

# SEKEM *Insight*

SEKEM's Journal for Culture, Economy,  
Society and Ecology in Egypt

## Editorial

Dear Readers,

work on the Heliopolis University is taking shape. This month, long-term supporter of SEKEM and global activist for peace and conflict resolution Scilla Elworthy reports on her experience of working with employees of the newly inaugurated institution. She also speaks about her impressions after the revolts of 2011 during a recent visits to Egypt, a country still in transition and suffering from economic and immaterial turmoil. Scilla also explains why she thinks that the work of SEKEM and of the Heliopolis University for the sustainable advancement of the country is so important, especially in times like these.

The, Christiane Braun-Pfister, a trainer from Germany tells us about her stay of two months as a guest in SEKEM's firm Naturetex. Her article recalls the many ways individuals can help SEKEM develop Egypt. Opportunities for involvement at SEKEM (preferably for at least several months) allow individuals to experience the SEKEM idea for themselves and come to their own conclusion. Finally, we direct your attention to an upcoming exhibition involving SEKEM in Ghent, Belgium.

## Your Team of Editors

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### Sustainability

Small Oases of Transformation

### Water

Source of Life in the Desert

### Products

New Black Tea Introduced by ISIS

## Egypt: Small Oases of Transformation in a Country of Change

The new Heliopolis university in Cairo has developed from SEKEM principles and is devoted entirely to sustainable development. Scilla Elworthy reports on the challenges of setting the pace of social innovation in education.



*The Heliopolis University has established itself as one of the few academic institutions throughout world that are predominantly focused on driving sustainability in the global South.*

On land that 30 years ago was nothing but desert, you can now walk through acres and acres of lush lucerne, knee-deep camomile, and the tall golden spikes of evening primrose. This is SEKEM, the organic farm 60 km north east of Cairo pioneered by Dr Ibrahim Abouleish, who went as a young Egyptian to study pharmacology in Austria and then introduced the concepts of Goethe and of Rudolf Steiner to Egypt. The encounter

of east and west merged in a new concept of sustainable community in the Egyptian desert.

In the midst of this oasis, there's a massive processing plant where they produce phyto-pharmaceuticals, prepare hundreds of tons of organic vegetables for export, and train seven hundred farmers in bio-dynamics. Each morning the employees gather in groups of about 100 and after a short

prayer, each person says what they're going to do today – an eclectic mix of German precision and Egyptian insouciance. It baffles visitors but it works.

## An Oasis of Transformation in the Desert

It takes almost an hour to get to Heliopolis, the university in Cairo that has developed from SEKEM principles and - as far as I know - is the only one in the global South devoted entirely to sustainable development. To get there we drive through miles of desolation – abandoned attempts to tame the desert, mountains of plastic garbage everywhere, perilous half built apartment blocks that the desperately poor have already moved into.

When you arrive at Heliopolis University, right near the airport, you discover another oasis, albeit urban this time. Casuarina trees surround the buildings - trees that manage with almost no water to hold the soil in sandstorms - and in the centre a botanical garden with herbs planted according to their properties, by a full time efficient volunteer German herbalist. Vast airy buildings in colours of biscuit and peach, original local paintings on the walls, and an excellent café allow you to forget the smog for a while.

The challenge for this university is whether it can become much more than a conventional course delivery factory, and instead pioneer in higher education what the SEKEM social enterprise has done so brilliantly in agriculture, winning awards & accolades worldwide.

- Can it build real community?
- Can it model, live, the values that will enable human beings to survive, and thrive, in the 21st century?
- Can it set the pace of social innovation in education; for example, can degrees in engineering, business and pharmacy embody sustainable development?



SEKEM is experimenting with innovative methods education not only through the Heliopolis University. Here school children literally have a lesson in nature on the grounds of the SEKEM School.

## Social Advancement Begins with the Individual

As with all attempts at social transformation in this bumpy age we are going through, Heliopolis has its internal tensions. My undertaking was to deliver a 3-day course to provide the leadership and teaching staff with the personal and interpersonal skills to engage with the challenges facing a new university, as well as to catalyse positive social change with the young people of Egypt. My starting point – which I share with the founder Dr. Abouleish - is that the key to transformation lies in realising that change starts with us, and within us. It is only by becoming the change we want to see in the world, as Gandhi said, that we can actually affect what happens in the world at a deep level.

We know from experience that if the 'inner' issues in any enterprise are not addressed, the outer 'results' can be severely compromised. Energy can drain away in misunderstandings, tensions and feuds. The course therefore started with the personal and more

internal issues, progressing via team building work to addressing the challenges currently facing Egypt.

## Challenges on a Grand Scale

The economy is dangerously close to collapsing. Political uncertainties generated by the uprising, the continuing street violence and the elusive national consensus have combined to worsen Egypt's economic and financial situation. Tourism has fallen sharply, foreign direct investment has shied away, Egyptian domestic capital has fled, and the central bank has begun to run out of usable reserves. The economy is now teetering on the brink of disaster. Foreign currency reserves dropped from \$36 billion to below \$14 billion. Manufacturing industries in need of hard currency encounter harsh restrictions, fuel shortages are common, and the number of people living on less than \$2 per day has risen substantially. Each day en route to the university we passed kilometre-long queues of motorists waiting for petrol; the grid-lock of Cairo traffic and almost total absence of workable public transport render logistics a nightmare; and corruption and cronyism has far from disappeared.



**YOU CAN VISIT SEKEM YOURSELF:**  
[WWW.SEKEM-REISEN.DE](http://WWW.SEKEM-REISEN.DE)  
[WWW.AVENTERRA.DE](http://WWW.AVENTERRA.DE)



By contrast the knowledge, enthusiasm and commitment of the university teaching staff, particularly the younger female faculty members, was remarkable. We were able to cover complex personal topics, including the various methodologies for self-awareness, and the concept of projection - an ego defence mechanism when our thoughts, impulses and feelings are projected onto another person or peoples.

### Team Building

When it came to team building work, we examined how a short meditation practice can be an effective way to start the day and connect with a young team. We worked out how to build a safe container for their work, cultivating an atmosphere of trust where colleagues can rely on one another. We tackled the challenge of balancing masculine and feminine qualities in each person, whether male or female, which they tackled with considerably less embarrassment and more clarity than similar groups in the UK.

Then it was time to address the challenges currently facing Egypt, and examine how we can harness the energy of conflict, and use it to transform a chaotic situation. We used live examples that produced a lot of laughing – a welcome relief from the intensity of the current situation.

Lastly we investigated the problems raised by the new Social Innovation Centre at Heliopolis – and how difficult it is for some of the older faculty to really buy in to social innovation. The under thirty fives swept us through with their commitment to community building, both in Heliopolis University and in their new ventures in the desert.

Notwithstanding the vast challenges facing Egypt, Heliopolis University has a good chance of becoming an oasis of social entrepreneurship as inspiring and effective as its parent, SEKEM.

*Scilla Elworthy*

Scilla Elworthy is a long-time SEKEM supporter and the founder of "Peace Direct", an NGO in the United Kingdom seeking to strengthen peace and conflict resolution worldwide.

## Respect, Perseverance, and a true Interest in Personal Encounters

Christiane Braun-Pfister, trainer and consultant in pedagogy, family life, and community building, visited SEKEM for a couple of months to work at the textile company Naturetex. She recalls her experiences in a short article.

Since I had been attending the annual Islam seminar hosted by SEKEM in 2008, I had felt the desire to work in Egypt and with the Egyptians in SEKEM. The time and circumstances had to mature for quite a while, but it eventually happened that I could come to Cairo in February and March of 2013 for work in the puppet-making workshop of SEKEM's company for the production of natural textiles, Naturetex.

For two months, I was a part of a team composed almost entirely of Egyptians. However, the nature of my mission, the work I was supposed to accomplish and pretty much everything else initially was open for negotiation. At first, I could clearly feel the amazement, both the few European employees, Egyptian co-workers, visitors, and guests, as I struggled to integrate myself into their ranks. At SEKEM, some few international co-workers contribute to the work of the Egyptian staff, mainly in quality control and international sales.

With my very limited knowledge of Egyptian Arabic and English, I tried to answer questions, to reduce scepticism and put myself into a good and personal relationship with my immediate colleagues. Of course I wanted what to apply practically what I had heard about life in Egypt and the skills needed in intercultural collaboration. For me, this intercultural encounter mainly meant to experience and contribute to the development of a sense of togetherness of the Orient and the Occident, to help with mutual learning. I am convinced that we must do so in order to survive in the future as mankind.

I met many people with whom I could exchange my ideas about Islam and from whom I could learn a lot



*Christiane Braun-Pfister worked for two months in the puppet-making workshop at Naturetex.*

– especially with respect to the commonalities of our religious beliefs.

Because of the tight linguistic boundaries, I aimed to show respect and appreciation for the work in which I participated through physical expressions, gestures, and by demonstrating „perseverance“ – in fact, the 6-day week from 8am to 4pm does need quite a bit of habituation. My work made me curious to one day also take a peek into a factory in Germany.

I also discovered opportunities where I could involve myself, for example in communication or in matters of common concern such as waste or workplace organization. Due to the limits of language, the responses that reached me let me to develop powers of the heart and of compassion, and in turn also new questions of personal relevance to my interlocutors to emerge. Thus, I greatly benefited from my initial scepticism receding, and gradually began to build open human relations created by a true interest for each other. Today, I believe more strongly that it is only here at this level of real interest in the other human being, that we can learn to live peacefully together in the human family.

*Christiane Braun-Pfister*

## Water Means Life: Resource Protection in SEKEM

SEKEM knows about the importance of the resource to its economic and human development work – on a local and on a global scale. Thus, a programme has been enacted in the recent past that aims at the preservation of the most important of all foodstuffs in agriculture.

All divine religions speak about the importance of water for the development of human life since the beginning of creation. In Egypt, the discovery of the Nile River is of special importance for the development of its people. In the Holy Quran, Allah also mentions water and its importance humankind: „We made from water every living thing“, He says here.

Water is an essential constituent of all organic life. In humans, water represents about 72% of their bodies' weight. Nevertheless, we are wasteful of precious water and today already have to fight with water scarcity in many parts of the world and even well outside of the great deserts. This year, the drought has also been making headlines again in the United States of America.

Securing the water supply is a major challenge for the international community. Developing countries must particularly be taken into account, because they, before many other countries of the global North, are confronted with increasing population growth and consumption. In recent years, a growing global sense of urgency of the situation has led to a search for new solutions to secure the protection of our water resources. SEKEM, too, understands the urgency of the issue and knows very well about the particular importance of water for its own operations and the development of the country, be it in the area of water extraction, for instance through desalination of seawater, the reuse of water, or its application chiefly in agricultural irrigation.

This crucial need for water and its commitment to the fight climate change have motivated SEKEM in the past to look even more thoroughly

for solutions that can be applied in its own framework. Thus, SEKEM has started its own programme through which it hopes to reduce water usage in agriculture and, thereby, its dependence on the river Nile. The programme includes the installation of additional deep wells on the various SEKEM farms all over Egypt. It also encompasses the smart use of the naturally available water, that, in the desert, is typically contaminated with high levels of salt. Some plants that can be used as animal food, such as *Salicornia*, tolerate high salinity of the soil they grow on. Organic fertilization with compost has further resulted in an increase of the water-retention capacity of SEKEM's arable soils by approximately 70% – a very significant success. In the long-term, this further results in less need for constant irrigation. A further option to reduce water consumption of arable soils in the desert is the system of „drip irrigation“. It brings the water in direct contact with the plant minimising the loss of excess water. Most fields are traditionally irrigated by flooding which results in the evaporation of enormous quantities of water.

SEKEM has been experimenting with new forms of irrigation not only on their own farms. It provides assistance also to its supplying smallholders. Even a new research department for water has been established at the Heliopolis University. Here, students learn not only about the value of the water; they also begin to understand how much water is actually needed to produce the food they consume. The staff of the Heliopolis University believe that it is particularly the young generation must be introduced to the topic. For in her lies Egypt's best hope.

*Fatma Sami*

## ISIS Adds Black Tea to its Product Portfolio



A steaming cup of hot tea makes for great relaxation after a long day's work and provides well-deserved opportunity for reflection and contemplation. Still, how often do we consider what exactly is in the tea that we enjoy so much? How much do we know about the methods by which it was grown and processed?

ISIS has just complemented its assortment of organic products with a fully certified organic black tea, one of the products most requested by customers. The black tea from the Assam region of India is fully compliant with organic production standards and its production process is overseen by ISIS to ensure the highest possible quality. ISIS monitors the production and processing of the tea on the Indian organic plantation along the entire chain of manufacture from planting to harvesting and drying to processing and packing by hand, to ensure an outstanding product.

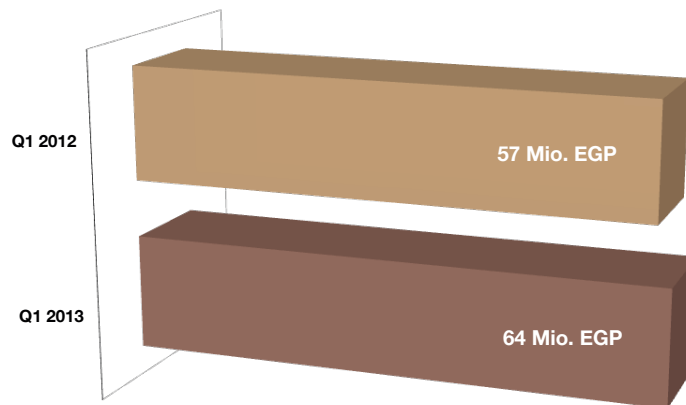
In accordance with the Egyptian preference, the tea is provided as a granule, its packaging clearly indicating its ingredients and nutritional values – another example of the importance ISIS attaches to the consumer health and the safety of its products.

*Fatma Sami*

! More information:  
<http://www.isisorganic.com>

## The Business Development of the SEKEM Group of Companies in the 1. Quarter 2013

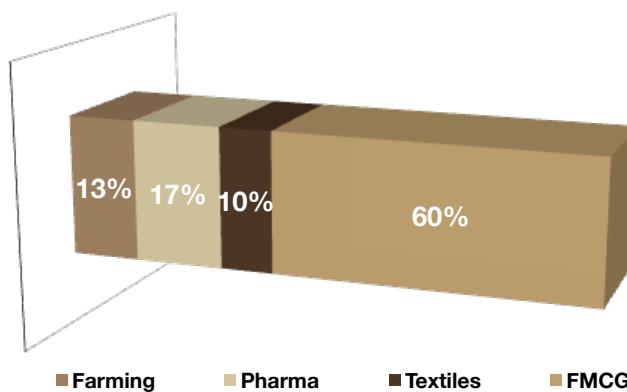
Turnover (consolidated)



Share of Sales (Domestic vs. Export)



Shares of Sales (by Sector)



FMCG = Fast-Moving Consumer Goods



## Impressions from SEKEM



It was an exciting and lively open day at the Heliopolis University on 8 May 2013. He had started with a „talent show“ and an exchange among the students on issues they value most in the current life at the institution. They used the opportunity to share questions and wishes concerning teaching, research and general institutional operations. Then they went on to a more sportive kind of exchange: as part of a small, improvised „marathon“ the male students sprinted a whole 2 km, the female ones a mile around the campus, and they all did so in very hot weather. All of the runners were enthusiastic after reaching the finish line and there were trophies and medals for the lucky winners. Everyone met at the campus' own coffee shop, the „ISI Café“ afterwards.

After the run, the afternoon was spent drawing and painting, especially in the countryside in and around the campus of the Heliopolis University. All participants used opportunity to experience their natural environment more closely with great interest. A „festival of colours“ with dance and games concluded the day in a truly colourful manner – not only on the canvasses of the young students.



## Exhibition Presents Initiatives for a "Healing of the Earth"

The Belgian artist Frank Liefoghe asked SEKEM to contribute to an exhibition on art and social initiatives that aims to deal with the theme of "healing the earth". Liefoghe has been in contact with SEKEM for a long time and knows its initiatives well.

Through the exhibition, the organizers intend to present "creative solutions to global environmental challenges of the 21st century". They wish to encourage the public to submit their own proposals for technical solutions. The goal is to inspire people to develop their own creative approaches to pressing contemporary issues – also and specifically within their own neighbourhoods.

Hendrik Bakker from the Dutch SEKEM support group set out to prepare six banners with photos about work, education and the art of living which are to be used in the exhibition. Most photos were taken by the Dutch photographer Michiel Wijnbergh who visited SEKEM in 2007 and made it the object of an extensive series of photos. The exhibition will take place during the summer months in a gothic church in Ghent, Belgium, and address an international audience.

Source: Hendrik Bakker



### Masthead:

The editors of SEKEM Insight wish to thank all contributors to this issue.

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### Pictures:

3, 4, 5, 6: SEKEM; 1: Bijan Kafi

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# creation assistance

"Creative Assistance" aims to gather and highlights creative solutions for global environmental challenges of the 21st century, in particular the water related challenges. **EACH ONE OF YOU**, adults well as youth, are warmly invited to share their technical solutions to be applied in connection with their environment, as well as creative and artful applications to enhance their own neighbourhood. The different solutions will be assembled in the project "Creative Assistance" and highlighted through exhibitions in different corners of the world. "Creation Assistance" will inspire people of all culture and all ages, to come up with concrete and innovative solutions for the actual environmental challenges.

## A FRANK LIEFOOGHE PROJECT CONCEPT

**PROJECT PRESIDENT BART DE VOS**  
**PRESIDENT OF THE WORLD YOUTH PARLIAMENT FOR WATER**

**You are welcome on the first "Creation Assistance" exhibition**

**Summer - June - July - August 2013**

**at the Saint Michael's Church - Ghent - Belgium**

**Open daily from 2pm till 5pm - closed on sunday**

## PARTICIPANTS

Carl Uitterhaegen Watersublimation by photos	Christine Roggeman "Moving Drawings"	Iza Cracco Animation movies	Freya Maes People allotments - Photos and mini garden
Guido Henri De Couvreur "Solar 2002" Bio-energy independent house	Jo Clauwaert Paper bag Art	Mathias Casaer "Waterscape" projection	Nayra Martin Reyes Water sublimate paintings
Phet Cheng Suor Artdresses and sculptures	Proviron "Algenpilot Hoge Maey" Algaeculture for the bio- r w material of the future	Sekem Kreis Education-art-nature regeneration and social justice project	Sint-Lutgardis and Sint-Jozef Ostend - Knitting by woolremnants for the poor
Sylvie Steyaert Jewels made by waste	World Youth Parliament for water Bottle light	Els Jacobs Artdresses and shawls	Patricia Creyns Paintings on newspapers
Dr Prof Donald Gabriëls Greening the desert through water captation	Jan-De-Nul-Group Soil decontamination technics	Frank Liefoghe - Jean Bouche "Disaster Free Habitats"	Rocket-stove Quick hot - less energy