

The power of one

Hoda Baraka explores the power of the individual in the bid to address the problems plaguing the environment

We hear all the time about how environmental catastrophes, such as global warming, are lurking and are set to overshadow our future aspirations for a sustainable and more stable world. In some ways there seems to be a tendency to highlight the doom and gloom scenario in order to push people towards taking environmental issues more seriously. Yet there are other, equally productive ways to achieve behavioural change. Raising awareness and amending perspectives is one of them. Such an approach requires that we bring out the true magnitude of the consequences of each person's actions -- whether positive or negative -- and then proceed to advocate for change where necessary. This will certainly instigate change for the better.

One area where each individual has the potential to make a positive impact is in that of solid waste management. Many Egyptians genuinely do not have a clear understanding of this area at all, neither of waste production, nor its disposal and the environmental impact it has. In fact, the sense of responsibility that should arise from adding any amount of waste to our environment evaporates as soon as we dispose of any given item. It appears that our relationship with the waste item ends the minute it is thrown away and is no longer in use -- as though a lack of concern with its future whereabouts will lead it to vanish into nothingness. Precious few think about whether each waste item disintegrates once thrown, or whether there could have been a way to recycle it.

Now consider the amount of waste produced in a metropolis like Cairo. If each individual living in such a city became more conscientious and made sure that each waste item was properly disposed of, surely the ripple effect would certainly be both noticeable and worthy.

According to the State of the Environment report produced annually by the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency, in 2006 Cairo alone saw 10,000 tonnes of waste produced on a daily basis, of which only 68 per cent were collected. Of this percentage, it is estimated that 56 per cent is disposed of in an open dump, only two per cent is recycled, eight per cent is composted and two per cent is disposed of in a landfill. Hence not only is waste being produced at truly shocking levels, but also there is no system in place to handle this waste and to dispose of it in an appropriate manner.

Instead of merely waiting for the introduction of a proper solid waste management system, we should concentrate on addressing the problem from the waste production standpoint. It would be of immense help to start changing habits and behaviour, in order to diminish the current levels of waste. One way forward would be to encourage people to buy fewer consumer goods, since a large part of the waste produced is fuelled by peoples' growing tendency to buy more than what they actually need.



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Onyx's landfill in the Northern Coast was the first to dispose of wastes in a sanitary manner; the garbage collectors in Cairo and Giza are probably the only people who manage to sort and recycle the wastes, yet still in a way that could affect their health and well-being photos: Khaled El-Fiqi and Kamal El-Garnousi

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According to Laila Iskandar, managing director of the Community and Institutional Development (CID) consulting firm, Egypt is definitely falling into the consumerist wave. With the wealth of the country's rich impelled into even further heights by the recent economic growth levels, consumerism, so too have the amount of waste grown disproportionately. "It is estimated that the most affluent segment of the population -- the top 10 per cent -- generate four times the amount of waste that is generated on average by Egyptians," Iskandar told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. Halting this wasteful consumption is imperative, before it leads to an even worse waste management crisis than that which currently exists. Awareness-raising, no doubt, is one important tool that will help towards diminishing the problem.

Another way forward, Iskandar proposed, is to start by changing people's view of waste. "Instead of spending so much time thinking about the need for a solid waste management system, we should be calling for a solid resource management system," she told the *Weekly*. She went on to emphasise that by starting to look at waste items as resources we could, and indeed should be using, much can be improved. People would start disposing of waste in ways that would make it useful. Instead of assuming that our relationship with, and responsibility towards, generated waste ends the minute it is thrown away, we would look closely at each item and proceed to dispose of it in a way whereby it would still retain its usefulness.

"Five experiments were conducted in order to find the best way for sorting waste at the source. The conclusion was that by introducing the use of just two bins -- as opposed to three, as is common elsewhere -- to separate waste is genuinely feasible in Egypt. One bin would be used to dispose of organic waste, or food, and the other for non-organic waste," said Iskandar.

The benefits that would arise from introducing such a system are numerous. Public health will improve as the amount of unmanaged waste shrinks, while it will become possible to produce compost free from toxic elements such as lead, zinc and cadmium resulting from the mixing of organic waste with non-organic waste. In addition, this method will help create new job opportunities for those managing the system. Indeed, a study revealed that each tonne of non-organic waste produced serves to create seven jobs. Finally, the ability to recycle waste will be maximised.

Local awareness-raising initiatives play an important role in seeing to it that such a system becomes a reality. Many are already at work. One initiative, which includes a project titled "Keep Egypt Clean", was launched by a group of youth who feel strongly about the environmental problems plaguing the country. According to project co-founder Ahmed Nounou the key point to emphasise in the attempt to change behaviour is to spread "the belief in the power of the individual and his or her ability to turn things around." So far, strong as his own belief is, he feels he and his colleagues will have to work extra-hard to make other Egyptians see that they too can make a difference.

The project Nounou is involved in works with schools and universities to raise awareness. Schools in particular are important, Nounou told the *Weekly*. Raising environmental awareness among youth is not only easier in many ways but also more effective in the long run. After all, adults are set in their ways, and are usually less willing to change their habits.

As such, Nounou believes the best possible results will be achieved by building on similar initiatives currently taking place throughout the country. Indeed El-Sakia Science Club in Cairo is already hard at work on similar projects. The club runs a set of workshops organised to familiarise youth aged 11 to 15 with different subject matters, including environmental issues.

One workshop included an environmental programme led by Ahmed El-Dorghami, an environmental management consultant. El-Dorghami's programme aimed to "promote science among youth, and to give them a useful and fun pastime during their summer holidays while integrating environmental awareness through a series of sessions and outdoor activities," he told the *Weekly*.

And while we work on raising awareness about specific environmental issues, we must aim to

understand the relationship between the full set of environmental problems that we face today. As highlighted by Annie Leonard in her short film titled *The Story of Stuff*, people need to see the problems related to solid waste management within the context of our production system in its entirety. The US filmmaker aptly described today's production system as comprising the following stages: extraction, production, consumption and disposal. In order to fully understand the problems related to each stage we need to understand the system as a whole and the interconnections between each stage. The system, Leonard infers, is inherently limited and cannot sustain itself. In order to address any of the environmental problems that arise within a given stage in this cycle we must start off by encouraging people to change their behaviour. Eventually we must come to the realisation that the production system as a whole must be transformed.

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