
Tolba, Mostafa

(1922–)



Mostafa Tolba was born in the town of Zifta, north of Cairo in 1922. He graduated with first class honors from Cairo University in 1943, and obtained his PhD from the Imperial College, in 1948. He returned to Cairo to eventually become Professor in the Faculty of Science, Cairo University, where he established his own school in microbiology and is currently Emeritus Professor. He was also Professor in Bagdad University, 1954–1959.

After this distinguished academic career, Dr Tolba joined the Egyptian civil service as Undersecretary of State for Higher Education and Minister of Youth, and on the international scene as an alternate member of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO's) Executive Board. He became the first president of the newly established Academy for Scientific Research and Technology in 1971.

In 1972, he led Egypt's delegation to the Stockholm conference on the Human Environment, thus starting a lifetime commitment to environmental issues. In the preparatory meetings leading to the conference, as well as during the conference itself, he was among the first representatives of developing countries to realize and promote the view that there are no irreconcilable conflicts between the environment and development. He argued that concern for the environment should extend to the social as well as the physical aspects. At the time, quite a number of developing countries saw environmental issues merely as problems of pollution that were the concern of developed countries. It was no wonder that he was nominated, immediately after Stockholm, as Deputy Executive Director of the newly established United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). Within 2 years, he became the Executive Director – a post he held until retiring at the end of 1992.

Under his leadership, UNEP became the core organization within the United Nations (UN) family acting as the catalyst spurring governments, business, academia, international governmental organizations (IGOs) and non-government organizations (NGOs) to meaningful action. UNEP, one of the small members in the UN family, could

leverage on the average four times its modest budget to carry out more than a thousand projects.

Following up on his position during Stockholm, he diligently promoted his philosophy of “development without destruction”. Its implications are clearly reflected in his speeches, books and in UNEP's programs, in many fields, and at many levels.

It is difficult to single out Tolba's most significant qualities and contributions. He is by nature an optimist who pursues his vision and objectives with remarkable diligence combined with communication skills. His obvious mastery of the subject, sincerity, and dedication to the causes he is pursuing, command the respect of those who deal with him, be they heads of states or ordinary people. As a negotiator he is respected by all parties who usually hold conflicting and, what seem to many, irreconcilable views. He patiently leads them to agree to compromises that many have despaired of reaching.

Combined with this, is his uncanny vision of emerging environmental problems. As early as the mid-1970s, he concentrated on the issue of stratospheric ozone layer depletion as meriting careful monitoring on the scientific front. At the right moment, he could manage, whether in Vienna, Montreal and later on in London, to formulate the prototype model for dealing with global environmental issues and the effective mechanisms for the transfer of technology and funds to developing countries, as and when necessary. Other examples of his skills as a diplomatic negotiator on the international arena are the Basel, and the Biodiversity Conventions, which were concluded after tortuous and tricky negotiations.

Dr Tolba has received many awards and prizes, both from academic institutions, governments and NGOs in many countries. These include honorary doctorates, awards, medals, and high decorations. He cherishes in particular the DSc degrees from Moscow State University, and the University of Guadalajara; DLL, Williams College; fellowship of Imperial College, London; the Sasakawa Prize; the Only One Earth Award of the René Dubos Center; the Distinguished International Service Award of the Regents of the University of Minnesota; and the First Order Decoration of the Arab Republic of Egypt.

Back in Egypt, he established in 1994 the International Center for Environment and Development (ICED), a not for profit organization financing environmental projects in the less developed countries through an endowment fund administered by an independent board of trustees.

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