

# Students' research guide

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# 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SITUATION OF THE ISLAND

## 1.1 Egypt's environmental conditions and governmental action

According to a Reuters report, the bottled water market has increased by 73% in 10 years since 2010, due to the growing demand for drinking water around the world<sup>1</sup>. Egypt is no exception, as one of the main factors in its environmental situation is water : it is being consumed by the growing population and affected by climate change. Indeed, the Nile carries crucial stakes in the region, as it is also the subject of geopolitical tensions. VeryNile's work is all the more important given that this river is among the ten waterways that carry the most plastic into the oceans<sup>2</sup>. As a result, the agricultural sector is at risk, even though it sustains half of Egypt's population<sup>3</sup>. This is why the country is one of the world's largest food importers. In response, the Egyptian government has sought to conserve water by launching the National Water Resources Plan in 2017, which outlines a twenty-year investment strategy.

However, some still complain about the management of water in the country. A fisherman from Qursaya island recalled his daughter's in-laws, who were initially happy that she was moving to Fayoum by the lake. In the end, the scarcity of this resource is a daily reality, and he lamented the way water is treated in Egypt<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, fishermen often place much of the blame on the government, which they accuse of being a major polluter contributing to the decline in fish stocks, while also failing to enforce the winter ban that helps lower the Nile's water levels<sup>5</sup>. Yet, the Egyptian government has already shown a certain rigidity toward those questioning the cleanliness of the Nile, even prosecuting individuals whose narratives are deemed too negative.

## 1.2 Introduction to Qursaya island : history of a rural entity in an urban chaos

Before the construction of the Aswan Dam, Qursaya was prone to flooding. A farmer told me : "My father came here 40 years ago ; fields were flooded. Houses were under water.". Then, the eight founding families sold their lands to fishermen from Upper Egypt, which led to the creation of the fishing village : Ezbat el Sayyadin<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, the island's 5,000 residents make their living mainly from agriculture and fishing<sup>7</sup>. The southern part is residential, while the army has been legally stationed in the north since 2022<sup>8</sup>. In addition, the Pharaonic Village represents the island's only tourist attraction and is run by Cairenes who have little interaction with the rest of the inhabitants. There are also a few "villas" owned by foreigners who are appreciated by locals because they provide jobs and a sense of security.

Furthermore, VeryNile is an environmental social enterprise that aims to clean the Nile's banks of plastic waste. They initially focused solely on organizing events and campaigns for cleaning the Nile, but in 2020 they began working with four fishermen. They now reach 250 fishermen across three different governorates : Asyut, Sohag and Cairo. It includes a kindergarten, a restaurant, a workshop, a shop, and a clinic. According to the interviews, if there's one thing that unites all the employees of this

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Dickie and Gloria Dickie, 'Rising bottled water consumption signals safe drinking water goal is under threat, says U.N. think tank', Environment, Reuters, 16 March 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Anis, Where Is The Bride Of The Nile, December 2025.

<sup>3</sup> 'Egypt has a water problem — and no, it's not only the GERD' - Atlantic Council, 2 June 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Anis, Where Is The Bride Of The Nile, December 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Anis, 'Back to Qursaya: A Never-Ending Nile Story', Billet, FLOWs, 13 June 2025,

<sup>7</sup> Roger Anis, Where Is The Bride Of The Nile, December 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Jenna Ashraf Hussein Tawfik, Bridging the divide on Qursaya island : mediating conflict through design, 2025

organization, it's their passion for working alongside local and marginalized communities. However, the lack of transportation on the island has allowed residents to maintain tighter control over its integrity, but this marginalization has led to shortages of natural gas, electricity and diesel. The school is also located in Giza. Qursaya has therefore had to be self-sufficient and has experienced limited development. In a nutshell, the study of Qursaya is particularly interesting because the island is considered a microcosm of the broader conditions of the Nile, according to Roger Anis<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Roger Anis, Where Is The Bride Of The Nile, December 2025.





## 2. THEMATIC RESEARCH AXES

“On this island, we have two problems : education and health,” told a farmer.

### 2.1 Health and living conditions

Minor traditional medical practices are still in use on the island. For instance, residents use frog blood for healing purposes and even ended up selling it to pharmacy universities. However, this has affected the island’s biodiversity by increasing the number of mosquitoes. Other medical practices consist of ignoring their health needs or getting painkillers directly from the pharmacy. Sometimes, they also go to the nearest hospital — about an hour away — but only in extreme emergencies, often involving children.

#### 2.1.1 The environment’s effects on residents’ health

The recurring issue of pollution continues to affect the lives of the island’s residents. A fisherman’s wife explained : *“In the past, the Nile was wide and clean ; now there is a lot of waste, and the number of clubs and buildings has increased.”* and *“My parents drank this river’s water, and it entered our homes.”*. The community’s medical well-being is threatened by unsafe agricultural practices, especially the excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides that contaminate food. Residents have also developed harmful habits such as burning waste, which spreads diseases like malaria, dengue fever, filariasis, and various allergies. A clinic member also explained that children are constantly in the water, which leads to frequent infections. However, it is difficult to convince them not to swim, as they are deeply attached to the river. In fact, the problem lies not in swimming but in the pollution of the Nile. A VeryNile’s workshop employee shared: *“I know one person who has been sick because of the Nile. May he rest in peace.”*. Moreover, access to healthcare is limited — there is no hospital, and pharmacies serve as health centers.

The island’s environment heavily influences the illnesses observed, as residents use water in nearly every aspect of their daily lives — an average of seven liters per day. Indeed, the strong presence of plastic in the Nile’s waters poses a danger to human health. Amir Nabil from VeryNile explained : *“The plastic containers found in the Nile waters take about five hundred years to decompose. A sea of plastic...”*. Dr. Faten Samara adds that microplastics *“have been detected in blood, in lungs, placenta, breast milk, testicular tissues — even in the human brain.”*. They act as *“vectors for other pollutants [...] carrying heavy metals and pesticides on their surfaces.”*. Practitioners frequently deal with ophthalmic, dermatological and chest allergies, sinusitis, immune diseases, and parasite infestations. The main correlation with their environment is the lack of basic environmental services — waste management, sewage systems, and clean drinking water. These deficiencies lead to harmful practices like burning waste on the island, which further disrupts biodiversity and increases mosquitoes due to stagnant water. Farmers use more pesticides both to drive away insects and to compensate for the declining fertility of the soil. Thus, the lack of environmental services can be linked to a behavioral shift among residents, producing harmful health outcomes. Furthermore, in agriculture and livestock, diseases are related to the tools used, pesticide exposure, and repetitive movements.

- Water issues

The issue of water is also crucial. There is a lack of both quality and quantity due to poor infrastructure, which contributes to disease. Stagnant water in the irrigation trenches attracts many mosquitoes.

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<sup>11</sup> غرينبيس, 2025, 27:15, A Sea of Plastics... The Invisible Pollution, directed by Greenpeace - بحر من البلاستيك.. التلوث الخفي الذي يغزو حياتنا

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Water samples revealed that the water along the banks is more polluted than that in the middle of the Nile<sup>14</sup>, indicating that pollution is mainly due to a lack of water sanitation and poor waste management on the island.

Some fishermen also shared personal experiences of illness: “My father, my uncles, and my cousins — none survived beyond 45 because of the pollution of the Nile. I refuse that fate.”<sup>15</sup>. The water they drink comes from three informally installed pipes, which are poorly maintained. These were installed with the help of a local politician probably seeking to gain voters. However, tests have shown that the water is unsafe. When these pipes fail, residents use pumps that draw water from seven meters deep. But the source is either the Nile or the sewage trenches, so it is not reliable.

Beyond the small microcosm of Qursaya, water-related health issues are widespread all along the Nile. A fisherman from Asyut said that the waste had affected their health, causing various diseases. In particular, there were bacterial infections originating from contaminated waters due to pollution and waste.

- **Hygienic issues**

According to the island’s doctors, hygiene problems are among the most urgent to address. These communities lack the necessary knowledge for living so close to nature : “Many lack awareness of how to sanitize spaces around them or even wash their hands properly. There are a lot of hygienic issues.”. Recently, a lice problem was reported among *Kids of the Nile*. Mothers reacted negatively when health professionals tried to discuss it, thinking it was an excuse to stop caring for their children.

Awareness sessions were therefore organized by the clinic to address these issues. Courses of this kind take place two to three times a month and include both adults and children. The topics they aim to address mainly include sanitation, waste management, occupational health, menstrual hygiene and contraceptive pills. It was unexpected that the women initially identified handwashing after meals as the most important hygiene practice. They believed, for example, that soap merely served to mask unpleasant smells and that it had no real sanitary benefits. Thus, they were taught the seven steps of proper handwashing. One woman stated that she had learned these steps from her child, as the children’s session had taken place prior to the adults’. Furthermore, I observed a scene that particularly struck me during a *Kids of the Nile* session. The hub manager asked the boy to step outside so they would not hear her discussion of menstruation. She then cautioned the teenage girls, reminding them to be careful, as some had been disposing of sanitary pads in the toilets, causing blockages. This scene clearly reflects the prevailing taboo : first through the exclusion of the boy, and then through the girls’ embarrassment about disposing of their sanitary pads in a bin. All things considered, health awareness in general is fundamental : if people cannot express their discomfort, communication problems arise with healthcare professionals. These workshops will also serve as a first step toward addressing more sensitive topics later.

### **2.1.2 VeryNile’s clinic**

Access to healthcare on the island remains limited. A resident explained that inhabitants were forced to cross the river for medical help. In 2023, the VeryNile clinic was established, currently serving only the organization’s employees. Its long-term goal is to become autonomous through the training of health workers. Indeed, rural communities in Egypt are most in need of such services, as they often lack the awareness to seek help.

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Anis, ‘Back to Qursaya: A Never-Ending Nile Story’, Billet, FLOWs, 13 June 2025.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



The clinic maintains medical records for each patient and determines sick leave, medication, and the need for medical referrals. After surveying 600 residents and developing a sustainable long-term plan, the clinic was built according to the community's specific needs. As mentioned before, they also implemented awareness workshops.

- **Domestic violences**

Some women from the workshop and the kitchen arrive at work bearing visible bruises. They discuss these incidents among themselves and also with members of the VeryNile staff. It's not a taboo topic — everyone knows who is violent. At times, they collectively criticize the man involved, and some even recount the incident in a humorous manner. The causes of the abuse are often unexpected and may include sexual violence, for example. Others, however, report having good relationships with their husbands, even if these relationships may be shaped by respect or fear. Nonetheless, in these tough situations, the staff ensures that women can go to the clinic if needed and that there is family support around them. However, they cannot interfere in the family sphere, as that would not help the victims.

Following this trend, these issues impact the clinic : *"I got a complaint because a health worker didn't come and I asked why. And she had an issue with her father and he took the phone and said 'We hope she'll come tomorrow' and I was like 'What?'. And it's very sensitive to try to address it until this moment."* One clinic member recalled that once, a patient told her : *"My husband pushed me and I fell so I hurt my knee' [...]. It's kind of sad and they're saying it while laughing, and I freeze at some moments. I'm not sure if they want me to hear them or if they just want something for the pain."* These testimonies clearly demonstrate that the issue is not taken seriously and is highly normalized within the community. This is a problem that could be addressed during awareness sessions.

Physical abuse can also be linked to sexual violence. One clinic employee confirmed that most residents still support and normalize female genital mutilation. From her conversations, the first and second degrees of mutilation — cutting the clitoris or part of the *labia minora* — are the most common on the island. Sexuality is not an easy topic to discuss though. Even menstruation is rarely mentioned unless explicitly asked about by a doctor in a medical context : *"They're not complaining about anything related to sex."* A clinic employee believes this is deeply cultural and will take a long time to address. In addition, psychological issues are often linked to physical abuse, which has been normalized among many victims. VeryNile has taken steps by consulting a psychologist, but further work with an on-site expert might be needed.

- **Trust in the clinic**

One clinic employee estimated that 50% of residents trust the clinic. Indeed, many accuse it of refusing to cure them when antibiotics cannot be prescribed or when the budget must be respected. Yet, some clinic staff even lend their own money to help patients. Nevertheless, some residents now discuss taboo topics with the doctors. For instance, one woman suffering from a severe vaginal infection received treatment that drastically improved her life. For these tricky topics, the team invited the creator of the Aziza application to lead a woman-friendly session on menstruation. These visible actions — and the clinic's respect for confidentiality — built trust through word of mouth.

However, it is easier for the community to trust professionals from outside the island than the three health workers trained locally in collaboration with the European Development Institute. People place strong trust in external experts, whom they believe are better equipped than anyone else to provide solutions. Yet, the clinic's model aims to show residents that they can own their health, while recognizing the limits of their knowledge and referring to external professionals when needed. The fact that the clinic's staff is exclusively composed of all women helps foster trust as well.

⇒ Eventually, according to the clinic's founder, one key improvement would be increasing the number of residents who use its services and testing the resilience of this model. They also plan to open clinics in other VeryNile hubs, though each will be adapted to its local context. Furthermore, many psychosomatic symptoms are reported — vague pains not linked to any physical illness. When health workers suggest seeing a psychotherapist, residents usually reject the idea. Thus, the mental health dimension has not yet been explored at VeryNile.

## 2.2 Economy and work

### 2.2.1 Professional activities on the island

*“The first time I saw the Nile, every family was fishermen”, confided one from Asyut.*

Among those who come from other regions, some did not freely choose their occupation. A fisherman from Asyut acknowledged that upon his arrival, he knew no one and therefore had no alternative : *“I lived with my farmer and fisherman colleagues and I worked. I worked in the fields, I worked in fishing. I did not choose what I worked on.”*. It's the default job. Indeed, according to the Book of Qursaya<sup>16</sup>, illiteracy is not correlated with inactivity on the island.

- Fishermen

Most of the men remain fishermen. Regarding fishing methods, joubeya is the traditional net-fishing technique, and stone fishing is also practiced, but as catches have declined, the afrita technique emerged. It consists of building artificial shelters for fish<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, these Nile experts have observed certain phenomena about the river such as *“The native Nile flower occasionally obstructs water-flow, though these blockages often create prime fishing zones”* or *“summer is the peak season of the availability of plastic and garbage accumulation in the Nile.”*<sup>18</sup>.

Some fishermen complain about the deterioration of water quality, which affects their main source of income. A wife testified : *“There was money, there was fish and there was everything that we could buy and work. Now no, the income has become small.”*<sup>19</sup>. The disruption of the Nile's fauna has resulted in the omnipresence of invasive species such as crayfish<sup>20</sup>. Recent constructions along the riverbanks have also impacted fish species in the Nile. However, there is a paradox in the fishermen's accounts : they complain about the decreasing number of fish in the Nile — *“There are fish that can't survive in dirty water. We are suffering from the pollution now, but what if the water ceases to flow ? I'm fifty ; the older I get, the scarcer the fish become.”*<sup>21</sup> — yet, the river is regularly cleaned thanks to the efforts of VeryNile — *“Fish will never return in abundance until the Nile is clean again.”*<sup>22</sup> . As Amir Nabil noted, *“We raise about 30 to 35 tons per month.”*<sup>23</sup>.

- Farmers

In the past, the boundaries between farmers and fishermen were clear. According to a farmer, today, there is no distinction anymore : *“Farmers and fishermen live next to each other. They live together. [...] There's no problem between them. If I need fish I meet them, and they take milk and cheese from me.”*. The island's crops are quite varied : rosemary, thyme, peppers, eggplants. These plantations allow

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<sup>16</sup> Qursaya island. Resilient communities along the Nile, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Anis, 'Back to Qursaya: A Never-Ending Nile Story', Billet, FLOWs, 13 June 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Jenna Ashraf Hussein Tawfik, Bridging the divide on Qursaya island : mediating conflict through design, 2025.

<sup>19</sup> غرينبيس, 2025, 27:15, A Sea of Plastics... The Invisible Pollution, directed by Greenpeace.

<sup>20</sup> Roger Anis, 'Back to Qursaya: A Never-Ending Nile Story', Billet, FLOWs, 13 June 2025.

<sup>21</sup> Roger Anis, Where Is The Bride Of The Nile, December 2025

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> غرينبيس, 2025, 27:15, A Sea of Plastics... The Invisible Pollution, directed by Greenpeace.



them to feed their livestock. Indeed, the soil of the Nile is among the most fertile in the world. Centuries of currents carrying nutrients along the river have made it impossible to replicate the composition of this land<sup>24</sup>. This, combined with the agricultural expertise passed down through generations, highlights the potential for agri-tourism in the heart of Cairo. Nevertheless, they also remain dependent on the environmental crisis. Due to the increasing salinity of the Nile's waters, the soils have been damaged, and many have become infertile : *"When you leave the land without planting for a long time it has so much salt so when you replant it, it's not good. Here and one more land are the only two lands that can be planted."*

- **Odd jobs**

The remaining inhabitants work in construction, craftsmanship, or drive Ubers and tuk-tuks. But residents said that it was not convenient : *"People here are struggling [...]. For example, how do tuktuk drivers do ? They have to find another job to earn enough money."* Some residents have also found jobs in the audiovisual sector, as the island's unique location has made it a popular filming site<sup>25</sup>. In a nutshell, access to employment on the island is not straightforward, since there are no schools or markets.

Finally, the island's marginalization brings challenges regarding livelihoods but also strengthens the desire for the self-sufficiency the community takes pride in. A member of the embassy with experience on Qursaya said : *"The residents take pride in their self-sufficiency and lack of dependence on raw materials and basic commodities from the mainland."*<sup>26</sup>. Thus, in order to develop eco-tourism, the embassy worked with them and with the kitchen set up by VeryNile<sup>27</sup>.

### **2.2.2 Evolution of working patterns since VeryNile's installation**

*"Everyone on the island wants to work in the social enterprise"*, assessed a young female islander. The ultimate aim of this organization is to enable the community to work toward environmental preservation on its own.

- **VeryNile's implementation**

The arrival of a foreign entity on this small rural island in Cairo could have easily disturbed many, yet it was well received as it brought numerous job opportunities to the residents : *"Everyone on the island had daughters that they were going to marry and they had to buy them stuff. So they were very helpful. That's why we were very welcoming,"* told a farmer.

However, when a work-related issue arises within the community or with their managers, they file a grievance by filling out a form or by speaking directly to a staff member. After that, an investigation must be conducted. Then three people from the community, the office, and the two parties involved are present to listen to them explaining the issue. From what I heard, there is no sheikh on the island — VeryNile's employees are the ones who handle each case themselves.

- **Effects on fishermen and farmers**

Today, not all fishermen rely solely on income from their traditional activity ; they also participate in cleaning the Nile, which provides them with additional income through the social enterprise. This idea was not well accepted by families at first but gradually became common over the years, as they had no

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<sup>24</sup> Jenna Ashraf Hussein Tawfik, *Bridging the divide on Qursaya island : mediating conflict through design*, 2025.

<sup>25</sup> Roger Anis, 'Back to Qursaya: A Never-Ending Nile Story', Billet, FLOWs, 13 June 2025

<sup>26</sup> Jenna Ashraf Hussein Tawfik, *Bridging the divide on Qursaya island : mediating conflict through design*, 2025.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

other choice to meet their needs. One fisherman mentioned collecting 5 to 6 kilograms of plastic per day to sell<sup>28</sup> ; he is then paid based on the quantity he brings to VeryNile, unlike the workers, who receive a fixed monthly salary. Therefore, a fisherman's wife has to collect plastic for VeryNile : *"In the morning I go down to collect containers."*<sup>29</sup>. According to VeryNile's head of partnership and awareness, the fishermen are free : if they don't want to bring in plastic, they are not forced to. However, fishermen from Warraq or Dahab island come to sell their plastic roughly every two weeks.

To a lesser extent, some fishermen also became plastic operators. Nowadays, seven of them are working there ; among them, one was previously a boat captain, and another was a marine mechanic. They collect the waste and sort it into high-value and low-value plastics. The first one consists mainly of PET bottles, while the second one includes mixed items, such as shoes. They partly relied on the plastic pricing in Manchiyet Nasr to determine the rate at which they would sell it. They learned how to compact it themselves, by imitating others. Subsequently, they have agreements with two or three factories, and the fishermen transport the compacted waste by boat to a designated location where it is loaded onto a truck.

However, there are sometimes some conflicts within the team. On the one hand, significant cultural differences coexist in Qursaya because residents come from various parts of Egypt and are not familiar with labor regulations. Skilled fishermen were selected based on those with whom they were known to be able to work effectively. Five years ago, efforts were made to instill work values, and the fishermen's project manager reported observing a significant shift in attitudes. For instance, employees previously swore at the workplace and often spoke very loudly ; he subsequently implemented strict measures to curb such behavior. Considering that, prior to VeryNile, most of these fishermen worked independently and now had to collaborate in teams ; it is thus unsurprising that such challenges arose. Nevertheless, the project manager also notes that when an individual faces difficulties, the others provide support. However, he observes that unity is stronger in Asyut, whereas in Qursaya there are two distinct groups : those from the island and those from outside.

Regarding VeryNile's role in the fishermen's personal lives, men often come to the fishermen's project manager to discuss personal matters, especially financial difficulties. VeryNile therefore sometimes provides loans to the operators. However, their manager must approve these requests and therefore needs to know the reason, which is often related to family issues.

In a nutshell, beyond being just a job, VeryNile has helped them develop a great deal of assertiveness. Some fishermen have even become media stars. Over time, they have learned how to speak confidently to the media. The fishermen's project manager stated that everyone tries to make the area more of a family than just a workplace. In community work, it is a quality that appears to be indispensable. According to him, work quality suffers when there is pressure and strict orders.

#### ◦ **Effects on women**

Women's role has evolved since the installation of VeryNile on the island. They have mostly been employed in the kitchen and in the workshop. Initially, the initiative focused on working with fishermen; however, the women later questioned why support was being provided exclusively to men. Since the women didn't have specific skills, they began teaching them something that could contribute to VeryNile, like the workshop. However, Om Nada — the current chef in charge of the kitchen — wasn't really interested in handcrafts, so she suggested opening a kind of rooftop restaurant.

Nowadays, VeryNile is a victim of its own success. One day, I was drinking tea with a 51-year-old

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<sup>28</sup> Roger Anis, *Where Is The Bride Of The Nile*, December 2025.

<sup>29</sup> غرينبيس, *A Sea of Plastics... The Invisible Pollution*, directed by Greenpeace 2025. بحر من البلاستيك.. التلوث الخفي الذي يغزو حياتنا



islander and, as soon as she knew that I worked for VeryNile, she told me : “I have a Facebook account where I sell my food. I want to work in VeryNile.”. Her daughter added : “I make decorations. I want to work at the social enterprise.”. Indeed, women who work there must be paid fairly and have reasonable working hours. This is what attracts people. They are generally hired after coming to help out once or twice. The head of the community kitchen and workshop believes that anyone with the right attitude can work, as all skills can be taught. Indeed, she observed that women appeared to be more passionate about their work than men. According to the Book of Qursaya<sup>30</sup>, 72% of respondents in a survey believe that men and women have the same opportunities regarding employment and education. Yet, the latter are much more deeply attached to VeryNile, because the firsts know they can find work elsewhere.

In general, men are often reluctant for their wives to work, yet at the same time, they do not provide sufficiently for the household. Yet, one man told me that the salary women earn belongs to them : “Women work for themselves. At the end of the month, they bring back a fridge, a washing-machine... They help themselves.”. This contrasts with the testimony of some female VeryNile employees, who told me they had heard of men being inactive and letting their wives work, only to take their money afterward — something considered very dishonorable in the Egyptian culture.

Moreover, a VeryNile’s female employee in the workshop declared that work also has a social impact on them : “Nowadays, women are picking up bottles, [...] we are cleaning up the Nile. This social enterprise makes us leave home while our husbands are at work. [...] At home, we just eat and we sleep whereas here we are all together with our friends.”. Even a male farmer confirmed that, saying that VeryNile opened people’s houses and enabled them to group up.

At work, women are very confident in what they do. They know that their boundaries are respected. Nevertheless, the dynamics in the kitchen are diverse. Sometimes, when someone needs money, they start collecting funds for each other. They are very supportive, but they can also be highly competitive when it’s not a serious situation. They are quite jealous, and if the head doesn’t give them enough attention as individuals — greet them, call them by name — they can feel hurt.

#### ■ Workshop

The workshop has been on the island since 2021 and is the place where women make products from collected plastic. They sometimes innovate : it is a co-creative space. It is VeryNile’s biggest project in terms of scale and numbers.

When the current head of the workshop arrived, the women had already received some training. Subsequently, the leaders taught the others how to proceed. However, when it concerns something important for everyone, they bring in external experts for several days. They ensure that knowledge is transferred to everyone, after which each person decides the direction they want to take. Some of them could already read and write, so they were taught administrative rules and how to use certain software — especially the younger generation. This contributes to the workshop’s autonomy, as the women manage the inventory and procurement themselves, for example. The VeryNile accountant also assists them in this process.

Since the women tend to be more assertive than those in the kitchen, there is also more resistance. However, others remain illiterate, and unlike in the kitchen, it was very difficult to encourage them to attend literacy classes. Being older and having lived their entire lives in a certain way, they do not understand why this should change. There are also many competitive dynamics within the team, including age and power dynamics related to skills. They even established an internal grading system,

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<sup>30</sup> Qursaya island. Resilient communities along the Nile, 2024.



where working on the sewage machine is considered more prestigious than ironing the plastic, for instance. Additionally, family ties are involved, so everything is intertwined.

According to the head of the workshop, a lot of things related to technical support and marketing are to be improved. Moreover, the workshop requires greater motivation and constant work than the kitchen.

#### ▪ **Kitchen : Shoka w Megdaf**

The kitchen has been operating on the island since 2022 and its entire purpose is centered on the health and well-being of the community. Meals are chosen based on their nutritional value and affordability. One of the goals is to make it a place where people can connect — both the staff and visitors from outside of the island.

The cooks also have decision-making power, for instance in choosing which events they wish to participate in. In this sense, the chef in charge of the kitchen, Om Nada, is described by most of the VeryNile staff as a strong woman who knows how to lead. She insisted that the cooks learn to read, making this place a true space for women's empowerment. However, there is no one who consistently puts forward a wide range of ideas, as it is generally the younger women who tend to be more open-minded. The older women, having never worked before, tend to take fewer initiatives.

The latter also complements the work of the clinic, as it is a place where hygiene issues are addressed. For example, the women used to sit on the floor while preparing food, and there were unusual practices, such as putting butter pepper above a pot of rice to make it cook faster. Furthermore, since they had no formal training, they used the same ingredients they would at home. Therefore, some things were to be revised. Nowadays, one of the major challenges is maintaining this level of quality and hygiene, and introducing the community kitchen more effectively to society, as people often perceive it as a restaurant, whereas it is not.

⇒ Some challenges are remaining. Originally, on the island there was no waste management, so the inhabitants used to throw waste in the Nile. They had huge dumps on the island as well. But VeryNile implemented bins, and hired people collecting it and getting it to the other side for the municipality to collect. They still need to do more but they need funds. They also need to find how to encourage the people to start using the system. For example, they had a waste market day, when they took the recyclables and gave the residents money for it. Nevertheless, it didn't last because they realized they don't give them their waste, but they buy waste from outside and sell it to them. There should be someone from the municipality to take care of it.

#### • VeryNile's expansion : new hubs

When they established the hub in Asyut, in July 2024, they began with plastic collection carried out by fishermen, the installation of compactors, and the appointment of a project manager on-site. Unlike Qursaya's employees, they are currently working only with mixed plastics. The secondary activities, such as Kids of the Nile and the workshop, only opened during the summer of 2025. People are very pleased that VeryNile is creating job opportunities. Nowadays, they have seven full-time staff members working at the hub for the women's programme. They organised workshops by having teams from each location visit and support one another. They also maintain communication with residents living in the surrounding areas. So far, they have only organized simple clean-ups with universities and with Cemex. According to the head of partnerships and awareness, community members there are more motivated, quicker to take action, and more proactive. She suggests that this may be because the island's community represents a mix of rural and urban cultures, which could explain the resistance and differing mindsets.

Over the next two years, the focus will be mainly on this location and the one in Sohag. There is no hub yet in the latter, but there is a storage facility where the fishermen bring the collected waste, and VeryNile then sends it to Cemex. Furthermore, VeryNile's staff will start in Minya soon, having already received approval for the location.

- **Fishermen**

The fisherman I interviewed in Asyut uses net fishing, a technique his father taught him. According to him, there are plenty of fish in the Nile, especially in winter ; he usually brings in between 5 and 10 kilograms. Indeed, since the launch of the VeryNile initiative, plastic has had less impact on the fish because there is less of it in the water. As a result, fish quantities have increased. This development has encouraged fishermen to work more closely together.

The president of the association of Sayyeda Zeynab approached the fishermen to bring plastic to VeryNile. Nowadays, he collects plastic from the Nile every week, in all its forms, in order to clean the river. When the two dams around Busra are opened, all the waste flows into the river : shoes, worn-out clothing, diapers, bottles, food,... Indeed, people see the river as a way to dispose of waste, since it will be carried far away. In addition, he told me that he has been earning a better living since working with VeryNile.

Moreover, in contrast to the testimonies collected in Qorsaya. Women also assist men in collecting waste ; families all work together. They gather plastic at home and work along the banks of the river, while men do the same on the water. He had no objection to his wife working outside. As a result, the children attend the Kids of the Nile classes, since both of their parents are not at home.

- **Plastic operators**

Before joining VeryNile, the operator said that he had a job that required him to be available all the time : *"Here, if you are sick, you can take days off. Also, life outside has become more expensive, so we support each other. We know that if we have real problems, the company will help us."* Based on his testimony, the structure — in addition to improving their daily environment — has enabled them to improve their general living conditions. This led him to confide : *"I, of course, would like [my children] to do the same job as me [...], because life is hard outside."* This testimony clearly illustrates that finding decent and dignified work in their area is not easy.

He told me that what motivated him to work at VeryNile was the desire to live in a pleasant environment. He does not want people to throw waste into the water on which their lives depend. In his view, the type of waste found in the Nile today is the same as in the past. The quantity, however, has decreased thanks to VeryNile's action. Eventually, one common point among most of the people I interviewed is how unique this social enterprise is in their eyes. The operator said that he appreciates working as if they were a family and that he is rather given advice than orders, which motivates the workers : *"This is our second home, so if there is additional work, we do it willingly. We are like a family."*

According to his own visit in Qorsaya, he confirmed that there is a stronger sense of unity in Asyut : *"Right now I am talking to you, but I know that the others will take care of my work without any problem."* They were not friends before joining VeryNile, but he explained that working together brought them closer and helped them grow. In times of difficulty, that solidarity becomes especially visible : *"When someone has a problem, we help and we talk to VeryNile [...]. Still, we are here to help others, we enjoy it."*



Moreover, the three plastic operators have helped install bins in the neighborhood. There is one at the beginning of the five small streets. They collect the waste every two or three days. Then, a man takes it to a place in the desert where the government gathers it. It is also a way to collect plastic that can later be reused. At the same time, fishermen bring them waste once or twice a month. On the one hand, they work with companies in Cairo that process their plastic, such as Cemex which takes the plastic free of charge, as it is unusable for the plastic operators. On the other hand, water bottle plastic can be processed by VeryNile. They therefore collaborate with the women in the workshop in order to discard as little as possible.

- **Craftswomen in the workshop**

The craftswoman I interviewed in Asyut explained that before joining VeryNile, she did not work outside the home ; she used to crochet and do similar activities at home. She noted that husbands no longer posed obstacles to their wives working outside, including in the case of the other women participating in the workshop. However, at first, some were reluctant. In her view, this mindset gradually evolved thanks to the organization. According to the manager of the hub, in the beginning, the craftwomen's husbands did not want them to come to work on their own or have any contact with the fishermen. Many had attended job interviews but were ultimately unable to take up the position because of their men's objections. At present, the fact that they are employed is no longer a source of concern. Indeed, the workshop operates from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. and was established in September 2025. Furthermore, women are paid daily and someone is responsible for transporting the products they create to Cairo, where they are sold as there are no local buyers in Asyut.

Moreover, she expressed that she really enjoys her work and appreciates being able to contribute to her household. She and her husband financially support each other and she feels more independent now. In addition, she was already aware of pollution and recycling. She had learned about it at school, and it is visible in everyday life. *"When I bought the lunchboxes and bottles for my children at school, I made sure to choose the ones made of better-quality plastic,"* she said. Thus, many young girls want to work like their mothers, and she encourages this. Indeed, she loves this place so much that she does not see anything that needs improvement at VeryNile when I asked her so.

⇒ VeryNile is therefore in a phase of active expansion. VeryNile's staff also aspires to create a hub in Greater Cairo and even in other countries of the Nile in future.

- **VeryNile's sustainability**

The sustainability of the social enterprise partly depends on the "Vera accreditation". It allows VeryNile to sell waste virtually in the form of plastic credits every time it collects some. Companies that have generated a lot of plastic pollution need to fulfill their sustainability targets by showing that they are offsetting the waste they produced. Therefore, they buy these plastic credits.

- **VeryNile's partnerships**

VeryNile sells the plastic bottles (PET) to factories. However, they pay the fishermen more than the market value, which is why this revenue alone is not sufficient. In addition, most of what they collect is mixed plastic, therefore a certain percentage ends up as waste. Furthermore, in the new hub, in Asyut, there is relatively little PET to be found. Most of what they collect are slippers, due to the dam located near the hub.

Thus, the head of partnerships informed me that they maintain both long-term and short-term partnerships. Some partners initially supported plastic collection, and once that activity secured



additional funding from other sources, the original funds were redirected to the shop and the community kitchen. The Slovenian Embassy also finances part of the shop. Furthermore, Cemex provides support by assisting in the collection of all plastic from the Nile, specifically taking the mixed plastics that cannot be recycled on the island. However, VeryNile has to know where the waste ends up because it is part of their transparency policy. Cemex's support is unique because it is tailored to the organization's needs — for example, helping them opening their center in Asyut or offering an English program with the American University in Cairo. However, VeryNile is sustainable in the long term thanks to its plastic-related partnerships, through which it secures multi-year agreements.

VeryNile's staff is flexible in implementing new initiatives if they support the community. If there are any red flags concerning a company, they follow a due-diligence process. Most of the companies they work with are international and operate in Egypt. Nevertheless, they would like to expand their sales of plastic credits to Europe and the Gulf region. There are also expansion plans, but they remain focused along the Nile, potentially extending into Sub-Saharan countries; however, this is envisioned only in the very long term.

- **Clinic's functioning**

A sort of community health care insurance was created, with a subscription costing 3 to 4 dollars per month, using the opportunity that these people have an income via VeryNile. As a result, instead of waiting until it is too late, this system encourages residents to seek medical attention earlier. However, surgeries are not performed at the clinic, so some patients are referred to hospitals in the capital. But there are cases of discrimination against marginalized communities in such facilities — especially women, who are often taken less seriously. Indeed, a clinic staff member said that *"It is true that the residents' way of expression is often more intense than elsewhere, but this should not be taken into account in a medical context."*

Thus, the clinic's operations are funded through 5% of the plastic credit budget, which is allocated each month to cover medical expenses. Chronic patients receive full coverage for medications and medical equipment. For other patients, the clinic typically covers 50% of medical costs, except for surgeries or treatments that exceed the available budget.

- **Workshop and kitchen's functioning**

VeryNile really improved women's financial level. It has a policy that prevents hiring several members of the same family within a single project, as they want to make sure that income is distributed across as many households as possible. Regarding salaries, it is very important for the head of the community kitchen and the workshop to preserve women's dignity. They are part-timers but they still receive a monthly salary with bonuses added. She trained some of them and increased their workload so that the staff could earn decent incomes – which allowed her to observe the differences when she raised the cooks' pay. Thus, the workshop functions with funding partners such as Slovenian funds and CMA, for instance, and the kitchen is now almost self-sufficient.

## **2.3 Social and cultural organization**

### **2.3.1 Family structures, local solidarities, women**

Before the installation of VeryNile, women helped with post-fishing tasks and household duties ; they did not work outside the home :*"I have worked [in the social enterprise] for approximately two years. I wash the bags, for example. Before that, I wasn't working. Yet, my husband works on the Nile. Sometimes I helped him."* That worker also told me that some women wanted to have a job in the capital but are not allowed by their husband to do so. A 51-year-old islander told me : *"I am educated, I went to a business school but my brothers and father didn't want me to communicate or be surrounded*

by men in public transportation. But I resisted and I worked in the Pharaonic village before marrying.”. Moreover, according to a study, 36% of Qursaya respondents reported having witnessed gender-based discrimination<sup>31</sup>. A young female resident assessed : “Men here don’t want women to work ; they want them to stay home.”. Nevertheless, women remain the ones who maintain family and neighborhood dynamics.

Gender-based relations also lie in marriage. A 26-year-old female islander said : “We are a bit restricted because it is the countryside here.”. This is crystallized in an expressed desire to leave Qursaya for some women : “Boys always marry girls from the island but girls want to get out of it to have freedom. So they want boys from outside.”. Young girls also undergo social pressure : “At 12 years old female islanders are already engaged and at 20 they have babies. They judge us for not being married starting from 26 years old. They talk behind our back but are not mean. Families always ask when I am to be married. Me, I want a kid not a husband. [...] There is no way I will marry someone from the island.”. Those kinds of phenomena also reflect in other places in Egypt, such as Dahab island or in the countryside.

Beyond gender segregation, there is a divide between the island’s wealthy villa owners and its long-term residents as well. This contrast highlights the disparity between the privileged living conditions of the former and the basic circumstances in which the island’s residents live.

### 2.3.2 Education and youth’s future

Nearly half of the islanders are illiterate. It can be explained by the current context — marked by tensions with the army and life in a natural environment within a vast city — which has led to a lack of interest in education. Even if the future of the island’s youth is threatened by government claims. However, children who grew up in this unique environment refuse to find themselves in Cairo’s urban chaos, where the nearest school is located. Sixteen-year-old participants from Kids of the Nile were even expressing interest in working in the organization. A VeryNile employee testifies : “My children want to stay on the island. They married here, they work here.”. Indeed, they grow up deeply attached to the water, swimming daily and neglecting school.

A female employee narrated : “One of my daughter’s children is 14 years old. He works with his father. He did not want to but his father took him. Kids usually go to school until sixth grade and then work.”. Yet, an islander explained to me that mentalities are evolving and it is not mandatory anymore to work in the same field as your parents. The latters think that the main purpose of school is to know how to read and then kids are ready to work : “My son is an accountant but he does not earn enough money ; that is why we take our children from school in sixth grade. We care more about money so education is not worth it. We just wait for them to write and read, then we take them from school.”. A 26-year-old woman also assessed : “Children of the island don’t study ; there are very few at university.”. In broader terms, children’s future depends on the island.

Nevertheless, I met one man who wanted his children to achieve social mobility, and this takes priority over the desire to pass on his craft to the next generation : “My sons want to study. I’m glad because I don’t want them to work as farmers. Because today, when one is studying he can become engineer, doctor, pharmacist.”. In this case, a future on the island can be compromised.

- Kids of the Nile

The objective of Kids of the Nile is not to replace school, but to offer children weekly educational extracurricular activities. Even if it requires more of their time, they are willing to come: “Anything

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<sup>31</sup> Qursaya island. Resilient communities along the Nile, 2024.



related to VeryNile, we are there,” a teenage girl told me. Qursayan children told me they take Arabic lessons, crochet, drama, singing, and more. It is also a way to introduce them to manual skills they might use if they eventually work with VeryNile in the future. This is reflected in the fact that if they create something truly beautiful, it is showcased at the workshop and potentially sold to the public. Environmental awareness is also promoted during these sessions, for example through plays about plastic pollution. Moreover, when I attended a meeting with the children to discuss which sport they would practise next, a debate arose about whether girls could play football ; the only boy present was convinced they could not. Several other matters also had to be addressed, such as ensuring that girls wear very loose clothing and the need to find female coaches.

In Asyut, the Kids of the Nile program only began in September 2025 and includes 22 children. They are between 7 and 10 years old, which is considered the most suitable age range for the planned activities. They are not necessarily the children of VeryNile employees — many are simply neighborhood kids. This represents a notable difference from the program in Qursaya, which only accepts the children of the organization’s workers. In Asyut, the school day ends around 11:30 a.m., and the children then attend VeryNile from 12:00 p.m. to about 2:30 p.m.

The teacher in Asyut explained that her objective is to facilitate learning through games ; she does not want the children to remain seated for the entire session, as interactive learning is more effective for them. What motivated her to join VeryNile was precisely the contrast with conventional schooling. She previously worked in regular schools, but she finds that knowledge is transmitted more effectively here. At VeryNile, they reinforce writing lessons and include sports activities after the children’s regular school hours. Indeed, their curriculum currently focuses solely on Arabic and sports. She and the coordinator confirmed that the children would often prefer to stay at VeryNile rather than go to school. Therefore, they do not support school homework ; on the contrary, they aim to move the children away from a conventional classroom environment.

Kids also create objects from the collected plastic, which raises their awareness about recycling. For the October 6th holiday, the children made cardboard tank costumes. They discuss the environment and greenery, thus sensitizing them to pollution. A taekwondo coach is also involved, and he and the teacher organize activities combining sports with educational content. Thus, the program enables parents to work, educates children about environmental care, and introduces them to teamwork. However, they have not yet addressed littering directly, yet, for instance, they have started to explain why it is important to turn off the tap after washing one’s hands. They intend to address pollution more explicitly in the future. Moreover, when I entered the classroom, I immediately noticed an implicit gender segregation, with all the boys on one side and all the girls on the other. The boys were also far more assertive than the girls and, although they were only three, they felt much more entitled to speak without raising their hands, for instance.

In addition, when a child is absent for too long, the teacher sets aside five minutes with them at the end of class when they return. She contacts parents to understand the situation. She mentioned that absence does not necessarily indicate a serious problem. Families are free to keep their children at home if they wish — attendance is not mandatory. She also conducts monthly follow-ups. Furthermore, the youngest student initially had difficulties enrolling because she was a girl and not yet registered at school, but the hub manager insisted that she be allowed to participate, as she expressed a strong desire to learn. Before working at VeryNile, the teacher explained that she did not give much thought to pollution, plastic, or the Nile, though she had learned about recycling at university. She believes this should be discussed with children at school. She recalled that working in the public system was difficult. At VeryNile, she says that she is provided with resources to do her work well. For example, she has a daughter, and VeryNile respects her availability. She also feels more independent than before — financially as well. Her husband is happy that she is pursuing something she enjoys and does. She also knows she can turn to the hub manager if she has any concerns. According to her, her work



environment seems to be very sane.

The program also keeps children from spending their time in the streets. Yet, some parents are overly cautious and keep their kids at home, but at VeryNile the children witness their parents working in a supportive environment, and naturally they want to be part of it too. The teacher said that they can envision a future for themselves in this place.

- **Verynile's awareness**
  - **On the community**

A plastic operator from VeryNile's hub in Asyut told me: *"Before working here, I had not heard much about recycling, so I did not pay attention to it. At school, they do not talk to us about it, only a little about pollution. But since I have been working in contact with plastic, I have seen that it can take a very beautiful form."*

When VeryNile arrived Qursaya, people were not accustomed to paying attention to the environment. So they worked to establish new habits, and, over time, they will take root naturally. According to the head of the awareness program : *"If you see someone littering, they realise — when they see us — that they are doing something wrong, and little by little, this will change."* But she also added : *"Perhaps they do not yet understand the reasons behind it, but gradually the mindset begins to shift."* She explained in what way they are reaching their purpose as well : *"We are making environmental awareness part of their routine, rather than simply telling people not to litter and imposing strong messages. If it is not relevant to them, they will not internalise it."* She said that changes were obvious nowadays : *"If you visit their homes, you will notice that they reuse many items. For example, a Coca-Cola bottle is never thrown away ; it is reused daily for water or juice. So you can see that there is already a degree of environmental awareness embedded in their culture, even if they do not understand it explicitly as such."*

- **On their public**

On the one hand, VeryNile raises awareness through social media by highlighting their projects and the amount of plastic found in the Nile. On the other hand, they rely on hands-on experience when people visit the social enterprise. They run programmes with schools and universities. However, now that the mindset of the organization has shifted toward recognising the community as the leader of the project, they no longer invite the general public to join their activities. Still, because they see people on social media eager to participate, they have opened one day per month during which visitors can come, volunteer for free, and feel that they are part of addressing the problem. They engage them either in an awareness session or in a Nile clean-up.

### **2.3.3 Beliefs and cultural customs**

- **Religions**

Regarding religion, most of the island are Muslims. There are four mosques. However, there is no church. Christians of the island have to go to Dahab island to find one. But Islam, present beyond religious life, has become integrated into the island's culture and traditions in a broader sense. For example, VeryNile's cleaning lady is Christian, as her cross tattoo confirms. Nevertheless, she dresses and behaves like a Muslim woman. She wears a veil and a'bayas, and when greeted, she uses the traditionally Muslim form of salutation (عليكم السلام ورحمة الله وبركاته). Therefore, it depicts how much religion is deeply rooted in the culture.

When I went to Asyut, a Coptic Orthodox craftswoman told me that there are no issues related to religion. In Busra, there are also Evangelicals, and they are free to practice their faith. “Here, it is not like in other countries. I have Muslim neighbors and there is no problem. We greet each other,” she assessed. She added, however, that of course there are still people who are prejudiced against Christians.

- **Myths**

Furthermore, urban legends surrounding the Nile and its creatures also exist in Egypt. Roger Anis looked into the matter and interviewed fishermen about it : “While passing by the Nile cruises and Nile clubs, curious children ask him about mermaids or the bride [of the Nile] and if he sees any, but his reply is always the same : ‘There are none. It’s us, the ones who know the Nile intimately who are its true spectres. We are the ghosts of the Nile.’”<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, the legends have evolved, influenced by globalization and social media. Roger Anis asked his niece how she imagined this Bride of the Nile, and her answer was full of Western stereotypes: “Nancy pictures a beautiful, fair-haired girl in a dress full of flowers, carrying a magical stick that could cleanse the river.”<sup>33</sup>. Reactualising these beliefs could, however, help to mystify the river once again, thereby increasing Egyptians’ respect for its waters and reducing pollution.

That is why Roger Anis and the VeryNile’s staff revived the Nile Parade. They established it on the Nile day, February 22, to crystallize this myth : “[...] Alban de Ménonville, manager and founder of VeryNile, argued that the real impact would come from the footage we produced, which would introduce people to the concept of the parade post-event.”<sup>34</sup>. Eventually, the most significant impact is that the people of the island became aware of the existence of this day.

- **Traditions**

Traditions reflect in marriage. A 26-year-old woman explained to me that, in the past, fishermen and farmers’ children wouldn’t mix up, but nowadays, it is much more common. Thus, professional background doesn’t play a major role in marriage anymore. They also marry outside of the island, in Dahab island, for instance.

Moreover, a young woman from the island who works at VeryNile explained to me : “If a girl has sexual relations with a man on the island and everyone finds out, she could be killed.”. She added, “But I can kiss my fiancé — it depends on your family.”. These attitudes are probably linked to the major part of the community’s roots in Upper Egypt, where honour killings are quite widespread.

Regarding construction-related traditions, contrasts can be observed between fishermen and farmers. The fishermen’s neighborhood consists of narrow lanes and urban alleyways, whereas the farmers’ residential area appears much more rural, with small simple houses surrounded by farmland.

## **2.4 Relation to territory and environment**

### **2.4.1 The Nile as a vital resource but also a risk**

“If you want to go to Giza, you have to take the public ferry.”, declared an islander. The Nile stands as a barrier between Qursaya’s inhabitants and the rest of Cairo. On the one hand, it protects them from urban chaos, but on the other hand, it locks them down.

The inhabitants of the island have a very special relationship with the river. It is a source and a place of life. Both children and adults swim in it regularly. A young woman from the island recounts : “Once, all

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<sup>32</sup> Roger Anis, *Where Is The Bride Of The Nile*, December 2025.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*



the electricity was not working for a week so all Giza came and swam in the Nile.”. Besides their free time, most of them work on the Nile and spend hours on its waters : “Today, I came at 6 o’clock. [...] I can work like that on the river for a very long time. When I think of going back home, Maghreb has already begun. Like, the day is finished.”. This fisherman even said : “There is no other work except for the Nile. [...] Every fisherman you see here earns money thanks to this river. My whole family from Upper Egypt until the river works in the Nile. There is no work without it for us. In our job we feel free : some work, others don’t.”. Much more than just a job, this river represents a social space for the people living along its banks : “I go drink tea, take a chicha, or whatever. One hour, two hours, three hours... I go by myself to the water. The Nile thinks. It makes you think.”. Some people build their whole life on it. A fisherman told us that a woman used to come with her son on a boat and live like that for 15 to 20 days. They drank, ate, and washed their clothes on the Nile. This special relationship with the river even allowed them to drink its water, especially outside of Cairo : “The Nile in Upper Egypt, I drank from it. The water there is green. In Asyut, a greener water doesn’t exist ! One puts his hand like that and can drink.”.

However, this fisherman also assesses : “But now, I see the cars. [...] They get off and throw their boxes and it falls into the Nile. I told them a hundred times not to do that. When they do that in their villages, it ends up in the Nile anyways.”. Another one also assessed : “In the old days, if I was thirsty, I would lean out from my boat and put my hand in the Nile and drink from its water but now I would never drink from it, it’s impossible. If I do, something will happen to my body for sure and I will have to go to the doctor for an examination.”. Thus, it can be observed that fishermen hold a rather negative view of the Nile compared to its past conditions. Nevertheless, opinions diverge surprisingly.

Indeed, another complemented VeryNile’s action : “In the past, the water was foul, unbearable. But now, by God’s grace, if I lack bottled water, I’d trust drinking from the Nile. The smell of the water now is like jasmine flowers.”<sup>35</sup>. According to interviews reported by Roger Anis, fishermen express rather surprising opinions : “Pollution, to their mind, seemed a lesser issue. Arafa even claimed the Nile is cleaner than ever before, assuring what he has told me earlier, countering any arguments about its purity.”. They also put forward the argument that the current carries waste downstream, as had been observed in Asyut : “They insisted that pollution wasn’t the issue with the Nile because the current would sweep away any trash. Their perspective seemed to overlook the larger environmental impact of pollution.”. They also hold mistaken beliefs about the proliferation of pollutants in the river, which highlights the need for awareness on such topics : “[...] they were convinced the flowing river could carry away any pollutants, focusing instead on fish populations and water stability.”. This lack of environmental awareness is also reflected in their behavior: “[...] Arafa absentmindedly tossed a biscuit wrapper into the water, an act contradicting his night’s work collecting plastic from the Nile.”<sup>36</sup>. These testimonies therefore corroborate the statements of the head of awareness, who indicated that they had incorporated environmentally friendly practices into their routines without necessarily fully grasping their underlying rationale.

⇒ In a nutshell, the project manager for the fishermen has observed less plastic in the Nile since the initiative began ; however, the population continues to grow. Around the island, the amount of waste is decreasing, but in the Nile overall it is increasing, particularly in Upper Egypt. VeryNile is the only initiative working to clean the river, and the volume of waste remains enormous.

#### **2.4.2 Perception of the island as a “refuge” vs. a “marginalized space”**

The island’s inhabitants enjoy a healthy and friendly environment since everyone knows each other. Thanks to this, 90% of respondents to a survey conducted on Qursaya feel safe, as when strangers

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<sup>35</sup> Roger Anis, *Where Is The Bride Of The Nile*, December 2025.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



come, they must justify their intentions<sup>37</sup>. A 26-year-old female islander explained : “They ask everyone where they are going when they walk on the island ; there has never been an assault. Some people tell me not to go out sometimes because everyone is going to ask where I am heading. If I want to get out of the island, I do so only at night or with my mother, otherwise they ask me questions.”.

Behind this strong sense of community lies a feeling of differentiation from the rest of the city. Most of them have lived their entire lives on the island and are deeply attached to this peaceful land in the middle of an urban environment : “I have lived on the island ever since I was little. It has been 27 years. I got married here.”. A 51-year-old woman confided : “I always come back here because I love nature. It is like heaven.”. Young people cannot imagine working outside of Qursaya. For example, the island’s women — often without diplomas and frequently illiterate — had never had the opportunity to work before the establishment of the social enterprise. Many do not wish to leave because of their attachment to this land and hope to join VeryNile. Moreover, being legally recognized as natural reserves, these islands could benefit the city both ecologically and economically. A young woman from the island recounts : “There is a trash bin now on the island. [...] Even children take plastic, pick up cans and sell them to a famous man.”.

This is illustrated by two distinct areas on the island itself. The first is very active, with fishermen and farmers working to make Qursaya self-sufficient so as not to depend on anyone from the outside. The second is inactive ; it is represented by abandoned lands and buildings whose construction was never completed. Indeed, because of the unstable situation of the island, inhabitants face difficulty to import construction materials without infrastructure, work opportunities and a school<sup>38</sup>. Thus, obstacles are reflected on its architecture.

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<sup>37</sup> Roger Anis, *Where Is The Bride Of The Nile*, December 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Jenna Ashraf Hussein Tawfik, *Bridging the divide on Qursaya island : mediating conflict through design*, 2025.



### 3. Cross-cutting analytical themes

#### 3.1 Sociology

##### Women :

- The transformation of women's role perception : cases of FGM, women's work, comparison to average Egyptians' point of view.
  - The establishment of VeryNile has enabled women to gain autonomy on the island, although it was a long process. The women at the Asyut hub also told me that their husbands were initially opposed to them working in contact with men. They are also exposed to domestic violence and several phenomena that take place at home and are not easily accessible. Therefore, it would be valuable to study how the acceptance process unfolded and the various economic and social dynamics to which the different actors were subjected.

##### Religion :

- Religious dynamics, discriminations
  - Examine the dynamics of discrimination on the island, whether based on gender, religion, or against community members who are not originally from the same region. These are sensitive topics on the island that merit further investigation, as many of its inhabitants come from other parts of Egypt. One could also explore how these dynamics are reflected in the workplace, now that most of the island's inhabitants work at VeryNile.

#### 3.2 Economics

- Post fishing economy
  - In light of the current state of the Nile's waters, study how the post-fishing economy has affected their lives, both financially and in their daily routines, including their relationship with the water and with each other, given that they previously worked entirely alone. It would also be important to explore how the fishermen might cope if the Nile were to become completely devoid of fish in the future.

#### 3.3 Environment

- Intense relation to the Nile, and the environment (already a bit studied by Roger Anis), insular identity
  - Speaking with the people of the island, one realizes that they are deeply attached to their territory ; it represents their entire lives, and they are aware that there is no other place like it in Cairo. This connection to the land is also linked to their profound attachment to the Nile. One could study the ambivalence between the Nile as a source of life and the Nile as a source of disease. It is a very special bond, which can be explained both by inheritance patterns and by more recent events, such as the island's history with the military. Studying the social mechanisms underlying this relationship would therefore be highly enlightening.



## 4. Research methodology adapted to this population

### 4.1 Participant observation and focus groups

- **Participant observation** is essential for understanding daily life, interpersonal interactions, and the use of public spaces by the different community members.
- **Focus groups** can be particularly useful for engaging specific groups, such as youth, women, or fishermen. For example, Roger Anis organized two workshops that brought together 31 fishermen from Qursaya and a neighboring island to better understand the challenges they face.

### 4.2 Semi-structured interviews

- Conduct interviews with a variety of stakeholders : residents, fishermen, farmers, women, youth, local leaders, clinic staff, and managers of workshops or kitchens.
- Informal settings are often more effective than formal interviews. Residents may feel uncomfortable being filmed mostly due to concerns about the military presence ; audio recording is generally more acceptable. Topics related to private life are less likely to be discussed in formal contexts.



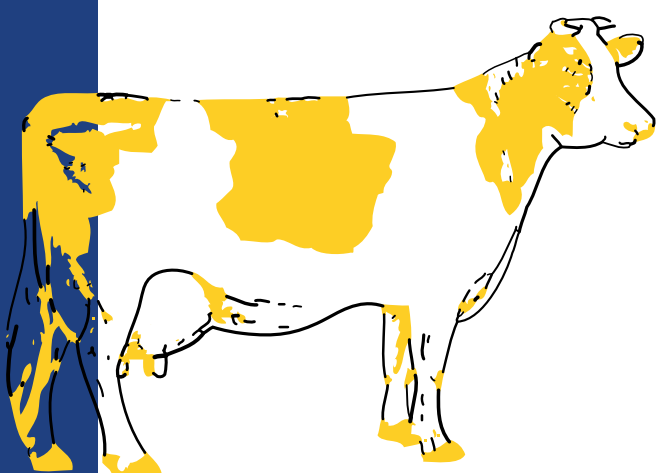
## 5. Cultural sensitivity notes and ethics

### 5.1 Building trust and access

- Gaining access to homes is possible, often through invitations. However, male researchers may face restrictions in entering spaces where women are present.
- Spending a few minutes getting acquainted, sharing tea, and explaining the purpose of your research helps build trust and encourages residents to share information more freely. Always respect consent when taking notes or recording conversations.

### 5.2 Cultural and safety considerations

- VeryNile's presence has created a dynamic where monetary exchange may sometimes be expected, especially when carrying cameras or recording devices. It is important to handle such situations delicately.
- Researchers, particularly foreign women, should exercise caution when walking alone on the island. Harassment by local children has been reported, highlighting the need for appropriate accompaniment.







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