



## No time to waste

Following the H1N1 scare and the decision to slaughter Cairo's pigs, Egypt's capital is in desperate need of new solutions to deal with organic waste. **Laila Iskandar** has some solutions

The unsanitary condition of the streets of Cairo has been becoming deplorable, and it poses a public-health threat to us all. However, thus far the solutions offered have not improved matters as much as it was hoped they would, and new measures are called for.

When contracts were given to multinational companies to deal with the problem of Cairo's rubbish, for example, hopes were raised that finally the city's streets would be rid of the unsightly piles of trash that have been disfiguring them for too long. However, the new system, designed in such a way that residential waste would be collected from street containers and not directly from residents in order to reduce collection costs, has not had the results hoped for.

Residents have had to pay for the new service by a surcharge on their electricity bills, and many have complained that this payment has gone hand-in-hand with a reduced level of service, with joint collection replacing the old system of door-to-door service.

Containers have been stolen, destroyed, or overturned, with waste spilling out onto the streets. Waste has also not been properly placed into the containers, and stray cats and dogs have had a field day scavenging in the mounting piles of litter around them. Human waste collectors have also had the opportunity to glean recyclable materials from waste bins, showing that the context of poverty in which many people live needs to be taken into account when designing a waste-disposal system for a city like Cairo.

While these innovations were being introduced, Cairo's traditional waste collectors have been continuing to serve their clients, the same residents that in some cases they have been dealing with for decades at least, though now with greater personal, legal and financial risk. These collectors, having had their licences revoked with the introduction of the new system, have themselves been open to harassment as they have carried out work that is now considered illegal, or have been the victims of extortion, or have had their trucks confiscated if caught on a collection route. In the worst case of all, they have been thrown into jail.

As a result of the new system, such collectors' incomes have been considerably reduced, and they have had to refine their sorting and recycling acumen. Some city residents have continued to pay them informally, but this cannot be considered a secure source of income, since now it is done voluntarily and is not part of a communal service.

Cairo's traditional waste collectors used to feed the organic materials in the waste they collected to pigs, thereby ridding the city of a health hazard, but at the same time creating an unsanitary environment for themselves to live in. When, in April 2009, the H1N1 virus was given the misnomer of "swine flu" and the culling of Cairo's pigs began, the traditional waste collectors suffered further.



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**Concerns are growing about ways to dispose of organic waste especially after the population of pigs was sent to the slaughterhouse**

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Yet, if the traditional collectors had been so inefficient, as had been claimed, then why, once the new system had been introduced, did waste continue to pile up in the streets of Cairo? If the companies that had been contracted under the new arrangements to dispose of the city's waste had really done so, then surely the waste should have gone to the companies' composting plants and landfills, rather than continuing to clog the city streets.

Cairo suddenly woke up to the fact that the traditional waste collectors had continued to serve the city even with the introduction of the new arrangements, but that now that they had no pigs left to feed following the government-ordered slaughter, they had no way of disposing of organic waste other than leaving it on the pavements.

Reflecting on the design of waste-disposal systems in Cairo, it is noticeable that the repeated and glaring neglect of the social-development aspects of waste management has led to flawed designs.

The city's systems have been based on engineering models rather than on socially constructed ones. In addition, top-down approaches and borrowed processes have been used that have not factored in the critical aspect of how poor people all over the world have developed the art of making a livelihood out of the materials others throw away. Such people have developed businesses, created jobs, protected the earth from the extraction of more raw materials and reduced greenhouse gases, all based on the traditional management of waste.

Today, we need to make use of knowledge that has been built up over many decades, acknowledging that any new waste-management system has to provide materials to recyclers in a clean form, so that they can process and recycle it in a more hygienic manner.

There should be a separate system for the collection of the organic part of the waste, and there should be an end to waste pooling. Door-to-door collection is better. The system proposed below would also dignify the trade of waste collector, such that a young person with a technical diploma could consider entering into the waste-collection and recycling business. New entrants from youth people who are not waste collectors would be encouraged, and source-segregated materials would allow for a much more dignified handling of the material, as well as generate more income.

Expressed schematically, such a system might look like this:

The system would work, since it has already been tested in five locations in Egypt, among them Manial and Deir Al-Malak by the Association for the Protection of the Environment (Ford Foundation) in 1993-1994; in Maadi by the Association for the Protection of the Environment (UNESCO) in 1996; in Al-Zawya Al-Hamra by the International Centre for the Environment and the Spirit of Youth Association for Environmental Services (Italian Debt Swap Programme) in 2005; and in Nuweiba, South Sinai, by the Hemaya Association (Social Fund for Development and the EU), the last-named of which has been operating for a decade or more.

All these experiences were originally research projects, the results of which could be scaled up and used as a basis for city-wide projects. Research has shown that during these pilot projects 65 to 90 per cent of residents source-segregated their waste efficiently. Moreover, when the projects were presented to community groups 268 NGOs working in different neighbourhoods expressed a willingness to adopt the practice, and 145 private and government schools said they were ready to adopt it.

The system would provide extensive potential livelihood generation for unemployed young people, and, in surveys of the informal waste-recycling sector carried out over the past 15 years it has been found that the sector's remarkable capacity to grow has reflected its desire to join the formal economy.

Investment has doubled, and income has been directed to education, investment in housing, and healthcare for those concerned.

## A waste-disposal system for Greater Cairo

The sustainable waste- collection system advocated here includes the following features:

- A return to door-to-door collection;
- The need for public- awareness campaigns in the media, among NGOs, at schools and so on, asking residents to divide their waste into organic and non-organic materials;
- An end to the distribution of plastic bags, since these are bad for the environment;
- Payment for the service from government and municipal finance;
- The organisation of unemployed young people working in the waste- collection sector into small teams, companies, or cooperatives to serve low- income neighbourhoods;
- The introduction of unemployed young people to a "clean collection" and recycling trade that includes sorting, recovering, processing and trading;
- The extension of credit and electricity to all small and medium-sized collectors and recyclers;
- The issuing of licences according to neighbourhood;
- The direction of organic waste to composting plants and the need to ensure that collectors are paid by the plants for clean organic waste.

In addition, a sustainable waste-collection system should ensure that composting plants that are part of the scheme apply for carbon credits through the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) under the Kyoto Protocol.

This would provide them with funds to pay collectors delivering organic waste. The government would also receive carbon credits under the CDM that would allow it to pay for public-awareness raising schemes to promote the new system. A portion of the revenues from the CDM mechanism would also be directed to upgrading the working conditions of collectors, whether new entrants to the trade from among unemployed young people, or traditional collectors needing gloves, uniforms, clean trucks, small transfer stations, and so on.

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