

➔ **EGYPT:**
A CONFIDENT COMMUNITY LEARNS TO MANAGE ITS ENVIRONMENT

In a Nutshell

A poor community in northern Egypt mobilized itself to improve waste water processing. The Geziret El Sheir project succeeded in establishing a regular and fully functional system for waste water collection and disposal. As confidence grew in its own ability to bring about change, the community embarked on improvements in other aspects of environmental management. All along, local authorities offered vital contributions not only to the project, but also in replicating and upstreaming the experience.

The Story

Geziret El Sheir, an island in the Nile that is part of El Qanater city in the governorate of Qalubia, has some 7,000 inhabitants living in six small settlements. They have electricity, potable water and household cesspits, but until recently, solid waste collection was inadequate, there was no proper waste water removal, and the cesspits often overflowed. Residents were supposed to take their garbage to public dumps, but they usually flung it in the street, along the Nile or into irrigation canals. Piles of garbage and pools of stagnant water were common.

To address these issues, a project was conceived based on local dialogue and community-based participatory planning. It drew upon the active contributions of women and worked closely with the administration of the Qalubia Governorate.

The initiative is one of many supported by UNDP's Local Initiative Facility for the Urban Environment (LIFE) programme and the German Technical Assistance Agency (GTZ), both of which encourage joint action between the local community and formal institutions, as well as the participation of marginalized groups such as women in needs assessments and planning.

The initiative began with the Community Development Association (CDA) conducting initial field research and then preparing a fact-finding questionnaire with help from LIFE/GTZ, which was administered to a sample of the population. Based on these findings, multi-stakeholder workshops were held to bring residents and other actors together, introduce the participatory planning approach, build consensus on priority needs and appropriate solutions, agree on a plan of action and foster women's participation. It was decided that 25 local volunteers – 15 of them women – would act as a link between residents and the CDA, which contributed more than \$6,000 to the project. Using the ZOPP (*ziel orientere projekt planung*, or objectives-oriented project planning) methodology, workshop participants identified three priority problems ranked in descending order: cesspit overflow, lack of solid waste management and unemployment among youth.

In addition to improving the environment, the project had other, equally important social goals. These included stimulating long-term behavioural changes related to sanitation, and establishing sustainable dialogue between the community and the local authority, elected popular councils and the private sector.

Subsequently, a series of environmental awareness campaigns began urging positive attitudes towards environmental sanitation and disseminating best practices for hygienic procedures. LIFE/GTZ provided technical assistance to the CDA to prepare a management plan for waste water collection by truck, which required a database to design an efficient truck route, so houses in Geziret El Sheir were numbered for the first time. The local authority authorized the disposal of waste water in a drainage canal, and a plan was made to collect fees for regular cesspit emptying and cleaning. Paid to the CDA, the fees were decided by the community itself and were slightly higher than those that had been charged by the municipality. Residents were willing to pay because their participation in the decision-making process had given them a sense of ownership and a stake in the improvements that were taking place.

The launch of the system was celebrated in a ceremony attended by the Governor of Qalubia, members of the People's Assembly, some members of local popular councils and the CDA board, residents of the community, and representatives from other communities and NGOs who were keen to learn about the Geziret El Sheir experience.

It has since become clear that the role of local authorities was indispensable in the project's success. As partners in all its phases, they made available two workers in two shifts for the waste water collection system. They also provided technical training for the collection staff, maintenance services and equipment. And they paved half a kilometre of road to allow the truck easy access.

Once the problem of waste water collection was solved, other local initiatives began, including a solid waste management project that established a garbage collection system. But perhaps the greatest impact was the empowerment of young men and women through their work as community volunteers. They received training in how to conduct environmental awareness campaigns, disseminate a project concept, and act as a link between the CDA and the community. This training and their involvement in different project activities helped build their self-confidence and sense of empowerment. Two volunteers, one male and one female, have now become members of a Project Development Committee responsible for long-term project management after the LIFE/GTZ team has phased out. For young Egyptian women who have limited opportunities, this is a relatively acceptable and accessible way to exercise their authority and influence. At a second workshop at which 43 community representatives and local authority officials were present, women's participation was remarkable and very effective.

Results and Critical Factors

The Geziret El Sheir project created a cleaner living environment, while broadening the capacity of the community and inspiring self-confidence, including among women. Better organized community development associations and new partnerships with the local authorities have opened doors for creative initiatives and fuelled a willingness for further participation. Community volunteers, particularly youth and women, have gained the knowledge and skills to carry out environmental upgrading and citizen's awareness campaigns.

Factors that contributed to the success of the project include the following:

- The use of a systematic approach including appropriate technology, social mobilization, and community training to help small localities address big problems and benefit from a positive psychological impact
- The identification of problems clearly apparent in daily life, followed by considerable achievements, leading to bigger actions with fewer inputs and costs, and drawing upon the moral infrastructure, self-confidence and capacity
- The promotion of local dialogue as an effective means to organize communities for common action and for building effective partnerships
- The involvement of local authorities right from the beginning, which proved critical not only to the project but also in replicating and upstreaming the experience
- The employment of strategic “pre-actions” activities, such as area mapping, surveys, training of volunteers, etc., which contributed greatly to the success of the project and comprised a valuable social asset

Further information

Local Initiative Facility for the Urban Environment (LIFE). 2001. *External Evaluation of LIFE Global Programme*. Management Development and Governance Division. New York: UNDP.

Local Initiative Facility for the Urban Environment (LIFE) and German Technical Assistance (GTZ). 2001. *Geziret El Sheir: Joint Evaluation Report*.

German Ministry of Economic Cooperation (www.bmz.de).

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Forthcoming. *LIFE: A Decade of Lessons in Participatory Local Governance to Improve Living Conditions of the Poor*. New York: UNDP.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Pratibha Mehta, UNDP/LIFE.