



## Views on Wellbeing Research, Policy and Practice: An Interview with Mohammad Asfour

Asfour, M.

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**Abstract:** In this volume of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology, we explore the views, hopes, and current research agendas of those working to advance knowledge in the field of positive psychology within the MENA region, or who research aspects of culture and religion relevant to it. We are also interested in those who practise in uncovering the excellence in the region and whose work is guided by positive psychology principles. Here, we discuss with Jordanian born, Canadian Mohammad Asfour, his thoughts on positive community development and the green building movement, a new partner in the quest for greater wellbeing in the region.

ملخص: في هذا المجلد من مجلة الشرق الأوسط لعلم النفس الإيجابي، نستكشف وجهات النظر والأمال، والأجندات البحثية الحالية لأولئك الذين يعملون على النهوض بالمعرفة في مجال علم النفس الإيجابي في منطقة الشرق الأوسط، أو الذين يبحثون جوانب الثقافة والدين ذات الصلة به. ونحن مهتمون أيضا بمن يمارسون أعمالهم في الكشف عن التميز في المنطقة ويسترشد عملهم بمبادئ علم النفس الإيجابي. هنا، نناقش مع الأردني محمد عصفور، أفكاره حول التنمية المجتمعية الإيجابية وحركة المباني الخضراء والتي تعد شريكا جديدا في السعي لتحقيق رفاهية أكبر في المنطقة.

**Keywords:** positive leadership; positive community development; volunteerism; green building; wellbeing; Jordan

**About the Author:** Mohammad Asfour has a Masters' degree in Positive Leadership and Strategy from the IE Business School in Madrid, Spain and is now the Regional Head of the MENA Network of the World Green Building Council. Former chair of the World GBC's MENA Regional Network and the Jordan Green Building Council, he also served as Senior Adviser to the USAID Energy Sector Capacity Building Programme and as the Environment, Water and Energy Sector Lead with the USAID Jordan Economic Development Program. He was an adviser to the Board of Trustees of the Princess Sumaya University for Technology, founded the Queen Rania Center for Entrepreneurship, and worked on developing the concept behind El Hassan Science City. He also started *Ahel Al Balad*, a non-political, community-based movement that aims to build ethical, cohesive, and compassionate communities by bringing Jordanian citizens together to create a better reality through initiatives of common interest.

**Address correspondence to:** Mohammad Asfour, E-mail: [mohammad.asfour@gmail.com](mailto:mohammad.asfour@gmail.com) You can also see Mohammad's photography at <https://500px.com/mohammadasfour> and follow Ahel Al Balad on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/ahelalbaladJO/>



**MEJPP:** Where does your interest in positive psychology come from and how did that evolve into your diverse work experience we will soon talk about?

**MA:** My interest culminated when I took my Master's degree in Positive Leadership and Strategy with IE in Madrid where I was lucky to have Dr. Tayyab Rashid as one of my professors, along with Dr. Barbara Fredrickson and others. I studied there in 2015 and my interest in the topic was a result of a several professional and personal experiences that were affected by various types of leadership with which I interacted throughout my career. I had several professional stages in my life; economic development and investment promotion, technology commercialization and entrepreneurship development, the green economy, and now it's all three of those, with an element of strategy and leadership as well. I served within the government, with members of the royal family and with non-profits and donor agencies. I was also part of a 4<sup>th</sup> generation family business. I visited 43 countries and worked in different places and industries and these experiences made me ask, what is it that will make me happy?

When I was younger, in my late 20s and early 30s I was given responsibility that was beyond my knowledge and experience, but had to, at the same time, manage my professional relationship with people who were much older than I was and who made life a bit difficult for me. My father also got cancer and I had to be absent for a time. Things dropped and my life took a completely different direction. This opened my eyes to the importance of positivity, good governance, integrity, ethics, of being humane, in fact. These experiences helped me better define my purpose in life. When you are guided by a mission and you feel that your presence on earth should be of value, you have to work on yourself and bring out the best in you. I had the urge to do something to better my country and add value to the part of the world in which I grew up; I knew this was not the end of the road. If my contribution was not appreciated somewhere I could still contribute elsewhere. Few years later, with the support of my mother and a close friend, I decided to take the IE's Master's program.

**MEJPP:** I'm assuming this is where the group, *Ahel Al Balad*, was born. Tell us about it.

**MA:** *Ahel Al Balad* means *people of the place*. It was started to address the issue of litter in Jordan; a few people who met on Twitter got together and decided to do something. We got a small grant to launch a clean-up campaign and we've had nearly 50 so far. The first two people to wear our distinctive orange t-shirts were the Mayor of Amman and the British Ambassador to the Kingdom. On one occasion, we had her Majesty Queen Rania join us in a cleanup event! As we conducted more campaigns, we saw that people who were involved were happy about what they were doing and were, as a matter of fact, rediscovering themselves. This coincided with my enrollment in the positive leadership program and I started recognizing the Duchenne smile in the photos I was taking of our events. So we started to think that maybe it's not just about littering, maybe it's about happiness through volunteering. We used to go to different parts of the country to do this and people would pay to join, so there was clearly value in what we were doing. Imagine! People were paying money to collect litter! We were also telling people that building a strong community, or improving it, is not just the responsibility of governments. It's our responsibility as citizens too, regardless of what governments do to support or not. So, we thought why not turn this into a campaign to spread positivity through volunteerism in the country and hopefully beyond?



Now, we are in the process of developing a new approach because although we were successful in triggering involvement from people in cleanup campaigns, we'd like to find a better reason to exist as we see people from all over the country going out on their own to clean sites, the municipality itself, which was one of our first supporters, are now supporting similar activities.

**MEJPP:** What do you think people are looking for when they join such initiatives?

**MA:** I feel people are looking for a feeling of togetherness, of being part of a group of people who belong to a cause and want to make a difference. Belonging to a cause in itself is something people enjoy, especially the feeling of contributing positively to our communities, which is not that common in our part of the world. Many citizens of my generation and younger generations don't feel that their voices are heard. But if this is the case, how can citizens become more positively involved in reshaping their communities? I think Ahel Al Balad and similar non-political initiatives are providing a platform for concerned citizens to engage in positive change within their communities outside the conventional structures - that do not seem to satisfy their aspirations. We are open to working with all, we have no political affiliations. Our cause is much about creating harmonious communities. This is especially an issue in our part of the world. People do not accept the 'other' easily. One of our principles is to bring more respect towards the human being in all of us. The volunteers who join our campaigns come from different backgrounds, schools of faith and races, but when they go out, they put these differences aside and show each other the respect they deserve. We have instructions for people to read before we go out, they say that even if someone was abusive to you while you are on a cleanup, for example, just smile and explain what you are doing. In our region, we often see people resorting to extreme measures towards conflict instead of establishing dialogue and listening to other's concerns. We feel that the solution does not come from anything but showing kindness and accepting the fact that differences will always exist.

**MEJPP:** How is your message of positivity received?

**MA:** In terms of positivity, our approach is simple. You are who you are. Make the best of who you are. We can't force people to change their beliefs or convictions; it is up to them to make the best of what is. When you speak this language to people, you tell them they have a choice, they don't have to follow a Western way of living in order to be happy, but they can cultivate their inner force, and first and foremost, take the decision to make the best of what is. If you are upset about any bad situation, it will not help you. You need to accept it and start working on improving it. But, indulging in a process of self-pity helps no one. Maybe because I work with many young, intelligent people of many backgrounds, people who don't fear the unknown, I feel much receptiveness.

**MEJPP:** As someone who is using the skills of positive leadership, what has this process been like for you? What are your reflections on positive leadership?

**MA:** Sometimes when people ask about Ahel Al Balad, they ask if I am leading it. But what I tell them is that it's not about me, it's about the whole group. Each and every single team member has to be a positive leader. We have a core team and we establish dialogue. It is a subject-subject relationship. It's a completely unconventional approach in triggering positive change. Hopefully, it will help transform communities. For me, I go with the flow, I do what I am supposed to do, but I don't measure the impact of what I am doing by the amount of benefit but



by the amount of happiness it brings. I do feel really happy when I am with the people of Ahel Al Balad. This is the ultimate goal, to be with a group that shares your values and that does good.

But, what is a positive leader? Alaa, Aya and I organized a workshop for about 80 female engineers in the Ajloun nature reserve in Jordan a few weeks ago. So, we discussed a few principles, grouped participants into six teams and organized a hike on which there were different clues. After finding these, they had to come back and present as a team. What was apparent in that occasion was that positive leadership meant different things to different people. From my perspective, humility is associated to a great degree with this type of leadership, and with humility comes acceptance. And with acceptance comes openness to knowledge; in fact, positive leaders chase knowledge and advice whenever possible and required. A positive leader is a person who acknowledges the differences that people have and yet, does not judge. It is someone who is guided by principles and ethics. Positive leaders are not people who go on an auto-pilot mode that makes them look positive, but are truly grounded and aware. Positive leaders are also humble people who do not see themselves superior to others.

**MEJPP:** Do you think we have enough positive leaders in government right now?

**MA:** Of course not! If enough positive leaders did exist, we would have been in a very different place today. However, some do exist, but in different capacities and places, but we don't have enough of them for sure. If we had more of those in the Middle East, we would be in a much better place. How can we get more? I spoke earlier about the entrepreneurship centre I established and one of the things I believed in at the time was that you cannot train someone to be an entrepreneur but you can help them develop their skills. The same applies here, but what you can do is create a platform from which those positive leaders can thrive, prosper and learn - from their own experiences of course. You cannot spoon feed a person to become a positive leader; but create an environment in which they can thrive so that if they have the potential, they can materialize it and become who they truly are.

**MEJPP:** You promote green buildings, a facet of the wellbeing movement that is less well known, but increasingly becoming important given our disconnection from nature and the negative impact of modern cities on physical and mental health. Can you talk about some of that work?

**MA:** The word green is not just about resource efficiency, it's not just about climate change, it's about establishing a state of harmony with our surroundings, which includes people. So, when we use the word green, it also means transparency, respect for diversity, harmony, good governance, and all of these values. This is what the World Green Building Council is about; maximizing the benefits of going green, be it economic benefits, health and wellbeing benefits and so on. We have a target of all buildings becoming net zero by 2050 because one of the biggest contributors to climate change comes from buildings. So, here we are doing good by encouraging businesses that are doing good for the environment. Green Building Councils are like business associations but are composed of companies that come in at different stages of the green building value chain, such as designers, vendors, material producers, investors, professionals and so on. We don't enforce laws but, we do lobby for them and encourage people to see the value behind building green. We now have a project called Better Places for People, where it is believed that if you build green, it will have positive impacts on your health and wellbeing. I believe that you can



start implementing the principles of positive psychology in buildings too. The green way of designing itself is revolutionary as it is more integrated and consultation with all stakeholders starts from the first day.

**MEJPP:** Is there anything else you'd like to add in terms of your hopes for the future?

**MA:** The region is going through very tough times and conflict is creating a lot of negativity and this is affecting our younger generations. I've worked a lot with refugees and recently developed a strategy for *Save The Children* in Jordan, where I saw that despite hardships brought by the civil war, many positive opportunities can be cultivated. I'd like researchers to take a deeper look into the impact these regional conflicts are having on the coming generations and what can be done to minimize the negative impacts and transform the lives of people displaced or harmed into something better. In sum, how can we instill a culture of positivity into conflict communities that have been taught to look unfavorably to the "other"? When dialogue ceases to exist and when violence is responded to with violence, extremism on all sides grows, especially when there is human loss, and this becomes a vicious circle. At some stage, we need to establish dialogue, talk and see the humanness of the other. There are also many stereotypes that are not helpful and that stem from a lack of research. For example, people say, extremism or violence exists because the economy is bad, and yet, many of these extremists come from very wealthy families. Another is that they lack education; the fact, however, is that many of them are well educated. We are too quick to rely on stereotypes to make sense of situations we can't understand. It is not just about being deprived, in many cases, but about finding an alternative to realize people's real potential and be part of something positive and fulfilling. So, what is it that people need? How can we avoid reaching situations where violence becomes the only answer? What would help people in this part of the world realize their potential, become more tolerant, find other venues through which they can discuss issues instead of resorting to extreme measures? At the end of the day, they are people too. They have families, they have children. We've lost this human touch and need more of it.

#### Readings of Interest

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