

Reviewing David Sims' *Egypt's Desert Dreams*

5 November 2017, by Jasper A. Kiepe

The second major publication by economist and urban planner David Sims, renowned author of *Understanding Cairo. The Logic of a City Out of Control* (AUC Press, 2010), is titled *Egypt's Desert Dreams* (AUC Press, 2014). Sims is an American scholar who has been based in Egypt since 1974.

The book deals mainly with the various aspects of the Egyptian government's attempts to develop and cultivate the country's desert landscape. These processes include the construction of new cities, farms, industrial zones and tourist destinations. According to Sims, such attempts have largely been unsuccessful, with several projects abandoned and settlements uninhabited. This failure, argues Sims, is a direct consequence of unrealistic pronouncements, mismanagement, corruption and political enmeshments.

"For over five decades, desert schemes have consumed massive public funds and private investments and continue to do so. Yet the Egyptian desert is virtually littered with still-born anaemic, and failed projects. [...] [T]he amount of land reclaimed for agriculture remains tiny and its production feeble, most cities [...] remain ghost towns [...] and most industrial areas remain sand-blown empty lots. Not a single proclaimed desert development target has been met" (Sims 2014, 3). With this diagnosis, Sims begins his exploration of Egyptian desert development processes, and his foreword is certainly characteristic of the rest of the book.

"The Egyptian side wanted to meet the desire of their political bosses to push desert reclamation as fast as possible with the least cost" (ibid, 85). Desert development projects, Sims notes critically, are more often than not used to further certain political agendas, advanced by politicians striving for success stories and popularity numbers, rather than for the so-called goal of sustainable development: "The gap between potential and reality is order-of-magnitude huge" (ibid, 244).

Sims dedicates particular attention towards highlighting the failure of desert development settlements intended to cater for Egypt's rapidly growing population. The author states that Egyptians do not like to move outside of the Nile Valley and Delta, pointing out that the bulk of Egyptian migration occurs within the Nile Valley and is mainly *between* cities (not, as assumed, between rural and urban areas). This basic fact has rarely been recognised, however, which

explains why the “portion of Egyptians living in desert areas [went] up slightly, from 3.8 to 5.1 percent.” (cf. *ibid*, 247-259, quote *ibid*, 255). The lack of employment opportunities, difficulties of claiming agricultural land close to settlements, rare opportunities to fulfil social needs and dialogue between new neighbours, as well as endless webs of bureaucracy contribute to this situation (*ibid*). Sims draws attention to data from the 2006 census, which demonstrates that the “total population of *all* new towns in Egypt had not reached 800,000 inhabitants,” 600,000 of these in new towns around Cairo (*ibid*, 283).

One rare exception, clarifies Sims, is in the field of transport infrastructure development: even though the planning of major desert roads is “almost never based on traffic or economic feasibility studies, yet in most cases these projects have eventually proven useful” (*ibid*, 241).

Shedding further light on the differences between various land development processes, Sims mentions a widely-used customary law in Egypt, called *Waḍʿ al-yad*. *Waḍʿ al-yad* enshrines a developer’s right to use a piece of unclaimed desert land of his choosing (usually sold by land speculators) and to work on developing the land on his own. However, the developer can only retain full ownership of the land once a governmental land valuation committee surveys the development and decides that it is sufficiently green with permanent plants, mostly trees and shrubs. Even though *Waḍʿ al-yad* land is often subject to speculation and ownership transfer process sometimes entail dubious deals, this customary law can be of particular benefit to local farmers and small investors and “[ranges] from spectacularly successful and productive farms to barely-marked barren bits of desert whose main object seems to have been purely to grab land and speculate on it” (*ibid*, 100f). Sims estimates that the unofficial *Waḍʿ al-yad* reclamations could equal more than half of all official desert reclamations, in terms of size (cf. *ibid*, 103 f).

Notwithstanding, Sims lists several other failures committed by Egyptian authorities, including a marked hesitation to establish policies to prevent further damage where it could have been avoided. Prime amongst these failures is the effect of desert development on the environment. For example, Sims critiques the development of Egypt’s exploding mass tourism industry in the Red Sea, focusing especially on the large-scale tourist resorts around Hurghada: “mass tourism and predatory salesmanship have given Hurghada a bad reputation [...] that is breaking almost all the sustainability rules you can imagine” (*ibid*, 185). When Sims speaks of “sustainability,” he gestures towards the immense damage of the coastal environment, particularly the reef ecosystems, through the construction of jetties, landings and other structures that are oftentimes located on the reef itself (cf. *ibid*. 178-186).

The failure of a number of agricultural development projects serves as yet another symptom of governmental mismanagement. According to Sims, the failure of these projects can be attributed to different reasons, be it to poor soil evaluations (stratas of clay and gypsum); poor management of in-theory-efficient drip irrigation systems (these require both substantial investments, and professional upkeep, which is particularly difficult for small-scale farmers); or improper water drainage facilities, leading to the salinization of groundwater and, eventually, to a swath of devastation (cf. *ibid*, 73-78).

In spite of the apocalyptic scenarios brought to mind by reading Sims' examples of failed processes of desert development, these unsuccessful efforts continue to be pushed by Egyptian authorities and large-scale investors. "The degree to which the Egyptian government and its various agencies have disastrously exploited this prime public asset [...] is stunning. Not only have billions [...] been wasted, but even more colossal amounts of the potential revenues have been lost" (*ibid*, 261), laments Sims.

It is clear that such resource misallocation has been to the exclusive benefit of a few investors in the country, and was easily executed due to the large number of highly bureaucratic "sectoral public agencies" who control all processes of land allocation and management. These bureaucratic and monopolistic practices are only made worse by a lack of general public land information inventory or adequate mapping (cf., 262f., 265). "One result [of this] has been the wide-scale abuse and downright plunder of the state's most important asset" (*ibid*).

Local authorities, argues Sims, control vast parts of the country but are not bound to a general policy, i.e. they can "rule" their assigned land without or with little interference. Furthermore, Sims observes that there has been a large number of laws and presidential and prime ministerial decrees put into action, including twenty-four laws, all assigning land to different public entities (cf., 264.) The unclear responsibilities between the different land administrations open a way for a lack of transparency and the proliferation of corruption and bribery. As a result, such overly complicated legislation serves to exclusively benefit political and economic elites, whereas "government desert development projects *never* make a profit" (*ibid*, 267): "it is surprising how little public land actually directly benefit the masses, and how much of it ends up enriching a few investors" (*ibid*, 269).

With all that in mind, however, what according to Sims, is the way forward? One of the major problems facilitating inefficient, random desert developments lies within Egypt's new constitution, which, according to Sims, lacks explicit perspectives on the way forward. Egypt's 2014 Constitution provides only one very vague sentence, which states that "[t]he natural resources of

the state belong to the people who have a right to their revenues” (ibid, 302). Instead, Sims suggests some clear principles to improve the chaotic nature of land distribution and development processes in Egypt, which are characterized by conflicting laws and regulations; horrendous bureaucracies; mistaken planning; organizations with conflicting mandates and interests; business speculations; and conflicts of interest.

Sims’ suggestions include: preserving unallocated public land as property of the nation and its people; focusing on the development of the most promising land, as well as preventing authorities from selling off this land to private developers; enforcing adequate tax collection, and demanding more governmental transparency. Development should be measured according to the ways in which it benefits “ordinary” people, e.g. through the creation of employment (and not through highlighting “opportunities for investment”). Finally, Sims advises that Egypt completely abandon the idea of solving “population pressures” through the development of new settlements in the desert, as he deems this idea illusionary (cf. ibid, 301-306).

Nevertheless, Egypt appears to be heading towards the same, age-old direction. Naturally, al-Sisi’s government continues to push the development of Egypt’s spacious deserts further and further. One need only to consider the current administration’s ambitious plans to create [a new administrative capital](#), on the outskirts of Cairo. As evidenced throughout Sims’ work, these desert development policies bring with them a series of unforeseeable consequences, from the ecological to the economic. We can just hope that people wake up before Egypt’s desert dreams do in fact turn into a nightmare.

Egypt’s Desert Dreams is well structured and the author’s complex research methods are presented in a digestible form for non-specialist readers, but also remain detailed enough for those who want to dig into more technical details. It is remarkable how Sims uses Google Earth’s time-lapse function to retrieve information, which is unlikely to be found on any official map or in any official document.

Finally, perhaps what is most striking about this work is that David Sims does not limit his work within the direct scope of his role as a technically well-versed researcher, economist, and urban planner. Most of all, Sims’ in-depth knowledge on the legal situation in Egypt and the country’s complex political background is spectacular. His book is highly investigative, and even goes *beyond* basic inquiry towards a call to action: Sims’ narrative demands more social democratic values in Egypt, and more responsibility in the hands of the people to put Egypt’s natural resources to a more sustainable use. Moreover, by unveiling the context surrounding the failures of previous “desert development” projects, the book makes a remarkable point against

corruption, nepotism and bureaucracy. Sims does not hesitate to ask how it could have happened, that from billions of dollars spent on development projects, only a thin margin of political and economic elite benefitted. After all, Sims' book is not only research, it comes with a political message: the land is not owned by the government, but by all the people of Egypt.

David Sims is currently preparing an update to *Egypt's Desert Dreams* to take into account desert developments in the 2014-2017 period, which will include the new administrative capital as well as urban, industrial, touristic and land reclamation efforts. The update will be released in early 2018 by AUC Press.

Sims, David. *Egypt's Desert Dreams; Development or Disaster?* (AUC Press). January 2015
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