



ISO109 | 2018
11/09 | 8

EGIC
Euro-Gulf
Information
Centre

District Centres in Saudi Arabia

An avenue for civil society engagement

By Dahlia Rahaimy

The concept of District Centres (Marakiz Majalis Al Ahia) was embraced in 2003 by the late governor of Madinah, Prince Abdulmajeed Al Saud, with the purpose of generating unity and social responsibility among neighbours living in one district. When the Prince became governor for the Western Province in 2004, the format was introduced to the cities of Jeddah, Makkah and Taif, among others. Fast forward to 2017, in Saudi Arabia there are 33 District Centres, of which 18 are managed by men only and 15 by women only. These centres have served hundreds of thousands of citizens through thousands of activities across time. However, despite these results and the benefit to communities, Centres are still only located in the western region of Saudi Arabia. The four centres based in Jeddah, Al Nahda, Muhammadiyah, Al Muntazahat and Al Shatee, are the centres that include all facilities, provide activities and services to their citizens and therefore are considered role models.

Saudi Arabia is a country in which societal and tribal rules and traditions play a major role in defining social structures and have a tremendous influence on the lifestyles of their people. Therefore, even though Saudi culture greatly values hospitality, interpersonal relationships are limited to relatives and friends. It is not usual for a neighbour to go and welcome his new neighbours. The Centres were thus established to create local communities that are not defined by tribal relations, but by neighbourhoods. This involves raising awareness for concepts that have been lost in today's modern-life Saudi Arabia.

A Majlis Hai (district centre) is formed by electing members from the general assembly of the district centre. The general assembly, which has his head office in Jeddah, is made up of Saudi women and men, without restrictions on age or gender. Members are volunteers who are re-elected every 4 years and have to contribute financially to the assembly. The general assembly of the Centre elects the board of each district centre,

the Majlis Al Hai, usually made of 8 to 13 members. Each district decides on whether they have mixed boards - female and male - or segregated ones, chiefly depending on the sensibilities in each community. The Centres operate in coordination with the central office with a common mission: create awareness and social responsibility in the neighbourhood to improve living standards and socio-economic development for the community.

The following programs have been identified, implemented or are in progress:

- The Iman Programme helps families build up their businesses by providing financial and knowledge support. The financial support that was given until 2017 is SAR 6,450,00 (€1,1 million) for 749 beneficiaries.
- The Volunteer Programme aims at attracting and training volunteers for events. So far there are 12,000 volunteers who helped in carrying out 3,024 events.
- The Salamatk Programme is concerned with increasing health and environmental awareness and has 120,863 people who benefited from its health services.
- The Nadeena Programme aims to develop and offer physical activities for children and youngsters and has 50,862 beneficiaries so far.
- The Jari Programme aims to strengthen social relations between neighbours and has 106,220 beneficiaries that have participated at social gatherings.
- The Tamkeen Programme aims at skills development. So far, 4,867 people have benefited from the training, programs and workshop provided.
- The Events Programme focuses on educating on the values of social responsibility and the role of an individual in society. There are 720 beneficiaries and 44 volunteers in this program.
- The District Competition League is one of the biggest sport events in Jeddah, it has 284 teams and 7,500 players and coaches for popular sports like football, basketball, swimming, etc.
- The Festivals Programme aims to entertain families. Among the many events that are celebrated are National Day, Jeddah Spring, Jeddah Our Story, Jeddah Eid and Beach, A Child's World with 1,000,000 beneficiaries.
- In the Waqfi Janati Programme, a waqf (religious foundation) has been created for and by the centre for financial sustainability and a steady financial income.

The main challenges for these Centres are creating awareness among people to participate as volunteers to attract sponsors. In a society where the people are raised on being provided everything to have a comfortable lifestyle, it is almost impossible to ask them

to contribute for their communities. Some miss the understanding for social responsibility and see it as a give-and-take, i.e. trying to find a benefit for being a volunteer. Not only that, they don't see in that their efforts will create a change or lead to benefits to society. It is less of a problem among young people because of the direction the government is heading in empowering the youth. They are more willingly to volunteer and understand the importance of social responsibility for society. The challenges are not just that centres don't have enough volunteers but also to that there not enough participants at events and functions.

Alongside a lack of volunteers, often centres struggle to attract enough participants at events and functions. In order to fully highlight the potential of these centres, more citizens need to be part of these centres by participating at events, volunteering to create a value and highlight the role of the centres in society. Otherwise no one will believe in the importance of having such centres. If those centres cannot convince the citizens of their value it will at the end not be beneficial for sponsors to give money or support.

Finance is a major challenge that almost every centre faces. And each centre finds its solutions in the services it provides in a way that suits the needs and interest of its citizens. Showcasing good work to individual sponsors or attracting small contributions from residents is one way to generate money. The government has provided land for each centre to build their premises on. Yet so far in a lot of districts sponsors are missing. Until that problem is solved those centres are housed in apartments, rooms, warehouses or whatever option is offered. The government also lately made it possible for centre citizens to use mosques, school sport facilities, to hold events. Yet, the problem is that if citizens don't use service or activities provided on those facilities - which are usually offered for about SAR 100 (20 Euro) income cannot be generated.

Social awareness is the major challenge that faces these centres to fulfil their mission. As Saudi Arabia is on course for change it is probably easier than before that this idea will grow and gain traction.