

Youth viewpoint: For the love of Egypt

Environmental activism is the best counterpoint to the attitude of those Egyptians who would rather leave Egypt than help save it, writes [Ahmed El-Dorghamy*](#)

Meeting well-off Egyptians who want to leave their homeland is not surprising anymore. Their money may go a long way in a country like Egypt; however, a vibrant life and a healthy environment for their children cannot be bought. They will commonly tell you "Look out of the window." Indeed, there is no more space to have a pleasant walk, it's too noisy, too crowded, garbage is everywhere, and the air is suffocating.

Daily life in urban Egypt has been growing increasingly unpleasant over the decades. Even those who decide to stay have mentally detached themselves from their environments. Not many are prepared to take on the burden of knowledge readily. Few will sit and reflect on the reasons behind an advertising campaign desperately seeking resources to establish a children's cancer hospital. What can they do?

Perhaps the few that do reflect and keep their minds in Egypt can make a difference, however. The recent history of civic engagement in environmental activism in Egypt can tell us a lot and inspire many.

Notably since the 1970s, many admirable civil society organisations (CSOs) have taken up local challenges. They initially focused on the aesthetics of our deteriorating urban environment, which incidentally might have started the lasting stereotypical impression of the "tree-hugger" among the less informed. With time, and usually international support for capacity building, CSOs started addressing demanding problems in environmental justice and human rights, environmental law and policies, housing and community development, eco-tourism, renewable energy, biodiversity, industrial ecology, management of natural resources, solid waste management, and cleaner production, to name just a few of an ever-growing list. The government and academia have been developing in the right direction as well, but have both been weighed down by bureaucratic inertia and overstretched resources, among other difficulties.

Better late than never, environmental awareness in Egypt, instigated by some alarming incidents, has finally pushed the environment towards the top of the national agenda. Indeed, Egypt's problems have been deemed grave enough for a constitutional amendment. Article 59 of the Egyptian constitution now states that, "Conserving the environment is a national duty". Advice of international environmental institutions suggests that the sustainable way to fulfil this duty is through partnerships between government, the private sector, and NGOs in alliance with community and grassroots organisations.

However, CSOs must make a head start in this alliance; otherwise, they will have a lot of time to kill. That is for two main reasons: first, the fact that there are at least 17 ministries involved in the administration of over 80 laws and decrees, including environmental components. Internal harmonisation within the government is necessary before arranging to partner with others. Second, although a National Environmental Action Plan (2002/2017) for Egypt has been issued, the same document concedes that there is a lack of environmental expertise in the government, claiming that the field is relatively new in Egypt.

Again, the need for ample time and resources for capacity building are implied. This might not be achieved anytime soon, not without professional practices of human resource management in the government to maintain a high calibre. Therefore there is a need for urgent and extensive intervention and support from the organised and enlightened of civil society. Many CSOs have come to prove worthy of being outsourced for environmental activities and they are able to promote ownership and incorporate the social and economic components for sustainability. Examples are multiplying by the day.

The Association for the Protection of the Environment (APE) has conducted truly inspiring programmes in solid waste management in the Zabbaleen area, the city of Cairo's garbage collectors. The programmes additionally integrated components of healthcare, literacy, and computer literacy to empower locals. Today, among the garbage men are many who have travelled abroad, have been featured on international television, and even hosted delegations from developing countries visiting to learn from them. The simple-yet-experienced Zabbaleen manage to swiftly recycle 85 per cent of what they collect, whereas stumbling international companies are increasing landfills and burning waste. The APE NGO managed to break a vicious cycle of poverty, ignorance and social segregation, and today the development has been extended to other parts of Cairo and Sinai.

The Friends of the Environment Association (FEA) is a civil society advocacy group based in Alexandria. It has won several cases against the government and the private sector on environmental matters. One of their successful campaigns put an end to dumping in Lake Maryut, saving an entire local economy dependent on fishing and putting an end to the deteriorating health of thousands of fishermen and residents.

The Arab Office for Youth and Environment (AOYE) is where the idea of the National Environment Day was born. The NGO has a 30-year history of successful projects, some of which have later been transferred to the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency, such as the Hotline Environmental Service Unit, and the Cairo House training centre.

The Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA) struggled tirelessly to save Giftun Island from a \$2 billion tourism development plan to turn the pristine island into what real estate developers called a "New Ibiza". HEPCA's campaign was a success, and Giftun proudly remains one of the top five diving sites in the world, a major nesting ground for green turtles and host to a diversity of marine species, to say the least.

The Friends of the Environment and Development Association (FEDA) has been focusing on endangered cultural heritage in historical areas with fragile ecological systems since 1993. Its most recent project was a sweeping restoration of the historic Gamalia district in Islamic Cairo, including infrastructure upgrading and community development. Another community development association, El-Bassaisa, introduced renewable energy in Sharqia Governorate. The association promoted biogas and solar technology and made sure they built the local technical and administrative capacity to sustain and replicate active projects.

Furthermore, a recent revolutionary popularisation of online social networking in Egypt has sparked many youth-led initiatives for environmental causes, many finding support from the private sector or international environmental organisations. Also, in the recent years, availability of local information has improved drastically to better inform stakeholders with local and up-to-date information. Examples are the national and the governorate Environmental Action Plans,

guidebooks targeting Egyptians, maps and statistics, national human development reports, or simply documentation of environmental projects implemented around Egypt with lessons learnt.

There is more potential today to effectively engage in environmental action than ever before, for those who choose to keep their minds and hearts in Egypt and hope, and may soon manage, to keep their lungs clean.

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