

ZCB and Zero Carbon Egypt

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Isabel Bottoms



The idea to introduce a decarbonised development model for a developing country did not come from a general desire to spread ‘zero carbonism’, though that is a noble cause in its own right. It came instead from being inspired by the struggles of the young people in a specific country fervently working for a newly democratic, representative system. I wondered, how could I aid the transition? What skills or knowledge could I share to encourage economically and environmentally sustainable development for all Egyptians? What could be done to contribute to transitional justice? Through my interest in Zero Carbon Britain and in energy, food and poverty distribution in Egypt, the connection was made and a decarbonised development scenario was born.

The ‘environmental’ why?

There is nothing new in documenting the impacts of climate change on Egypt. As a large country in

the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region it will suffer (if it isn’t already) from rising sea levels affecting populous port cities such as Alexandria and Port Said; salt water intrusion killing off crops, polluting the fresh groundwater sources and negatively impacting on freshwater fish species; droughts and flooding down the Nile affecting the majority of currently productive agricultural land in Egypt; increased waterborne diseases hitting the poorest in the population the hardest; increased desertification; plus rising temperatures and the potential for more extreme weather events, such as dust storms. The effects of many such environmental stresses on Egypt are those prominent in public discourse today: rising food prices, power shortages, rising fuel prices and loss of rural livelihoods.

Life on the ground

Egypt is an interesting case for the MENA region: once the breadbasket, it has been dubbed a “basket case” in recent media coverage. Egypt is now the second largest wheat importer in the world, but it used to feed itself. Egypt’s cotton industry, famed for the finest cotton sheets, is in decline. Its people are also heavily reliant on natural gas for their heating and cooking, which is very cheap as long as the subsidies remain in place. Diesel is becoming increasingly scarce, and farmers, hauliers and other key actors in the food chain have to spend up to a day queuing for their share of the subsidised, and soon to be rationed, diesel.

Since President Sadat’s open door policy of the eighties, businesses big and small have gone about their profit-making ventures with little regulation. This means international companies and development projects, as well as state-owned and local enterprises, are damaging local livelihoods and environments by polluting the groundwater (used for drinking and irrigation), destroying agricultural land by building on it, and by contributing to widespread pollution of the Nile. Meanwhile, current government fuel and bread subsidies cannot be sustained and Egypt’s economy is up to its eyes in debt and riddled with inefficiencies.

The political why?

The uprisings in Egypt over the last two years are indicative of many factors – resource scarcity and poverty being two very important ones. These affect the everyday lives of millions across Egypt, whose anger at the politics dictating their lives can only be expected to increase as their situations deteriorate. Their demands cannot be ignored, yet neither can the science predicting how badly they will be affected if climate change is not mitigated. Current social structures must also become resilient to the worst and unavoidable effects of climate change.

The time is ripe for a set of co-ordinated policies with deep social and environmental integrity. Politically active Egyptians across the the political spectrum advocate, criticise and discuss what befits them and what serves their varying political ends, but they have yet to articulate objectives that are both socially just and environmentally sound. A unique opportunity exists to contribute to the transitional dialogue between Egyptians, in the hope of creating a legacy that will serve Egypt's current and future generations.

How are we doing it?

From the germ of the inspiration, there is now a 'we' making this happen. With support from the Zero Carbon Britain team, the first phase – the research – of the Egyptian project will be conducted by the Desert Development Centre within the American University in Cairo. Using the same techniques and a zero carbon framework, potential scenarios will be developed through a carbon model. The difference for the Egypt process is that, in consultation with Egyptian stakeholders and experts, there also needs to be a defined 'development space'. Through representative stakeholder groups and expert advice this 'space', which defines Egypt's developmental trajectory and potential, will be defined from the outset. This allows for the backcasting and scenario building that incorporate Egypt's aspirations and needs. Furthermore, every policy will come up against a set of criteria which represent social justice and developmental elements. Without jumping to conclusions, these are likely to be efficiency, effectiveness, and equity – again, terms which will

have to be defined by Egyptian stakeholders from the outset.

The second phase is where the project aims to get real leverage. That is, translating technical and alienating environmental and scientific jargon into a framing that the average Egyptian person will relate to. Having identified social justice as the tagline of the opposition parties, the youth and the general population, it will be the method by which this zero carbon scenario is framed. Social justice can include job creation, energy security, food security and access to efficient and safe housing. To do this the project is partnering with the Egyptian Centre for Social and Economic Rights, as they have established working groups in most of Egypt's Governorates and can offer access to unions, farmers, workers, local communities, etc. They will also carry out the reframing and writing of the zero carbon scenario research within social justice terms.

The third phase is to catalyse widespread take up of the findings and solutions offered in the report by advocating on all levels of Egyptian society. Using strategic power mapping, systems intervention analyses, sector specific micro-models of how to implement the report's recommendations, and with convincing business models we hope to reach the huge informal sector in Egypt as well as the highest levels of government. We will also be promoting the cultural aspects surrounding the adoption of the recommendations.

Egypt is begging for opportunities and pathways to a better future, and we are now seeking funding to be able to offer it a sustainable and zero carbon future.

About the author:

Isabel Bottoms is a young Welsh woman inspired to initiate Zero Carbon Egypt by Egyptian friends active within, and affected by, the uprisings of the last two years. Drawing on her experience as a youth climate activist, graduate of law, equity advocate, and policy and strategy geek, she's co-ordinating the project.