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## Success Formula for a Cleaner City: Source Segregation and Institutionalization

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We do not give much thought to what goes into the dust bin in our house, nor to what happens to it once it is collected from our house door. The garbage collection and its disposal in the teeming city of Cairo have been impacted by a number of changes, like new players in the form of foreign multinationals being contracted by the government to clean the city and the pigs belonging to the 'zaballeen' (garbage collectors) being culled for the misguided notion of stopping the spread of swine flu. Community involvement if any has been minimal. But all this may be about to change with the NGO "Spirit of Youth", as it uses the grant received from the "Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation" to try to institute the two-bin system with source segregation and instigate participation of the residents in the garbage collection and disposal in their neighborhoods.

The residents of Zamalek are the initial beneficiaries of this complex project, which is not simply confined to testing or implementing source segregation, but is also linked to changing the contractual status of the garbage collectors in Cairo.

Through partnership with the "Zamalek Neighborhood Services", the project is reaching out to the residents through a door-to-door campaign, meeting and educating the residents about the benefits of source segregation and advocating two bins -one for the organic and one for the non-organic. Not leaving any stone unturned to create awareness, public meetings are planned at the Gezira Club with community wide meetings also being held at the El Sawy Cultural Wheel.

"However, this concept of source segregation is very old and it started as a pilot project in 1996, in collaboration with Association for the Protection of the Environment (APE) and they tested it in two neighborhoods and it demonstrated that the behavior of Cairenes would change," says Dr. Layla Iskandar, treasurer of Spirit of Youth. As chairperson of CID Consulting, her firm has been at the forefront of lobbying for source segregation and conducting experiments on its viability in different neighborhoods of Cairo.

The success of this pilot project saw the concept being taken to Nuweiba in South Sinai and for 10 years now, source segregation has been practiced there; the organic waste goes to the Bedouin and the non-organic comes to a municipal recovery facility.

Dr. Iskandar admits that the pilot showed that the low income neighborhoods were more malleable to change, but then isn't it ironical that they have chosen Zamalek as the first neighborhood under the Gates' foundation sponsored "Improving the Livelihoods of Garbage Collectors Communities in Cairo through Organizing, Institutionalizing and Upgrading the Traditional Waste Sector?"

Majd Madina, the project director, is quick to defend the choice. He admits that it is a high-income neighborhood and also one of the cleanest. Yet, he says it has been a deliberate choice since "It is an island and is separated from the rest of the city and we have assorted partners who are influential and may carry more weight with government agencies. Once the idea of source segregation and the other objectives are met in this neighborhood, it would be easier to duplicate this model in other neighborhoods".

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Garbage collection in the city is a mixed bag of informality and there are different models operating in different neighborhoods. And this further compounds the complexity of the project. Therefore, as a first step, Madina's team conducts a study of the neighborhood to understand how the model works. This is followed by a session with the zaballeen, "where we alert them to the problems that they maybe facing at this point of time in dealing with the various agencies - the multinationals, the police, the municipality - and urge them to get registered to avoid a situation where they may be completely sidelined as the multinational may replace them with licensed garbage collectors."

"Integration of the zaballeen into the formal system is of utmost importance," agrees Ezzat Naem Gendy, founder of Spirit of Youth, "Otherwise, we will remain on the fringes forever."

#### Are the multinationals and the zaballeen really interested in a change in the status quo?

Madina insists that it would result in a win-win situation for both, and this is where the source segregation assumes importance. The multinationals recycle the organic waste and convert it into compost, whereas the zaballeen, whose pigs have been culled, cannot recycle organic waste and re-cycles non-organic waste, like plastic and paper.

"Source segregation, registration and licensing of the garbage collectors are like two arms of the same body," asserts Madina

"The key thing about this project, apart from public awareness is that we have met every single garbage collector in Zamalek --we have their names, numbers and know the boundaries of their operation," explains Dr. Iskander. And the zaballeen are happy to collect both bins -the one containing organic, as well as the non-organic, from the households and to bring them down.

#### The battle ahead

But the big question now is what to do with the organic waste and this is where the discussions with the multinationals began. "In a year or so, we are going to have a large amount of organic waste which will be clean, compostable and non-hazardous. We want the multinational to assign locations where the garbage collector can leave the organic bags as they leave Zamalek," explains Dr. Iskander, of the battle that lies ahead.

After Zamalek, the Gates' sponsored project will be taken to the suburbs of Mohandessin and Heliopolis.

Though the financing from the Gates' foundation is available only for five years, Dr. Iskander, Gendy and Madina are committed to not giving up advocating source segregation and integrating the zaballeen in the formal system. "We have been at it for donkey's years and it is our core mission to change the waste management system in Cairo," asserts Dr. Iskander. n

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