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Trash Talk

Citizens band together to prevent our waste from going to waste

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Along with traffic, beggars and an absence of greenery, garbage has become one of the sights associated with the streets of Cairo, whose continually growing population dumps over 14,000 tons of rubbish a day. A country of already scarce resources, Egypt cannot afford to lose that much material on a daily basis, which is why for the past 150 years or so the zabaleen have been collecting, sorting and recycling solid and organic waste, and making a decent living in the process.

However, an increase in the amount of refuse produced has made it impossible for the zabaleen to keep up, and efforts by private collection companies have proved ineffective. Adding to the mess is the recent cull of pigs, one of the capital's primary consumers of organic waste.

Amid the mounting garbage problem, the Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs (MSEA) is looking for a better system. A coalition of civil society organizations thinks it has the solution with its New Waste Management System (NWMS), a household-based recycling program that over the past decade has been successfully piloted in select Cairo neighborhoods as well as a South Sinai town. Organizers say their previous attempts to interest MSEA in the project were rebuffed, but the ministry is now more receptive to the idea.

The real question is whether a recycling initiative that does very well in small communities can transcend bureaucratic, economic and cultural barriers to succeed capital-wide.

KITCHEN CONSERVATION

NWMS began as a cooperative scheme between the consulting firm Community and Institutional Development (CID) and the Association for the Protection of the Environment (APE). The first step starts at home: Each household sorts their rubbish as they are throwing it away, placing organic waste such as leftover food in one container and all non-organic refuse such as cans, papers and plastics in another. Garbage collectors then take the separated waste, load it into specialized trucks and transport it to recycling facilities that deal with each component separately.

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To be truly effective, the system requires the full participation of Cairo households. “We hope that in Egypt, we establish the understanding of sorting out trash at home,” says Amin Khayal, general director of MSEA’s Public Administration for Waste.

The separation process would save around 10-15 percent of Egypt’s total waste management budget, which Khayal estimates at around LE 2 billion. The goal is to prevent cross contamination so materials remain viable for recycling. For example, of all the paper that gets thrown away, only one percent can be used for recycling as the other 99 percent gets contaminated and spoiled by organic material.

“If we start sorting out at home, then the process will become a lot easier,” says Khayal. “We can assign a truck to organic and a truck to non-organic waste, or divide the truck to hold organic waste in one compartment and non-organic in another. It will save a lot of work in the future.”



Garbage collectors would need training on handling pre-sorted garbage.

Grassroots Experiment

Laila Iskandar, founder and chairperson of CID, says NWMS’ first trial took place in 1996 in two areas of Cairo: the middle-class neighborhood of Al-Manial and the less-affluent area Dar El-Malak. Residents were given flyers with printed instructions on how to separate their waste and shown demonstrations, while the garbage collectors were trained on how to handle the segregated trash.

The experiment was considered a success among the residents, yielding a 60 percent participation rate. It also proved more efficient for the zabaleen, who only had to spend half the time normally needed to separate organic from non-organic material for recycling. The organic waste collected under the project made better fodder for the zabaleen’s pigs: Blood tests on the livestock indicated the animals were ingesting fewer heavy metals and other harmful materials from contaminated waste.

Amin emphasized that the ministry encourages all serious efforts made towards establishing a better system of recycling in Egypt, but Iskander claims that when NWMS team presented their findings to the MSEA, officials there dismissed the project.

In 1998, the project was tested in the Maadi neighborhood, but this time had poorer results — a mere 35 percent participation rate. “We discovered that the higher the income, the lower the participation rate,” says Iskandar. A high-income kitchen, she explains, is often managed by a maid, while in lower-income households the kitchen is run by the woman of the house, who is typically more sensitive to concept of not letting things go to waste.

The same year, the NWMS team — now joined by environmental NGO Hemaya — took their campaign to Nuweiba, where they launched a citywide project teaching the citizens how to separate their waste. They also established the Municipal Recovery Facility (MRF) that receives non-organic material to recycle; the organic material goes to the Bedouins for cattle feed.

The Nuweiba project is still operating, and MRF workers receive a bonus worth half the value of the recycled material, an incentive for employees to do their jobs effectively.

Enter the Multinationals

The Cairo governorate started exploring alternatives for garbage collection as earlier as 1998, when officials decided that since Egyptian garbage collectors were not handling more than half of the trash being thrown away each day, foreign companies should be brought in to pick up the slack.

In 2000, the MSEA adopted a policy that privatized waste management and made each governorate responsible for its own waste, either at its own facilities or by hiring a company under its supervision.

One of the companies bidding for Cairo’s garbage collection contract was the public-private partnership company AMA, partly owned by the Italian government. The team from CID and APE raised the issue with the Italian Development Cooperation (IDC), which provides Egypt with assistance and funds to alleviate poverty, and accused the IDC of not doing enough to oppose a contract that would put local garbage collectors out of work. AMA won the contract and, following consultation with IDC, in 2004 offered to carry out another trial of the NWMS with the local garbage collectors on board.

Iskandar says that the AMA pilot, conducted in the Al-Zawya Al-Hamra neighborhood, yielded an impressive 90 percent participation rate among residents, who were used to separating their trash as a rural habit and consumed less due to their lower income. She adds that the Al-Zawya Al-Hamra results were once again shown to the MSEA, but were not followed by any action.

The Cairo governorate’s decision in 2000 to privatize garbage collection in all four districts has since proven to be taken hastily, says Khayal.

Iskandar agrees. "It was a bad idea because we were not ready for it. We are not disciplined or educated or aware enough to keep our streets clean."

Five years after the multinationals took over, it was abundantly clear that the privatized waste management system was not working. Residents had long been accustomed to leaving their garbage bags outside the front door for the garbage man to collect, and they didn't take kindly to being told they'd now have to carry their refuse to dumpsters outside their buildings. People refused to cooperate, the streets were filthy and freelance garbage pickers in search of high-value recyclables raided dumpsters, leaving a trail of trash in their wake.

Khayal says an ongoing contract dispute between the Cairo governorate and the contractors has exacerbated the problems. The governorate says the contract obliges the multinationals to collect trash door-to-door, while the companies claim they are only obliged to collect trash from in front of the buildings. It has become a vicious cycle: The companies say they are not getting fully paid for their services, while the governorate says that the companies are not executing their full duties.

That dispute may be close to resolution. On May 27 of this year, the Minister of State for Environmental Affairs signed off on rewriting the contracts that are due to begin in October.

SORTING OUT the problems

Following the international outbreak of swine flu and the government-ordered slaughter of all pigs in the zabaleen communities, the MSEA contacted CID and APE about implementing the NWMS. The government may have bought into the idea, but a lot more needs to be done to make it work.

As it stands now, the entire system of garbage collection is erratic. Some neighborhoods are still dependent on their door-to-door garbage men while others struggle to follow the new system of dumpsters; some garbage collectors are working informally, while others have contracts with the foreign companies.

"The system we have right now is not working," says Khayal. "The people working in the industry do not treat the waste situation in Cairo like the critical issue it is."

He lists some of the problems facing the implementation in NWMS in Cairo: the governorate not allocating enough financial resources to manage the waste; society's perception of working with garbage as low class, unattractive employment and a lack of awareness about the benefits of recycling and proper waste management.

The MSEA official promises Cairenes that in two months they will see an improvement in the efficiency of garbage collection with a doubling of manpower, an increase in the number of trucks and street dumpsters, cleaning of major streets to be carried out twice a day instead of once, and daily cleaning of narrow streets, as opposed to two or three times a week.

courting the Zabaleen

Just as every household needs to participate by separating their garbage, the different factions collecting it have to be willing to handle it. The contracted companies may have the resources and incentive to collect pre-separated garbage, but the garbage community in Manshiet Nasser, which once thrived on the profitable business of turning other people's waste into recycled goods, will not be as easy to motivate.

A substantial part of their livelihood came from raising pigs, fed on the organic waste. The recent cull wiped out that source of income. With no local use for the organic waste, the zabaleen now have to pay to have it transported to a dumping site, where it is then taken to recycling factories to be turned into compost.

Iskandar sympathizes, "They are in very bad shape, the people are devastated. [] When half of your income is gone, you can barely live."

The government and the people of Cairo have long depended on the zabaleen to make their trash go away without ever officially recognizing them. Iskandar believes there needs to be a formal agreement between the garbage collectors and the multinational companies regarding the organic waste.

According to Khayal, the garbage collectors have always had an agreement with the companies but they never delivered the organic waste. Iskandar claims that the middleman paid the garbage collectors, but didn't deliver the waste to the factories. When the zabaleen tried to deliver the organic waste to the factories themselves, they were often stopped by company employees.

"The garbage men have put in a lot of effort into this field, but they still have to be under control," says Khayal. "We can't deny their efforts, but they just need a little more care and organization."

With the NWMS, Iskandar hopes to improve the current situation by setting up formal contracts for the zabaleen, upgrading their garbage collection and recycling methods, and improving their equipment. The founder of CID is no stranger to the garbage community: At the 2006 World Economic Forum held in Sharm El-Sheikh, she was named the Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneur of the Year for creating a system that encouraged garbage collectors to recycle shampoo bottles directly with manufacturers in exchange for education funds.

In the meantime, the NWMS players are trying to get the word out on the street. CID and APE are currently trying to raise awareness of their proposed system through seminars, flyers and media interviews. The MSEA has also begun its own campaign by handing out two separate trash bags to households in certain parts of Giza. The ministry is conducting experimental projects in Cairo and Giza and hopes to include the concept of recycling in school curricula. Ultimately, we are the source of the trash problem — now it's time to be part of the solution. [et](#)

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