Arab States • Egypt

SEKEM: A Holistic Egyptian Initiative

Prepared by • Tarek Hatem (Egypt)
Sector • Agriculture
Enterprise Class • Large National Company
Summary

In 1977, the Sekem initiative was founded by Dr. Ibrahim Abouleish to support the development of the individual, society and the earth, through the initiative’s various economic, social and cultural activities. Sekem’s group includes eight companies: Libra for farming, Mizan for organic seedlings, Hator for fresh fruits and vegetables, Lotus for herbs and spices, Isis for organic foods and beverages (such as bread, dairy products, oils, spices and tea), Conytext for organic cotton and textile fabrics, Atos for pharmaceutical products, and Ecoprofit (under establishment) for sustainable management.

Sekem’s philosophy is to “learn by doing and do while learning, emphasizing on-the-job training and improving employees’ practical skills. Sekem’s goals are many and include seeking to build its group of companies’ activities so that they can strengthen each other, establishing alliances and long-term bonds with partners, emphasizing local culture, exploring the potential to learn through work, restoring the natural environment through biodynamic agriculture, providing a variety of high quality products and services, providing education and health facilities for both children and adults and encouraging research and development.

Sekem’s efforts have contributed to the Egyptian community in various economic, social and cultural dimensions. With 2,000 employees, and 850 associated small-scale farmers, Sekem has succeeded in organically cultivating 3,500 hectares of land in 2005 and has benefited about 25,000 people through the Sekem Development Foundation (SDF) and the Cooperative for Sekem Employees (CSE).

Positive Outcomes for the Poor

- Sekem sources fruits, vegetables, medicinal herbs, cotton, grains and seeds from over 180 small-scale farms and 850 farmers
- Sekem produces a large variety of high quality crops and herbal medicinal plants for domestic and international markets that suit the real needs of consumers
- Sekem provides work for approximately 2,000 people
- Sekem provides employees, as well as residents from surrounding areas, opportunities to enhance their education, health and living conditions
- Each of Sekem’s companies has a human resources executive who is accountable for staff members’ affairs such as training, career development and medical insurance to guarantee a healthy and fruitful workplace
- Sekem’s Academy for Applied Arts & Science integrates arts and science into daily life
- The Cooperative of Sekem Employees (CSE) aims to build communal structures that will guarantee respect for employees, ensure equal opportunity and reinforce the spirit of brotherhood among community members
- Sekem’s Medical Center provides comprehensive health care and preventive services to approximately 30,000 patients of the group’s employees and Sekem’s school children, as well as patients from surrounding communities
• Approximately 50 children between ages three and six attend Sekem Kindergarten and approximately 300 students, who are mostly the children of Sekem’s employees, are enrolled in Sekem’s School
• Sekem has created a literacy program, which is administered by Sekem Development Foundation (SDF)
• 200 youth trainees participate annually in Sekem’s three-year Vocational Training Program that guides them in their chosen professions
• Sekem’s special education programs allowed participants to direct new, successful lives and to contribute to their communal incorporation

Major Challenges Faced
• Extremely adverse growing conditions due to the very poor soil quality, limited water supply, absence of a direct road to Cairo and intermittent electricity supply
• Establishing concrete social policies for proper functioning of the organization
• Finding an investment partner
• A tedious and complicated administrative environment
• Raising peoples’ awareness of biodynamic agriculture
• Certifying Sekem’s organic products to be viable in the marketplace

Success Factors and Innovations
• Sekem was the leader in establishing pesticide-free farming techniques in Egypt
• Sekem created a comprehensive socio-economic model to develop cultural, social and economic aspects while preserving the environment
• Sekem established cooperative agreements with governments, alliances with NGOs and partnerships in the field of biodynamic agriculture, medicine, and education to develop a continuous mutual interaction among farmers, producers and traders in order to deliver the highest quality products to consumers
• Sekem Development Foundation (SDF) included educational activities and several projects in the areas of economic development and health care
• Sekem introduced Key Performance Indicators to review employees and evaluate their performance according to objective criteria and goal achievements
• Sekem was awarded ISO 9001 in 1997 and ISO 17025 in 2005. In 2003, the Sekem initiative was awarded the Right Livelihood Award (the “Alternative Nobel Prize”) for its endeavors in sustainable socio-economic development. It was chosen as the "World Wide Project" of the Hannover EXPO 2000

Opportunities for Replication and Scaling Up
• In partnership with the Fountain Foundation in South Africa and the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, Sekem shares its best practices with other countries; examples include India, Palestine, Senegal and Turkey