

## Integration of organic farming in the west Nile: Learnings from Dr. Alia Gana's visit to Sekem's living lab in Egypt

*In the first week of March, Dr. Alia Gana, leader of the MA4SURE's policy analysis (WP5) visited the Egyptian Living lab of the project located in the district of Belbeis (Egypt). The visit allowed Dr. Gana to identify the elements of the socio-economic context that influence the dynamics of sustainable agriculture in Egypt.*

The main objective of Dr. Gana's was to advance towards the socio-political analysis of the MA4SURE project in Egypt. To do so, the visit consisted of a tour to the Sekem farm and MA4SURE agroforestry experimental plot, and several meetings with Sekem and Heliopolis University partners, as well as visits and meetings with nearby contract farmers and other local actors to learn more about the productive and social initiatives of the Sekem.

### The farm visit: an integrated and diverse environment.

The farm tour showed the extent and diversity of the agricultural production in the Sekem farm (cereals, fodder, fruit trees, olive plantations, horticulture, medicinal and aromatic plants, livestock, beekeeping). One of the farm's pivotal aspects is the adoption of biodynamic practices and the integrated crop-livestock system. The production and use of organic compost is at the heart of the technical system, which also includes the generalised use of water saving techniques.



The horizontal integration of agricultural production is accompanied by a vertical integration of Sekem's activities. For instance, various companies attached to Sekem focus on processing medicinal and aromatic plants, herb teas, olive oil, textile, cereal products, honey, etc.



The experimental plot set up by the Egyptian research team associated with the MA4SURE project, carries out experiments on agroforestry, direct seeding and more efficient water saving techniques. Together, the horizontal integration of agricultural production is accompanied by a vertical integration of Sekem's activities, which include the processing, packaging, and marketing of the products Sekem farm itself is a production and technical testing ground of great importance in the region.



### Beyond farm limits

Sekem farm is part of a much broader initiative from the Sekem group, and the farm impact reach extends beyond the boundaries of the land it directly manages. During her visit, Dr. Gana learned about the schools, health centres, learning workshops, among other social services provided by Sekem group. These initiatives enable the social integration of families and children from poor neighbourhoods around the Sekem farm, thus are an integral part of the social economy and sustainable development approach that guides the Sekem group's activities.

Similarly, Dr. Gana had the opportunity to meet with neighbouring contract farmers (nearly 1,500 farmers), completing an overview of the territorial actors and stakeholders and the sociocultural and political context in which the living lab is embedded. This revealed that while Sekem plays a leading role in the dissemination of a sustainable production model in the region, its social impact is based on a great deal of collaborative partnerships with contract farmers.



Dr. Gana also met with University of Heliopolis and the head of the Egyptian Bio-Dynamic Association (EBDA), two key local partners and stakeholders of the MA4SURE project. Sekem works closely with EBDA, whose work focuses on helping farmers convert to biodynamic agriculture. EBDA works with 2,600 farmers in all governorates of Egypt, 500 of whom are part of the Sekem network: supply of inputs and compost, technical assistance and training, support for renewable energy, support for product labelling, implementation of a carbon credit mechanism that allows farmers to earn additional income (ecosystem services). The aim is to accelerate the growth of organic farming, by relying on farmers' organisations. As the head of EBDA puts it, "our goal is to make organic farming the mainstream in Egypt". Similarly, a team of agricultural engineers, many alumni from University of Heliopolis and employed by Sekem carry out weekly monitoring visits to the contract farmers and carry out awareness campaigns to encourage conversion to organic farming.

#### **Future steps: challenges and opportunities.**

The growth of organic farming appears to be an adaptation strategy for farmers affected by the agricultural crisis (increased production costs and degradation of water and land resources). It also appears to be driven by a growing demand for healthy, quality products from affluent consumers.

While Sekem's action is undoubtedly a major asset for the development of sustainable agricultural practices in Egypt, as its interventions in favour of farmers are multifaceted (i.e., supply and marketing, support for conversion to organic farming and risk reduction, training, technical assistance and monitoring, profit sharing, support for farmers' organisations), the success of the Sekem project is fundamentally linked to its integration into an international network of partners and the support it provides in terms of finance, technical assistance, and marketing on European markets. However, strong constraints continue to limit this growth dynamic, especially land constraints (most farms have less than 5 feddans) and environmental problems (i.e., pollution, water shortages, rapid urbanisation, etc.).

After this visit and initial analysis, three future steps of the socio-economic component of the research in Egypt can be established. First, it is crucial to identify the constraints and assets that, at different scales, hinder or promote the development of agro-ecological practices in the region (1), and carry out an assessment of the socio-economic feasibility of the technical innovations proposed by the project (2) to finally, establish recommendations for public policies (3).

Over the next months, a collaborative team between the Egyptian and French partners will focus efforts to tackle this agenda.

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