

Dr. Ibrahim Abouleish - SEKEM Founder

About Born in Egypt in 1937, Dr. Ibrahim Abouleish moved to Austria in 1956. He studied chemistry and medicine at the University of Graz where he also received his Ph.D.. Thereafter he engaged in medical research, and was Head for medical research centre. In 1975, on a visit to Egypt, he became aware of its pressing problems in education, overpopulation and pollution. In 1977 Dr. Abouleish decided to establish the SEKEM Initiative for sustainable development in Egypt.

3 Questions to Dr. Ibrahim Abouleish You spent around 20 years in Europe. How does this experience affect your personality and the foundation of SEKEM?

During my time in Europe I noticed inner changes taking place. I became thoroughly involved with European culture, getting to know its music, studying its poetry and philosophy. Somebody looking into my soul would not have seen anything “Egyptian” left, so completely had I absorbed everything new. Despite this I still felt grounded in Egyptian culture because of my upbringing during childhood and adolescence. I existed in two worlds, both which I felt were completely different from each other: the oriental spiritual stream I was born into and the European, which I felt was my chosen course. But during this time I also started experiencing moments when these two streams met in my soul, when I was neither Egyptian nor European. The two completely differing worlds within me slowly began to dissolve and merge into a third entity: A synthesis, a real uniting of two cultures.

When I then visited Egypt in 1975 I realized the bad circumstances that Egypt got into. I developed the SEKEM vision out of my own experiences and thoughts in the past years: Sustainable Development towards a future where every human being can unfold his or her individual potential; where mankind is living together in social forms reflecting human dignity; and where all economic activity is conducted in accordance with ecological and ethical principles.

The concept of SEKEM is strongly influenced by the intellectual life including the philosophy, arts and culture that I got to know in Europe. I experienced that development needs a holistic approach – the cultural and societal life should receive the same awareness as the economic and legislative point of views. And of course all these dimensions are embedded to the ecology, which is the valuable foundation of everything.

Until today SEKEM has an enriching and trustful exchange with many European institutions, such as the SEKEM Friends Associations or the International Association of Partnership (IAP). We are connected by the values and a deep understanding of sustainable development.

Which role does religion play in SEKEM and in your own life?

SEKEM developed out of my own vision. My spiritual inspiration came out of very different cultures: a synthesis between the Islamic world and European spirituality. I moved around freely in these different areas as if in a great garden, picking fruits of different trees. I would have felt I was restricting myself if I had to limit myself to one way of thinking. But I felt there was enough inner space for everything in me.

I do not want to be known as a religious person but rather as a striving, practising person. I have a goal, ideal: Allah’s qualities, his ninety-nine names. He is for example called the patient one, the knowing one, the merciful one, the forgiving one any many more.

I place the consciousness of Allah at the centre of my work, in the knowledge that everything we do and experience is not only of an earthly nature, but is supported by spiritual worlds. SEKEM has been created as something new out of both earthly and spiritual encounters. All religions and cultures have their place in SEKEM and we are surrounded by the good thoughts of many friends all over the world who give SEKEM spiritual energy.

How do you see SEKEM in the future?

How a living and learning community is going to develop, is one my main thoughts since the SEKEM vision came to my mind. From the beginning, there was this ideal of a human community that, by a permanent will of development, creates a living spirit that is sustainable and thereby building the perfect foundation to the future. SEKEM developed and unfolded during the last three decades and is today a living and constantly reinventing and learning community. Thus, it will find its way into the future and may even become a role model for others. We can already see today how parts of the SEKEM mission are taken for instance by the Egyptian government. We want to carry the SEKEM impulse into the world on an international level to spread our vision of sustainable development. I see it very important to build the future on an invisible net of life, which connects people with their hearts. This invisible connection of people is more powerful than the most dangerous weapon, and unattainable for all outer violence. Only from it can real peace radiate.

