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Learning while earning

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Cairo's 'garbage people' are improving their standard of living





A brighter future: Zabbaleen locals involved in the recycling business. Photo by: Jehan Casinader

On the outskirts of Cairo's bustling metropolis is Egypt's forgotten city: a settlement of 70,000 people known as 'the Zabbaleen'. In Arabic, the name translates to 'people of the garbage'. The reality is just as grim as the name. When the Zabbaleen people migrated to Cairo from Upper Egypt in the 1950s, they began to gather, sort and recycle the raw waste generated by Cairo's growing population. Five decades later, the Zabbaleen people are not just processing the garbage; they're living in it.

The stench of waste wafts down the main street of Manshiet Nasser, one of the five main districts where the Zabbaleen live. In the early hours of the morning, the men and boys take a pick-up truck or donkey cart to the streets of Cairo to gather the inorganic waste. They bring it back to their town, where the women and girls process each piece by hand. The material is cleaned, recycled and sold to generate income.

Despite the unsanitary living conditions of the people in the Zabbaleen, their situation is improving. Electricity and sewerage are recent additions. The people have been given a boost by non-governmental organizations which, with the support of the private sector, are introducing health and education programmes. Martin Fink works for CID, a local consulting agency which is harnessing private investment to improve the conditions for the Zabbaleen. The philosophy is 'learning while earning', and it seems to be paying dividends.

'The people in the Zabbaleen are already part of the private sector,' Fink explains. 'They have businesses and workshops. Many foreign corporations and big investors are interested in the Zabbaleen. Some are interested for reasons of charity. Others are interested because there are commercial opportunities here. If these companies work with the poor and improve their living conditions, they will make a profit. That's because the urban poor are their customers of tomorrow.'

One major toiletries company has agreed to buy used shampoo bottles from the child garbage collectors, to prevent competitors from using the old containers to sell their own products. But for a child to be part of the scheme, they must be willing to go to school for a certain number of hours each day; 70 per cent of Zabbaleen children are illiterate. The manager of the 'recycling school' is Ezzat Naim, the son of a garbage collector. Despite his people's situation, he seems hopeful about the future.

'None of the people in Cairo want to be garbage collectors,' he says. 'In the past, we were shy about what we do. We said, "Oh, how come we are in this position?" We are still marginalized, but these days we feel better. We recycle more than 85 per cent of the waste. We face health hazards, but the recycling business has become much more profitable in the past 20 years. It is not a high life, but it's a good life. Yes, this is a squatter area. Some call it a slum. But we want to live and work without that stigma.'

Jehan Casinader