

Laila Iskandar: Consultant from Egypt



The sun has just risen in Cairo, and the city's "garbage people" are moving through the streets, collecting trash. They will take the refuse back to their homes in the poor quarter of the city and sort it.

For over 20 years Laila Iskandar has been trying to help disenfranchised people to organise their livelihoods according to a business plan. And in the case of Cairo's rubbish collectors it has worked. Today, US company Procter & Gamble is paying for the education of the children of the "garbage people" - in return, their plastic containers are efficiently recycled. "No-one", says Iskandar, "is completely bankrupt. Everyone can contribute something...". Made in Germany reporter Patrick Benning follows the award winning entrepreneur through her day.



What these women are sorting in the cellar doesn't smell good. Laila Iskandar insists this isn't garbage, but yoghurt containers. The difference is important to her. She regards Cairo's impoverished district of Manshiet Nasser as a recycling center. She doesn't like to call it a slum, like others do. She says the cliches sometimes do more harm than the poverty itself. The poor need someone to protect them.



Journalists can't normally film in this part of Cairo. The only reason we could, is that we came with Laila. For her sake, the people let us look around. Behind almost every door is a small family business. This one processes old cans with a metal press.



The

district has 20 thousand trash collectors and more than 700 recycling shops. In this one, a centrifuge dries plastic. Laila Iskandar explains: "There is a very big industry in the informal sector of producing these machines. They don't always observe industrial safety specifications. But they're built to operate. They know how to maintain them, the spare parts are available, and they work!"



One man washes the plastic, another dries it. In the next step, it is sold to a neighbor, who processes it to granulate – the market at work. Laila Iskandar: "These are shampoo containers that are recovered in the trash with the stickers still on them – and in perfect condition..just a little dirty they need washing with the lid and all. And certain traders come to this neighbourhood and all neighbourhoods like it to buy them. They take them, they wash them and they look like new again. And they refill them with junk – a little perfume, a little soap, and then they wrap them up and put them on

the counters and sell them."



Laila Iskandar has told the story with the shampoo bottles many times. It was what convinced big companies like Procter & Gamble to invest money in Manshiet Nasser. Now the bottles are recycled and the product piracy ended. It's a classic win-win situation. The companies have protected their trademarks, and the trash collectors have built a school for their children. The most important teaching materials are the shampoo bottles themselves. Laila Iskandar shows how: "So, they are received all mixed up like this. And they have to record on this piece of paper, how many of each kind and of each

size of bottle. Here's the boy's name and that's the date and this is the size of container and here's the grand total. After they do this, they have to learn to take that sheet and do it on a computer using Excel. Let me show you how.



"Then he goes to a higher level of learning. He learns how to read maps. The names of the streets are the words of our alphabet because as waste managers we want to go out some day and know how to read the names of streets, not just drive around because we know the neighbourhood and after we've learned that, we learn how to track a collection route on this street which is what the multinationals are doing and this is new learning that we never knew."



Laila didn't found a charity program for her projects, but a consulting firm. It's called "Community and Institutional Development", or CID for short. Its market niche is the interface between the formal and informal economic sectors, as Laila Iskandar puts it. Money comes from private companies, but sometimes

also from aid organizations. Aid organizations sometimes have scruples about combining development and business. Laila Iskandar: "We're not making money from them. We're providing them with expertise that they can't otherwise get and we're providing them with links to the private sector and

this is what we are banking on."



All 60,000 inhabitants of these five Cairo neighbourhoods are employed in the waste collection business. Laila Iskandar believes that they could easily recycle half of the megacity's rubbish: "Poverty in this country is between 17 and 20 percent of people. They live below two dollars a day. There it is you have the workforce that needs the work. I'm not suggesting that everybody goes into waste management and recycling, but I'm saying here's one way out. Rather than destroy it, let's adopt it and do it man, do it."



The young people in Manshiet Nasser show us the material with which they want to build their future. Trash recycled as musical instruments. Self-confidence and optimism – that, more than anything, is what Laila Iskandar has given them. Today they might even talk about a classic win-win deal.