

Capital Collection

It may not be the ideal job, but garbage collection is still big money. **Dena Rashed** sifts through layers of controversy as Egypt's waste disposal goes private

"Lucky is he who dreams of garbage," says one book of dream interpretations. Here in Egypt, we must be blessed, because there is certainly plenty of garbage to dream of. According to the Ministry of Local Administration, Egypt's 26 governorates produce 25,000 tons of garbage daily, with Cairo, not surprisingly, providing the heaviest load: more than 8,000 a day. Giza is the next largest producer, dispensing 3,000 tons daily, while Alexandria and Qalyobiya governorates offer up another 2,000 tons each. Included in this solid waste are medical, construction and demolition waste.



Proper waste management has remained elusive for Egyptian authorities grappling with the significant projected cost and the enormity of the task of bringing garbage collection and disposal into the modern age of environmental concerns. Any reform of the waste management sector has to take into account the thousands of garbage collectors, both formal and informal, who make their livelihood from collecting, sorting, recycling and reselling the country's waste. But the lack of a centralised system for the disposal of refuse has resulted in a proliferation of problems, most of which centre on inappropriate methods of waste disposal like whole-scale burning. The solution? Privatisation.

Privatisation of the waste management sector is a risky and expensive endeavour for the government and whether it will pay off has yet to be seen. Either way, it was a bold choice, and the first returns on this choice are to be seen in Alexandria, where the privatisation scheme has been under way since October last year. A contract signed last year with the French company Onyx, part of the international conglomerate Vivendi Environment, bequeathed Alexandria's garbage to foreign expertise. Vivendi handles garbage management in countries throughout the world.

In the agreement, Onyx received \$446 million for the treatment of one million tons of waste per year over the next 15 years. By these figures, the governorate is paying LE100 for every ton of waste -- almost 10 times what it was paying before. Operations started on 1 October 2001 in seven Alexandrian districts. The most immediate sign of the change-over is the omnipresent blue and silver paraphernalia of Onyx in Egypt -- chosen to reflect the colours of the sea. Garbage collectors clad in blue and silver uniforms can be seen everywhere in Alexandria, toting matching plastic garbage bags.

A cursory look at the city several months into the Onyx contract



shows that famous corniche has gained the lion's share of attention. There are containers on every street, but these are not as clean as one might have expected for the money being paid. "The clean areas would surely be those we started with in the first phase in October," Frederic Duvelle, the managing director of Onyx, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. Judging by Duvelle's remarks, the company might not have realised the scale of the task they were taking on. "We clean and then in three hours the place is dirty again and we have to start all over again," he said wearily.

Duvelle stressed that keeping Alexandria clean was not solely the responsibility of Onyx. The city's inhabitants, he said, also had a responsibility to change their habits. "But I think people are cooperating with us," he says. "They take good care of the containers placed in front of their houses."

The company's services are expected to extend to the whole city by the end of March, after which other activities, such as beach cleaning and medical waste management for all the area's hospitals, laboratories, and pharmacies, will get under way. Another important task facing Onyx is cleaning up the Abis waste dump, where the governorate dump trucks have been dumping waste on the shores of Lake Mariout. The dump has long been singled out by environmentalists as a major pollutant of the lake.

To solve the problem of the Abis dump, Onyx is preparing a new dump site in Borg Al-Arab that it says will be able to receive six million cubic metres of garbage over 15 years. The \$200 million project involves securing the safety of the area's soil, which after the 15-year period is completed will be usable as a garden.

So far, so good, but one of the major points of contention regarding the Onyx agreement is where all the money is coming from. When the government was in charge of garbage collection, residents paid a small fee for collection. But today the most debated issue on Alexandria's streets is the burden that has been shifted to the city's residents. Based on an elaborate index determined by the type of property, a certain percentage of each electricity bill is added as a garbage collection fee. The percentages are not based on property value or income, but on whether the property is a house, a flat, a business, a factory and so on. As the consumption of electricity increases, the more the garbage collection fee increases.

"We found that this was the only way to ensure that all residents paid the bill for garbage clean-up," Safa'eddin Kamel, the deputy governor of Alexandria, told the *Weekly*. "Besides, we figured that the more a person consumed electricity, the more energy he was generating -- and the more disposable waste he would have."

Ahmed Shabara, an Alexandria resident who is an engineer at the Ministry of Industry, says that he had LE18 tacked onto his bill, which he believes is too much for the service. "It is simply unfair," he grumbled, noting that for many residents this amount was significant.

Abdel-Salam El-Said, who owns a café in the low-income district of Al-Gomrok, thinks he is being robbed. "Paying LE50 for the garbage clean-up is simply unbelievable," he said. He said that before October he used to pay a few pounds to the governorate for taking away his garbage.



His next-door neighbour, Abdel-Salam Mohamed, 65, who owns a small shoe repair shop in the same area, has taken matters into his own hands. "I have decided to economise my use of electricity," he said. Mohamed said that even though he needed good light to work because his eyesight had weakened with age, he could not afford the new fees, which amounted to LE20 on his first bill. "What can I do?" he asked. By economising on light, he said he had managed to reduce the fee by LE5. "Eventually, you will find this area much darker at night, because shop owners will use less electricity in fear of the large garbage bill," he added.

Though they are frustrated, residents like Mohamed and El-Said acknowledged a difference in the service being provided -- a point quick to be made by Onyx's Duvelle. "Of course, the service is more expensive than what was offered before, but naturally, you can't have better services on the cheap," Duvelle said. But he added that the way the governorate collected the money for Onyx's fees "has nothing to do with us. We only deal with a public authority, and not directly with the people."

In response to the growing complaints about garbage collection bills, the governorate of Alexandria has taken on the responsibility of paying the company LE2 million pounds, which in turn reduced the amount collected in fees from the public. Deputy Governor Kamel told the *Weekly* that 12.5 per cent of Alexandria's population who only consumed a maximum of 50 Kilowatts of electricity per month, had been excluded from paying a garbage collection fee. Kamel also noted that the fees for households and small commercial projects had been reduced.

It is not only Alexandria's citizens who are complaining, however. "I thought that I would be moving up when I joined the private sector, but it is not what I expected," a truck driver for Onyx who had worked for the governorate for 10 years told the *Weekly*. The driver, who preferred to remain anonymous, said he had left government work hoping for better money. Not only was the promise not fulfilled, he said, but he says he lost crucial government health insurance in the transfer. "We all lost our medical insurance by leaving government employment," he added.

Duvelle maintains that all the people employed by the company are working in strict accordance with Egyptian law, which means that all workers receive social insurance and medical services -- albeit the company's insurance plan, not a government one. "Besides we are strongly supervised by the governorate in a way we have never been in any other country we worked for," he added. He also has his own complaints: "We have problems with the workers who used to work with the governorate, because they used to work only for a few hours per day," he added.

"We don't even have risk allowances," countered one worker, as he emptied a large garbage container. "It is expected that we may suffer medical problems down the line from carrying such large containers." Amir Said, 23, who used to work as a barber and joined the company hoping for better money, noted, "I think we are prone to catching many diseases due to the nature of our work. Well-covered medical insurance is what we really need."

Despite these problems, Alexandria's difficulties with privatising waste management will seem a walk in the park compared to the problems expected in Cairo. For one thing, Cairo, at 18 million people, is significantly larger than Alexandria. More significantly, private companies will be cashing in on the livelihood of a large community of *zabaleen*, the traditional community of informal garbage collectors who have a strong presence in Cairo.

In the Moqattam area in Cairo, communities of 30,000 *zabaleen* and their families make their living from the garbage of the capital. Down the narrow dirty roads of Moqattam are dozens of small factories where the *zabaleen* sort out the garbage, recycle and sell it. A ton of paper is believed to bring in LE1,200, and a ton of plastic is worth LE1,800. Other components are extracted from the garbage like tin, glass and bones which constitute the basis of other industries in the area.

The basic challenge for Cairo authorities is the incorporation of garbage collectors in the new system. "The garbage collectors will not accept to work as employees for the companies," Ishaq Michael, head of the Moqattam garbage collectors association, told the *Weekly*. "They make much more profits working on their own."

But as the deputy of the governor of Cairo, Abdel-Hadi Gad-El-Maola, told the *Weekly*, "The problem is that 20 to 40 per cent of Cairo's population do not pay the informal community of the *zabaleen*." Some households, he said, do not pay because they think they can dispose of their garbage by themselves -- or they cannot afford to do so. Ultimately, not all the waste is collected, which adds to Cairo's existing problems.

Though Gad-El-Maola insists that the government has dealt adequately with the city's solid waste, he admits that the governorate has "limited capabilities." The lack of infrastructure and financing for reforming Cairo's waste management sector is better handled through an independent contract, he says.

Contracts between the governorate and private waste management companies are currently being finalised. Information collected by the *Weekly* indicates that the contract being negotiated states that the private sector is responsible for cleaning the streets, collecting household garbage and medical waste and the building of a sanitary waste dump. The contract does not oblige private companies to work with the *zabaleen*, however, although it forbids them from selling garbage.

In an attempt to reconcile the differences between the informal *zabaleen* sector and soon-to-be-established private sector, a workshop was held last week by the Community and Institutional Development Association (CID) and German funding and research organisation Friedrich Eibert Stiftung. The representatives of the *zabaleen* at this workshop noted that their community had the kind of expertise that private companies could benefit from. But how to sort the garbage and how to recycle it was the important question raised by Laila Iskandar, the chairman and managing director of CID.

Iskandar maintains that dumping all the governorate's waste into the newly-built dump site would be a real waste of the garbage. Iskandar drew on a number of successful programmes run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), among them a campaign financed by the Ford Foundation. The programme, launched in several areas in Cairo, asks households to sort their garbage into organic and non-organic waste before collection. Boosted by an energetic awareness campaign among the *zabaleen* and followed by door-to-door house calls explaining the programme, the project takes organic waste and passes it on to be made into fertiliser. "The results were excellent since the sorting of the garbage helps to provide fertilisers without all heavy pollutants, plastic and glass," Iskandar said. The idea is so successful that it has been implemented in Nuweiba in Sinai, where the same results have been achieved at very low cost. "What we need is for new projects to accommodate existing conditions and allow the *zabaleen* to upgrade their techniques and be a part of this new phase," she added.

Present at the workshop were the representatives of the Arab Contractors, the Egyptian company that is partnering with the Italian company AMA in cleaning up northern Cairo. Arab Contractors representative Tarek Eid maintains that the company will do its best not to disturb the social fabric of the *zabaleen* community. But he feels that the choice to work with the *zabaleen* should be up to the company, and that any contract should be on its own terms.

However Wisa Guirgis, one of the representatives of the *zabaleen*, insists that their traditional knowledge is crucial: "They will not be able to proceed with this job without us," he said. "We should be creating jobs, not increasing unemployment rates by discarding traditional garbage collectors."

The representative of the Italian company Antonio Canale said that AMA was not aware of the scale of the problem. "We did not expect such a large problem with the traditional garbage collectors," he said. "In the tender there was no mention of them and no obligation for us, but we will hire those who can help us in the end," he told the *Weekly*. Unlike Onyx, AMA is not required to hire the employees who used to work for the governorate. Several meetings are expected to take place in the following months between both sides to work out the details of the agreement.

For the moment there is sort of gentleman's agreement between the *zabaleen* of Alexandria and Onyx, where, as Duvelle affirmed, they are allowed to take items from garbage containers so long as they keep the place clean when they do so. It is doubtful that such a tacit agreement would be feasible in Cairo, where the *zabaleen* community is so large and where so many lives depend largely on garbage. At the end of the day, garbage is big money.

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