

Excerpt from [webpage about Mohamed Nagi](#) (also spelled Nagy) on the Ashoka website. This profile was prepared by Ashoka when Mohamed Nagi was elected to the Ashoka Fellowship in 2003.

## **Mohamed Nagi - THE PERSON**

Mohamed comes from a poor family. He grew up in Shoubra, a lower middle-income area of Cairo; his family later moved to Ismalia, a coastal city northeast of the city. As a boy, he was the class leader. He was also an enterprising child and made and sold sandwiches to teachers and classmates to supplement his meager allowance. He went on to university and graduated with a degree in social work. His university years coincided with the politically active 1970s, a time of opening up in Egypt and many parts of the world. As a student, Mohamed designed "wall magazines"—big sheets of paper posted in the hallways, spaces for student's editorials and articles—and participated in campaigns to promote freedom of expression. He wrote for the school magazine and participated in organized debates and student-led seminars about Egypt, its changes, its promise. These early experiences formed the base of his rights-based efforts today.

After completing his degree work, Mohamed began to see that his interest in citizenship rights would require him to know the law. Working as a bus driver and salesperson, he put himself through law school, completing a second university degree. As a lawyer, he has never worked for money from clients; instead, he has considered himself a public defender, working to support and enable people like those he grew up with: poor, mostly uneducated, many illiterate.

Mohamed traces his interest in environmental rights to a period in the mid-1990s when he used to visit a friend in a low-income area of Cairo. He would find the building doors blocked with piles of garbage blown by the wind from a nearby dump. The filth was unsightly and unsafe. He and his friend began to talk to neighbors, to summon support to create a community garden in place of the dump. The success of the garden—and the active community that developed around it—led Mohamed to see that environmental concerns offer a useful rallying point for neighbors, colleagues, and citizens generally. He was drawn to learning about broader environmental issues and became interested in environmental legislation, interests he pursued by working with a national environmental group for three years.

In 2001 he founded the Habi Center for Environmental Rights to move his ideas forward. He directs the center with a staff of 10.