

## Egypt

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### Lead

Uncontrolled population growth and scarce water reserves are a common scourge in many parts of the world suffering desertification. Egypt, too, faces a strong challenge from encroaching deserts, but it has one advantage: the Nile, the world's longest river, runs the length of the country.

Egypt's rapid population growth means that its arable land, only 5 per cent of the total area, is rapidly succumbing to the pressure of development.

Some studies have postulated that 1000square metres of valuable farmland in the Nile Delta and the Nile Valley disappear under new buildings every hour. The Egyptian Government faces a huge challenge if they wish to ameliorate the problem. A scheme to win new farmland by greening the desert is underway near Abu Simbel. The „Toshka“ irrigation project will channel water from the Nile into the desert to open the area up to agriculture.

But at what price? Hassan Znined compiled this report from Egypt.

### Text

To Egyptians the desert is a geographical reality which has shaped their lives for millennia. 95 per cent of the country is desert. Agriculture and urban development compete for the other five per cent.

A narrow strip of land along the Nile is home to 90 per cent of Egypt's 74 million inhabitants. Cairo alone has a population of 16 million, which swells to 20 million each day as people commute into the city.

Cairo's challenges stand out in high relief as the city becomes ever bigger and more congested. 67 year old taxi driver Iman Ali has seen Cairo's unremitting growth first hand.

1. O-Ton Iman Ali,

“Originally I was a farmer, but then I saw all the arable land being built over, so after my military service I got a driver's license, and have worked as a taxi driver ever since. The fertile land has been transformed into buildings – to house more and more people.”

The changes in the direction of Iman Ali's life typify the experiences of many Egyptians. They have seen farmland overtaken by newly built brick houses, and on the outskirts of Cairo the contrast is at its most striking.

Checking population growth is one of the biggest challenges for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and his government. Current estimates predict Egypt's population will pass 100 million by 2025. Egypt's people need to be fed as well as housed, and there-in lies the dilemma.

In 2002 Egyptian geologist and astronomer Faruk al Baz predicted within 60 years there would be no arable land left in the Nile Delta or Nile Valley. Since then

awareness of the problem has increased and the government is under increasing pressure solve the problem.

In 1956 president Gamal Abdel Nasser endorsed the Aswan dam project as Egypt's big solution.

O-Ton Nasser:

„And thus the history of the Aswan Dam started. A plan to develop productivity has been drawn up. We are growing very fast, up to one half million each year. In 30 years we will have a population of 40 million and every year we see our water going back into the Nile, which is a huge waste. This is a good project.“

Nasser's vision in the 50s is very different to today's reality. The Aswan project was meant to boost the Egyptian economy, feed an ever-growing population and stop flooding in the Nile valley. New land was opened up, and the country's electricity supply was guaranteed, but Egypt's population growth is thwarting all efforts to save agricultural land. At the moment one third of the population lives from agriculture, but Iman Ali said that for small farmers it no longer pays off.

4. O-Ton Iman Ali:

"When a farmer receives 1 million Egyptian Pounds for his land, which is the equivalent of 140.000 Euro, he has to ask himself if he will ever make that much by continuing to farm. In most cases, he will eventually sell his land."

The government is trying to reclaim land through irrigation, in the Nile Delta and the Nile Valley - but time is against them, as their efforts are not sufficient to compensate for the destruction of farmland.

Awareness of this fact led to the creation of the large-scale Toshka project, which was initiated by the Mubarak administration in 1997. Situated 1300 kilometres south-west of Cairo near Lake Nasser, the realisation of a dream is supposed to solve all problems at once: The desert is to be made fertile and ready for settlement. The official press praises the project and calls it "Ahramat Mubarak" - the pyramids of Mubarak. At the heart of the project is a pumping station - the largest of its kind in the world.

5. Atmo Pumping Station

The "Mubarak Pumping station" is located 70 kilometres north of famous Abu Simbel and pumps water out of Lake Nasser towards Toshka. The station is protected by stringent security, so that even with special authorisation the station can only be viewed from outside.

The monumental concrete structure is 70 metres high and 140 metres long. It consists of 24 gigantic pumps, 18 of which are in operation permanently. 25 million cubic metres of water are pumped out of Lake Nasser every day and are conducted towards Toshka via the Sheikh-Said-Canal. The 50 kilometre long canal was named after the main sponsor of the canal, the former president of the United Arab Emirates. Despite the high temperatures, which in summer can rise to around 50

degrees Celsius, the precious water is pumped towards Toshka without protection against evaporation.

4 adjacent canals branch off the main canal, each of which can carry water for about 80.000 hectares of land. 18 villages and cities are planned to be built by 2017 - in the middle of the desert. The development is especially aimed at enticing young people to settle there, relieving the pressure on other overpopulated regions of the Delta and the Nile valley. A target of 5 million new settlers is proposed. It is quite impressive to see brightly lit paved streets in the middle of the desert.

But the project that was initiated in 2003 is encountering difficulties getting started. At the moment there are only a few hundred workers living there, who are employed on two operating agricultural trial farms. They have left their families in their home towns. Asked about the project, they react without enthusiasm and tend to believe that their labour will benefit only the coming generations.

Indeed Toshka is far from being the green paradise that the government imagined. It could even turn out to be a white elephant.

Germany has been co-operating with Egypt in the agricultural sector for a long time, but they don't participate in the Toshka project. Paul Weber, an expert in irrigation at the GTZ in Cairo, explains why:

6. O-Ton Weber, dt:

"Germany has made the conscious decision not to be involved. There are considerable doubts whether it will be possible to mobilise enough workers to accomplish the production under these harsh climatic conditions, such as near Lake Assuan."

10 percent of the Nile water will have to be branched off for the project to work at all. This will without a doubt have consequences on the underflow of the river. Even now, the salt content in the Nile Delta is alarmingly high.

Many Egyptians see the Nile as their national property. They like to ignore the fact that the Nile is an international river, which runs through Sudan and Ethiopia for example, before it reaches Egypt. More than 80 per cent percent of the water in the Nile originates in Ethiopia, where the population is projected to break the 100 million mark in 2025. Ethiopia currently uses only 0.3 percent of the water. This is bound to cause crises in the future. Observers think that the next war in the region could be a war about the water of the Nile.

In the end, the Toshka project will have cost Egypt 60 billion Euro, a sum that many experts would rather have seen invested in better productivity and water use in the Delta and the Nile valley, rather than risk watching huge amounts of water drain away into the desert.