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Posted by steve on 04/07/2011



Dr Kadria Ali Abdelmotaal hopes Heliopolis University for Sustainable Development will lead to a more eco-friendly Egypt

Perpetually gridlocked traffic coughs infinite exhaust from barely tuned engines; foothills of non-biodegradable rubbish lie dormant on city street corners, plastic bottles and bags play starring roles; while authorities struggle to supply 80 million-plus people with their daily power, a gargantuan task even before considering how sustainable its delivery will be.

Egypt surely challenges the convictions of all but the most ardent environmentalist; enough to have them curled up in the foetal position, reconsidering their lofty ideals.

However, solutions to this environmental chaos are indeed budding from this soon-to-reborn desert state. In 2012 a new eco-focussed university will open its doors, ambitiously aiming to foster a revolutionary order of environmental habits in the country.

The Heliopolis University for Sustainable Development will offer degrees in subjects such as Organic Agriculture and Sustainable Engineering in Renewable Energy, stepping outside courses traditionally demanded by the privileged minority here.

“It is the first university in Egypt, or maybe even the world, having sustainable development as its main vision and role,” says Dr Kadria Ali Abdelmotaal, president of the Heliopolis Academy.

“We want to have the concept of sustainable development in each and every of our curricula. We work with local and international experts to achieve this.”

The university is sponsored by organic agribusiness co-operative Sekem, as part of its established education arm, which already includes schools and a technical academy. From its commercial profits it also funds a Development Foundation (an NGO) designed for “the Egyptian community to have a better life”.

The fledgling university, eight years in the planning, will open its classrooms in the first semester of 2012 with four ‘schools’ - sustainable engineering, pharmacy, agriculture, and business economics, limited to 150 students each initially.

The project was given the green light by deposed president Hosni Mubarak in 2009, but Dr Ali Abdelmotaal says post-revolutionary Egypt is more open to the concept than back then.

“Before the revolution we had our doubts that what we are trying to convey to society will be understood and accepted, but we don’t feel this anymore. I’m confident that the young generation is very open and aware and we will find our target.”

Sekem (‘vitality from the sun’ in ancient Egyptian) specialises in organic and biodynamic products, such as processed foods, beauty products and organic cotton. Its products are probably too expensive to appear on the daily shopping lists of a large proportion of Egyptians. Dr Ali Abdelmotaal insists the university itself is aimed at academic elite, regardless of their socio-economic background, as long as they possess an “ability to care about the earth” – bankrolled by a series of scholarships in conjunction with its corporate partners.

The campus lies in Ismailia, north-east of Cairo, and the idea is to engage with the community as well as catering to businesses ready to trot down the sustainable path for the first time.

“It will address the problems of the areas surrounding the university – we don’t intend it to be an isolated academic tower,” Dr Ali Abdelmotaal says. “Also a lot of new companies in Egypt are just starting to be interested in these new areas like solar panels and wind energy – and by the time our students graduate I’m sure it will be much more aware of it.”

Eventually there will be 13 divisions in the university, including courses in nursing and physiotherapy.

“The general principles of sustainability will be taught as part of the programme. So they will know as part of their daily tasks how not to consume a lot of electricity, energy and how to recycle things.”

Time will tell just how a subject such as nursing can be taught more sustainably than other universities, but most students have adequate ‘greenwash’ filters these days.

Egypt’s new government will play a crucial part in fostering programs such as this, but it has a stockpile of more pressing issues it will have to face in the short term. Ultimately, however, what companies and governments do means little without the will of the people.