



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Sekem / Ibrahim Abouleish (Egypt)

(2003)



Ibrahim Abouleish

...for a 21st century business model which combines commercial success with social and cultural development.

Dr. Ibrahim Abouleish was born in Egypt in 1937. He began his studies in chemistry and medicine at the University of Graz, Austria, receiving his Ph.D. in Pharmacology in 1969. He then engaged in pharmaceutical research, taking on the position as Head of Division for pharmaceutical research until 1977.

In 1975, on a visit to Egypt, he was overwhelmed by the country's pressing problems in overpopulation, environmental degradation, inadequate education and health care. Agriculture involves 40% of the workforce and remains the least developed sector of the Egyptian economy. Cost of agricultural production has increased while the resource base has shrunk. Today, Egypt has become one of the world's largest importers of food.

It was to address these interrelated problems that Abouleish returned to Egypt in 1977, and established a comprehensive development initiative, which he called SEKEM. Over the years, SEKEM has built a thriving social and cultural base to address Egypt's crumbling health, educational and cultural preservation capacities.

SEKEM is about establishing the blueprint for the healthy corporation of the 21st century. Taking its name from the hieroglyphic transcription meaning "vitality of the sun", SEKEM was the first entity to develop biodynamic farming methods in Egypt. These methods are based on the premise that organic cultivation improves agro-biodiversity and does not produce any unusable waste. All products of the system can be either sold or re-used in cultivation, thereby creating a sustainable process.

SEKEM is formed by three closely interrelated entities: The SEKEM Holding Company comprising six companies, each responsible for an aspect of SEKEM's business value proposition, the Egyptian Society for Cultural Development (SCD), responsible for all cultural aspects, and the Cooperative of SEKEM Employees (CSE), responsible for human resource development. Working together, they

have created a modern corporation based on innovative agricultural products and a responsibility towards society and environmental sustainability.

The SEKEM "mother farm" and processing facilities are located on 300 hectares of land near the town of Belbeis, 60 km away from Cairo. To spread the sustainable agricultural method and secure raw material for the SEKEM companies, the Egyptian Biodynamic Association (EBDA) was established - a non-governmental, non-profit organization to provide training and consultancy to all the farmers in Egypt enabling them to apply the organic and biodynamic agricultural method and getting the necessary certifications. Until today the EBDA has succeeded in facilitating the conversion of more than 650 farms with over 16000 acres to biodynamic farming from Aswan to Alexandria. Through its research, EBDA was the first in the world to supervise the cultivation and harvesting of biodynamic cotton in 1991. One direct result of this achievement probably was a landmark reduction in the use of synthetic pesticides sprayed by airplane by up to 90 percent, from over 35,000 tons per year.

In 1990 SEKEM facilitated the establishment of the Center of Organic Agriculture in Egypt (COAE) as a regulatory and certification body, according and adhering to DEMETER guidelines and the European Regulations for Organic Agriculture.

SEKEM has grown exponentially to a nationally renowned enterprise and market leader of organic products and phyto-pharmaceuticals. It has established reliable links with European and U.S. customers in the export trade. Moreover, 55% of its sales are domestic - an essential element for SEKEM's long-term sustainability. Today, 1,800 people work in SEKEM. Through cooperation on projects with sister organizations in Germany and the Netherlands, SEKEM has received support from institutions such as the European Commission, Ford Foundation, USAID, and the Acumen Fund.

The SCD is SEKEM's way of reaching out beyond its commercial activity in pursuit of its goal to contribute to "the comprehensive development of Egyptian society". It employs approximately 200 people in four main domains of activity:

- a kindergarten, primary and secondary school;
- a work-and-education program for children from poorer families;
- a Medical Center providing modern medical services and an outreach program;
- the Heliopolis Academy for Sustainable Development.

SEKEM is also founding a private University offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in arts, science and technology. SEKEM is increasingly seeking to share its experience and acquired knowledge with other countries (including India, Palestine, Senegal and Turkey), and has a partnership for this purpose with the Fountain Foundation in South Africa.

In an article, which appeared in Business Today Egypt, the Sekem Group was described as "an economic powerhouse", but the Group describes its approach, based on social and ethical awareness and responsibility, partnership and transparency, as the 'economics of love'.

Dr. Ibrahim Abouleish was elected as one of the distinguished Social Entrepreneurs by the Schwab Foundation. Being a Muslim, he also emphasizes the consistency of SEKEM's approach with Islam: "All the different aspects of the company, whether the cultural ones or the economic ones, have been developed out of Islam. We believe that it is possible to derive guiding principles for everything from pedagogics, to the arts, to economics from Islam."