

Cairo: a story of waste mis management

In 1984, Cairo and Giza created new regulatory authorities (the Cairo and Giza Cleansing and Beautification Authorities -- CCBA and GCBA) to organize and upgrade the city's waste sector. They licensed the traditional collectors (the *zabbaleen*) by delineating their collection routes, charging them a fee for the privilege (!) of collecting waste from households (!), allowing them to charge residents a fixed fee for monthly collection, and forcing them to split that fee with the traditional middlemen (*waahi*). They placed a tax on the traditional collectors which went in a 'cleaning fund' at a decentralized level of government. Many cities in the South have experience with these 'cleaning funds' being readily available pots of money used in non-transparent ways to compensate municipal government employees.



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The 1 L.E. the *zabbaleen* ended up keeping after paying the government 1 L.E. and the *waahi* another 1 L.E. hardly covered the cost of operating, maintaining or upgrading their vehicles, let alone cover the cost of labor, health and safety, or any of the other costs of delivering the service. Their lack of education and information, their traditional lack of accounting for unpaid family labor led them to miscalculate revenues and profits. Thus the cleanliness of cities becomes intertwined within a whole set of poverty contexts: a poverty of capability to even discuss, negotiate and participate.

A new system to replace the informal sector

To respond to the continuing need to expand coverage to all of Cairo, and not rely on a system which dealt with the organic component of waste by feeding it to pigs, policies in the late nineties leaned heavily toward the establishment of composting plants. They were expected to absorb a substantial amount of the city's waste and substitute for the unseemly methods of the traditional collectors, i.e. pig breeding. Ten years of that policy led to a trail of poorly managed, poorly operated, poorly maintained plants and facilities which ground to a halt, or years later were at a standstill. Many had become obsolete after five years of operation and others still glistened with their original coat of paint, never having been used!

In the meantime, Cairo kept growing. In 2000, the population had reached 12 million. This population was generating 10,000 tons of municipal waste per day and the *zabbaleen* were still collecting between 30-40% of it and recycling 80% of what they collected. Local Egyptian companies were contracted to haul the waste from the neighborhoods not serviced by the *zabbaleen* to the municipal poorly managed dumpsites. These became constant sources of billowing dark smoke hanging over the city of Cairo.

In 2000, farmers in the Delta converted to new rice harvesting technologies which led to the practice of burning the rice stalks. Together with the wild fires from the landfills, this created a suffocating environment for a duration of two months from October to November.

A System to supplant all systems

In response to this, in 2003 the governorates of Cairo and Giza opted for the privatization of their waste services to multinational corporations. Cairo was going to unburden its waste

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management woes onto the Northerners -- professionals with long track records of keeping cities spotlessly clean. The terms of the contracts included collection from dumpsters in waste pooling sites on the streets -- an end to door to door collection. This arrangement included transport to transfer stations, then on to composting plants (only 20% of the waste was required to be recycled) with the greatest component of waste to be landfilled in sanitary engineered landfills.

The people who designed the system had not factored in a few socio-economic aspects of their city: that it is home to an estimated 40.6% people below the poverty line in 2004/ 2005 according to the African Economic Outlook 2007/2008; that this constitutes an eternal potential pool of scavengers; that popular markets provide the urban poor with lucrative sources of incomes for the recyclables they scavenge from waste pooling sites; that the residents of Cairo do not enjoy the same standards of education enjoyed by the average resident of cities in the North; that residents had previously enjoyed a level of service that was now being reduced, and that they were now being asked to pay more for lower service levels; that the ones who had enjoyed that level of service preferred to keep it and were willing and able to pay for it as well as for the service they were not getting; and that the multinationals would not be able to attract the labor they required even at reduced service levels as the stigma attached to the occupation of garbage collecting acted as a barrier to unemployed youths joining their collection crews.

The system led to the following:

1. Containers placed on streets were stolen at an alarming rate.
2. Placing household waste in the public domain led to the appearance of scavengers who now found a bounty on the streets of Cairo. They mined these at night and moved about the city on donkey carts -- the same carts which the zabbaleen had been forbidden from driving into the city in 1990!
3. A parallel system to the official multinational one sprang up among high income residents of the city They held on to their door to door collection by the traditional collector. They paid him an amount which they felt was fair, but in addition they were obliged to pay for the service they were NOT receiving by the new system on their electric bill as the fee for waste collection service became an integral part of the electric bill as per the Egyptian Government decree.
4. Recycling rates achieved by multinationals met the 20% contractual quota but no more, i.e. down from 80% which the zabbaleen had proved was possible.
5. Government agencies in municipalities were, and still are, building their capacities to implement rigorous monitoring of waste contracts. They often fined multinationals for violations which were not always contractual shortcomings and which often exceeded the amounts due to the companies. This led many to halt the service, go into arbitration, strikes and eventual breach of contracts.

And then the pigs were culled!

In 2009 when the outbreak of the H1N1 flu in Mexico became known by the misnomer 'swine flu,' the Egyptian Government decided to take precautionary measures to protect the city from the possible outbreak of an epidemic and in a hasty move embarked on the culling of the entire pig population in Egypt! Since most of this took place in the neighborhoods of the zabbaleen, the massacre commenced there and later extended to the rest of the country. What happened next was reported worldwide and Egypt's action was criticized by the World Health Organization. The relationship between pigs and the H1N1 flu was firmly denied by all authoritative, international, and neutral agencies. The official waste managers of the city had made a decision which had left the city without its main organic waste recycling machine: the pigs!

It did not take long for the city to swim in a sea of organic waste which the traditional collectors now had no incentive to collect. To make matters worse, the pig culling ended right before the

holy month of Ramadan when food consumption rises. Waste generation rates of organic material during that month are substantially higher than other months. This coincided with the strike of the multinational companies due to the complexities and ambiguities caused by the contract monitoring process, and Cairo found itself in a hellishly unsanitary situation it had not experienced in living memory.

To sum up, cities in the South can extract some valuable lessons from the story of Cairo. These are:

1. Traditional waste management systems are embedded in realities which are too complex for official, conventional systems to understand. They are socially constructed and thus difficult for engineers to understand. They spring from an organic relationship between the people who run them and their city. They are market based and derive from knowledge and information about popular markets and trading systems. They provide the poorest and most destitute segments of society with incomes, livelihoods, trades, occupations and economic growth opportunities which no other sector provides.
2. Traditional systems should be supported not fought. At present, because they are not recognized, they end up adopting unsanitary, unsafe and backward methods.
3. They achieve the highest recycling rates recorded for cities all around and generate employment for significantly higher numbers of people than official systems do. In spite of the resistance traditional garbage collectors face, they relentlessly seek the materials which the city discards, and look forward to turning the day's pickings into the day's earnings so that they can raise children whom the state, has left behind, with no education, no health services or nutrition, no social services, no basic services and no prospects. In short, no place in society. Yet they choose to go out every day and save the city from the daily threat of an outbreak of cholera.

The question posed to waste managers of cities therefore should be: how can we give these people (the Zabbaleen) their rightful place in a more efficient system to serve the city, the economy of the poor and the environment? There are new systems we can adopt which can keep cities clean and the poor recycling.

** The writer was awarded the Schwab Social Entrepreneur prize at the World Economic Forum, 2006.*

Traditional waste management systems spring from an organic relationship between the people who run them and their city, writes Laila Iskandar

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