly administrative content were excluded from further analysis, as the focus was on the participants and their interaction, and not on the approaches and methodology of the Edgeryders' team. In a table below, a brief overview of the retrieved data is given.

Table 1. The review of the analyzed Edgeryders discussion groups

#	Name of the discussion group	Size	Coding for the qualitative analysis finished by
1	#futurespotters worshops: the aftermath	50 posts +355 comments	06/09/14
2	Arrivals	49 posts +244 comments	06/04/14
3	Spot the Future: we, the people.	20 posts+118 comments	06/07/14
4	Spot the Future: Caring for Commons	13 posts +155 comments	06/08/14
5	Spot the Future: Making a Living	10 posts+108 comments	06/07/14
6	Georgia's #Futurespotters	16 posts+104 comments	06/10/14
7	Sky School Yerevan	1 post +2 comments	06/10/14
8	Biogas People	1 post	06/10/14
9	Swap Shop Yerevan	1 post +2 comments	06/10/14

In addition to content analysis, social network analysis (SNA) was performed in order to capture other, non-semantic, dimensions of the online conversations. This analysis is built on top of total 11119 comments, 2415 posts, 501 users and 2797 conversational exchanges in the Edgeryders platform. It shows that there were 128 users involved in the conversations related to STF with 384 interactions (35 of which are users' replies to themselves), producing altogether 2791 comments, among which 910 are STF-related content.

Limitations. It needs to be mentioned that the STF project had a limited reach of the organizations, groups and individuals working on the grass-root level in Armenia, Egypt and Georgia due to the following reasons. First and foremost was the language barrier. The Edgeryders platform is in English. As the global language, English enabled communication and cooperation between peers from different countries. But at the same time, very low proportions

1 A lot of posts, together with depending comments, were duplicates, meaning that they were posted in two or more groups at the same time. The duplicates were excluded due to redundancy.

of native languages - Armenian, Arabic and Georgian – distanced a considerable amount of grass-root activists from each country who do not have any knowledge of English, or whose English is limited. Hence the reach of the Edgeryders was limited to English speakers from all three countries.

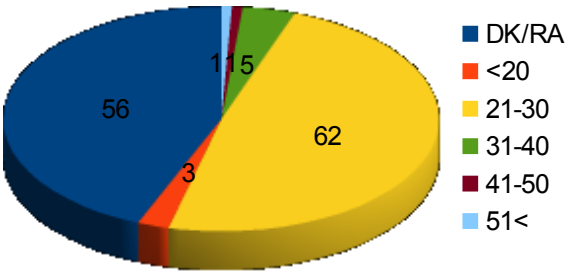
The human factor should also be taken into consideration. It can not be ruled out that the sample of the grass-root activists at least partially depended on social circles of the community builders responsible for Armenia, Egypt and Georgia respectively. For example, the informal talks at the final conference revealed that a relative high number of environmental activists from Egypt might have occurred due to the fact that the main information about this project was being spread through environmentalist networks.

In addition, our sample was mainly participants on the *Edgeryders* platform, hence it would not be feasible to draw overarching conclusions. But on the other hand, it can be argued that we heard the voices of those social activists who wanted to be heard, those who are actively engaged in their communities, hence the results allow us to put forward concrete and tailored policy suggestions for governmental and major donor organizations in Armenia, Egypt and Georgia.

Results and discussion

In this section a condensed description of the STF participants and their activities will be provided followed by discussion about challenges they face.

Figure 1. Age of the participants



As it can be seen from the Figure 1 above, although a big part of participants did not indicate their age (44 percent), the data still shows that the majority of them are under 30 years of age, which is the same age group as the majority of the participants of the UN My World 2015 survey in these three countries.[v]

The Table 2 below shows that there were 65 initiatives and social actors mentioned in the discussions related to the STF project. These social actors are mainly preoccupied in the

spheres of environmental protection, urban planning, empowerment and inclusion, ICT and media, alternative economy.

Table 2. Social actors

	Number of social actors talked about	The main spheres of activism
Armenia	13	Environment, alternative economy, inclusiveness, empowerment, informal education
Egypt	25	Environment, urban planning, gender issues, education, community development, solidarity and media improvement
Georgia	27	Information and communication technologies, urban planning, environment, gender issues, road safety, solidarity, media

A closer look to the content of discussions revealed that the participants experience various challenges in their activities, but they all can be divided into 3 groups. Macro level challenges correspond to the environment that they live in, mezo level are challenges directly connected to their activities on organizational level and micro level contains challenges on the personal dimension.

Table 3. Challenges faced by change-makers

Micro level	Motivation
Mezo level	Vertical relations with donors and governmental organizations, horizontal peer-to-peer relations,
Macro level	Health care, employment, education, urban planning, environmentalism

Challenges. When it comes to the macro level, it can be noted that four out of five main challenges that people from Armenia, Egypt and Georgia indicated in the My World 2015 survey – better health care system, better job opportunities, better government and good education – were mentioned by the participants in the STF as well. However, protection from crime and violence did not receive such attention from the STF participants. More research should be done in this direction, but at this moment it can be stipulated that in the STF discussions a need of protection against crime and violence did not appear because the participants were asked to share their personal experiences rather than to talk about perceived general trends. And victims of violence or crimes are often silent, as they feel ashamed, traumatized, afraid and stigmatized

The main mezo level challenges are connected to both vertical, top-bottom relations with governments and donors, and to horizontal relations with peers which instead of possible fruitful cooperation a lot of times result in a fruitless and frustrating competition while pursuing the same

goals. Young change-makers are still struggling in a highly competitive environment, but at the same time they are open for closer peer-to-peer cooperation and believe that this will help to achieve more with less energy and fewer resources.

This shows that the STF participants are disappointed with traditional top-bottom approaches and strict vertical relations. They yearn for more direct communication with the decision makers from the government, and new cooperation possibilities with donor organizations/development agencies that would go beyond traditional grant schemes.

As for micro challenges, the participants perceive that there is a lack of motivation in the society as a whole. The reasons for that, in their opinion, vary from individual and cultural values to historical and political circumstances. But at the same time, they are able find their own motivation in altruistic actions or in necessity to become the main change makers.

Needs. As the macro level challenges encompass those challenges that the participants experience in their social and natural environment, it is natural that they try to overcome these challenges by working in spheres showed earlier in the Table 1. However, more needs to be done in order to address mezo and micro level challenges that they face during their work.

Among tangible needs, related to better cooperation between local grass-root activists and NGOs the following were mentioned: outside assistance, such as brainstorming facilitators, assistance with public relations (especially in social media), help in strengthening communication between different NGOs and/or other social activists.

In order to solve problems connected to funding, the participants asked for external assistance in providing trainings in project management; for more flexible and alternative sources of funding; to share experiences related to funding so that various organizations could find the best source of funding for themselves. And to help overcoming the lack of human resources, participants suggested to put more emphasis on volunteering activities.

To sum up, the STF participants need various technical and legal assistance, trainings on fundraising, help to reach out to wider audiences, expanding their social circles, strengthening their teams by attracting new volunteers.

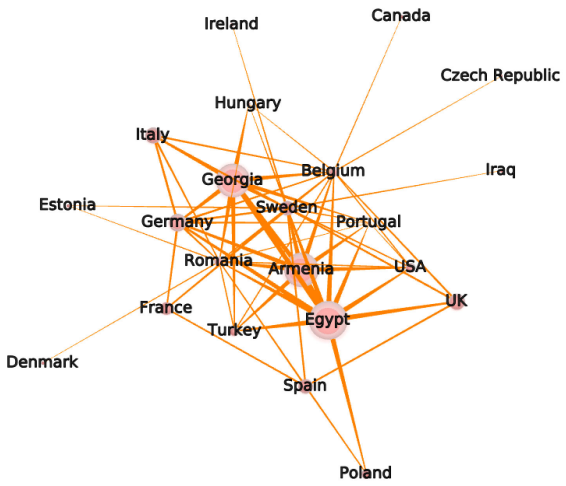
Interaction.

The following figure illustrates communication patterns within and between different countries. The thickness of connecting lines shows the amount of communication between the respective countries; and the size of the country's marker corresponds to the number of interactions between users of the given country. Thus it can be seen from this picture that the conversations crossed borders between countries, but at the same time there are a lot of interaction within Armenia, Georgia and Egypt respectively, and also these three countries are situated in a center of conversation. This explains the overlap of themes mentioned in the Table 2 and stresses out their importance for people coming from different countries.

As there were 128 users involved in the conversations related to STF with 384 interactions (35 of which are users' replies to themselves), producing altogether 2791 comments, among which 910 are STF-related content, it can be derived that the STF platform

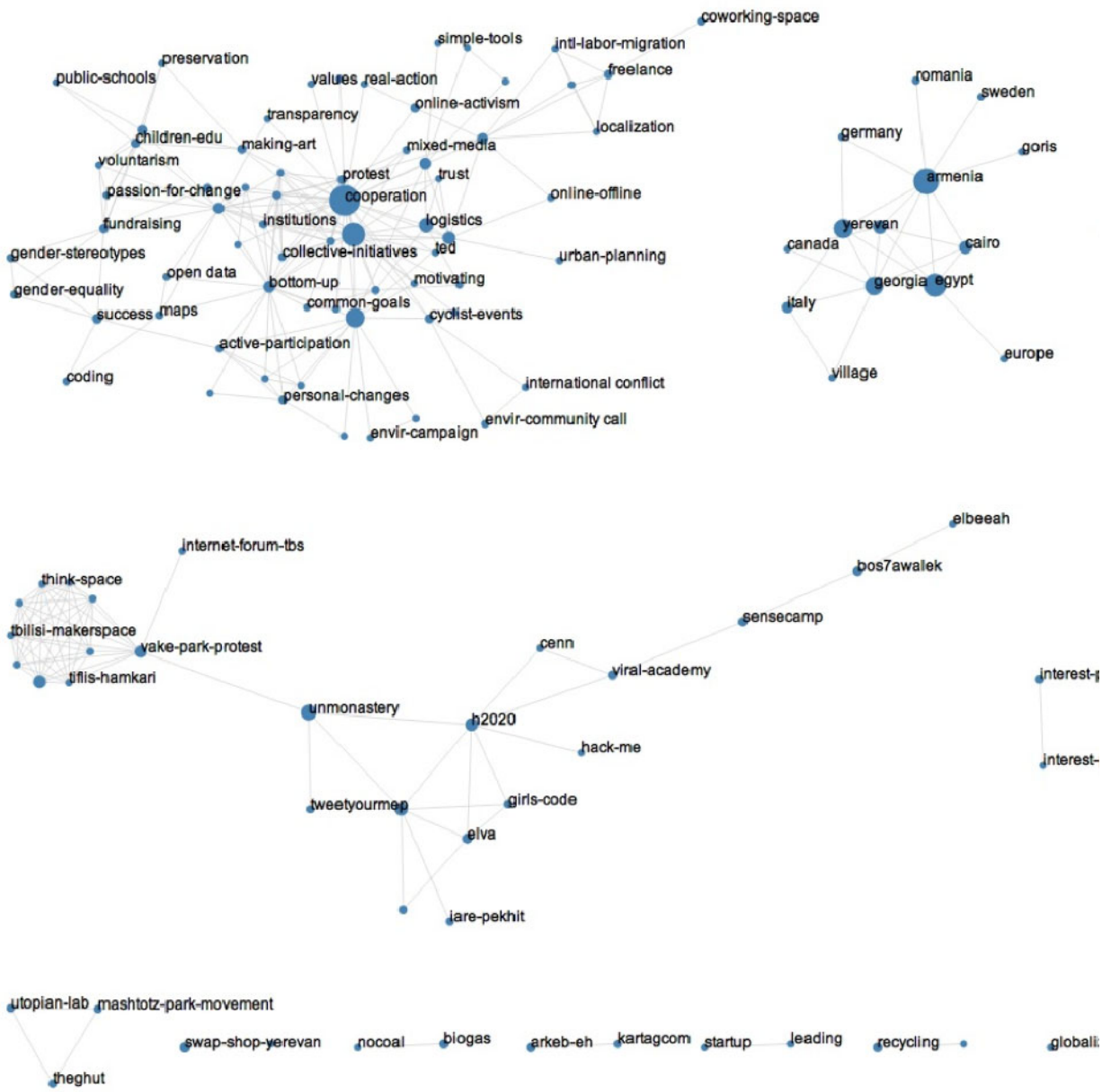
succeeded in becoming a place for global interaction between social innovators from different countries.

Figure 2. Communication between and within countries



Even more can be seen by merging semantic data with the SNA data. Such merge demonstrates shows patters of discussing various topics on the STF platform. The Figure 3 below serves as a communication map, where semantic meanings are placed upon graphic illustration of social interactions. Two keywords interact when they are mentioned by two participants in the same exchange; the size of the marker corresponds to the The analysis of this interaction yields at least three important points.

Figure 3. Communication map of the STF discussions



To start with, the upper right corner underlines the notion of international communication. The previous graph stressed out that communication between users is on a global scale, as they talk not only with their compatriots, but also to peers from other countries. The Figure 3

demonstrates that the participants were referring to different geographic locations during their interaction. To sum up, interactions on the STF forums were international not only because of the origin or locations of the users, but also because different places and countries were talked about on semantic level. However, both graphs show that focus remained on Armenia, Georgia and Egypt.

The small cluster in the bottom left corner refers to interaction between Georgia-based social innovators. It can be derived that in Georgia the scene of social innovators is more closely connected than within Armenia or Egypt.

Probably the most interesting is the big cluster of keywords in the upper left corner. Here keywords, which indicate specific issues, such as children education, gender equality, environmentalism etc., overlap with keywords which identify specific approaches and methods directed to deal with these issues. It suggests that the participants on the STF platform are comparing their experiences with different projects, sharing their ideas and insights how to deal with a specific issue.[vi] The biggest markers in this cluster are “cooperation”, “common goals” and “collective initiatives”, which suggest that participants opt for closer collaboration and are willing to work together towards mutual goals.

To sum up so far, the analysis of interaction between peers on the STF platform showed that the platform itself serves as a tool for global conversation between peers from 22 different countries. However, the interaction and conversations remain there focus on Armenia, Georgia and Egypt. In addition, it can be derived that the grass-root activists from these countries are sharing and comparing their experiences in dealing with different social issues in order to find the best approach and the best toolkit. Also they opt for closer cooperation, for working as a collective towards common goals, that is, they do not perceive each other as competitors.

Policy implications

In this particular case the symbiosis of qualitative data (online ethnography and focus group discussion) and quantitative social network analysis provides us with a strong ground for the following recommendations for international donors and local policy makers:

1. To strengthen cooperation on vertical level by offering various assistance to the grass-root activists and social innovators in Armenia, Egypt and Georgia. This should be extended beyond the scope of traditional funding scheme and involve other resources, such as social capital or various skills.
2. To foster cooperation on horizontal level between peers on local and on international level. The research showed that peer-to-peer cooperation leads to common resource sharing in order to achieve common goals.
3. To promote vertical level cooperation between grass-root level NGOs and other social actors and local governmental institutions.
4. To organize trainings and workshops on grant writing, project management and other fundraising activities.
5. To provide a platform for good practice sharing, capacity building, that would lead to mutual local and international projects between grass-root activists.
6. To be more open to non-traditional approaches suggested by grass-root activists and move beyond the scope of the usual suspects.
7. To promote community volunteering

To put it in a nutshell, our approach, which combined using ethnographic methods and social network analysis of online peer-to-peer and many-to-many conversations, allowed us to put forward concrete practice-oriented policy suggestions.

Conclusion

To sum up, the combination of qualitative online ethnographic research and quantitative social network analysis of the same online many-to-many and peer-to-peer discussions allows to conduct an in-depth research and to provide tailored future policy suggestions.

In this paper we looked at online grass-root activist community which was formed within the framework of the STF project with participants from Armenia, Georgia and Egypt. The online discussions revolved around 65 different social actors and initiatives, who are mainly preoccupied the spheres of environmental protection, urban planning, empowerment and inclusion, ICT, media and alternative economy.

These social grass-root activists experience challenges on three different levels – macro, mezo and micro. The macro level challenges directly corresponds to those issues mentioned in the UNDP *My World 2015* survey by respondents from Armenia, Georgia and Egypt. Hence the main activities of the social change-makers in these three countries are directed at combating these issues. However, they need some external assistance when it comes to mezo (horizontal peer-to-peer and vertical bottom-up-bottom relations) and micro (motivation) level challenges. In these cases, the STF participants need various technical and legal assistance, trainings on fundraising, help to reach out to wider audiences, expanding their social circles, strengthening their teams by attracting new volunteers.

Peer-to-peer relations were analyzed more detailed. SNA showed that the STF platform functions not only as a platform for connecting local activists, but also as a tool to share ideas and to plan possible cooperation across borders. Merged data from SNA and ethnographic tagging (which was possible as the tagging was done online straight on the platform) showed that indeed, the platform itself serves as a tool for global conversation between peers from 22 different countries. However, the interaction and conversations remain there focus on Armenia, Georgia and Egypt. In addition, it can be derived that the grass-root activists from these countries are sharing and comparing their experiences in dealing with different social issues in order to find the best approach and the best toolkit. Also they opt for closer cooperation, for working as a collective towards common goals, that is, they do not perceive each other as competitors.

Hence by providing an open platform for discussions for social grass-root activists from Armenia, Georgia and Egypt and by treating each of them as an expert, we provided a tool for future peer-to-peer cooperation. In addition, an in-depth analysis of their discussions combining content analysis and social network analysis allowed us to uncover deeper levels of the conversations and enabled us to put forward detailed and concrete recommendations for UNDP and for policy makers of the given countries.

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"Post2015.org - What Comes after the MDGs?"

ii "MYWorld2015 Analytics. Armenia"; "MYWorld2015 Analytics. Egypt"; "MYWorld2015 Analytics. Georgia."

iii See for example Baym, *Tune In, Log On*; Androutsopoulos, "Potentials and Limitations of Discourse-Centred Online Ethnography"; LEANDER and MCKIM, "Tracing the Everyday 'Sitings' of Adolescents on the Internet"; Collins and Cuzzocrea, *On Being Edgeryders: A Picture of Young Europeans Navigating Their Transition to an Independent Life*.

iv "Research Methodology."

v "MYWorld2015 Analytics. Armenia"; "MYWorld2015 Analytics. Egypt"; "MYWorld2015 Analytics. Georgia."

vi Cottica, Renoust, and Popovaite, *The Spot the Future Conversation Network. Horizon Scanning in Armenia, Egypt and Georgia*.