

Where there's muck...

With swine flu threatening around the world, cleaning up Cairo is now more necessary than ever. But the job is not getting any easier, writes [Dena Rashed](#)

As you take out your black plastic garbage bag, your connection with its contents is lost forever. That is how it is supposed to be: you're disposing of it. Nevertheless, your garbage becomes someone else's possession in a surprisingly short period of time, and while most people never give their garbage a second thought -- unless of course they have lost something valuable in it -- waste in general has become a hot topic in recent years and people's everyday garbage a subject of heated debate.

In Egypt, the city of Alexandria, swiftly followed by Cairo and Giza, have hired five foreign solid waste-management companies in a bid to clean themselves up since 2001. The beginnings were not smooth, and as the process continued it became clear that cleaning up Egypt's major cities was going to be more difficult than some people thought. For one thing, those involved in collecting, sorting and disposing of garbage had different techniques and aims.

Egypt's traditional garbage collectors, the *zabaleen*, have been processing the country's waste for generations in sometimes unhygienic ways, and their informal, but well-organised, way of doing things contrasts with the methods of companies that may have modern expertise but lack a sense of how things have traditionally been done. The role of the authorities has thus been to build bridges between the different parties.

The plans have definitely been ambitious, but results thus far have been somewhat disappointing. Nevertheless, cleanliness, or its absence, is easier to spot than many other social indicators, and for many people Egypt's cities do not obviously seem to be getting any cleaner. In an attempt to clarify the problems of the three cities, the French Centre for Economic, Judicial and Social Studies and Documentation in Cairo (CEDEJ) gathered the parties together last Sunday. "The day was meant to outline the main problems and obstacles that face the cities and to



As the slaughter and, at times, burning of pigs continue, there are other issues that need to be addressed concerning the future of the business and the *zabaleen*, in addition to the cleanliness of the cities; pigs in populated areas are soon to be a thing of the past after the slaughtering plan; everyone is keeping an eye on the performance of companies cleaning up

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let the actors share their opinions," says Safaa Monked, a researcher at CEDEJ and the organiser of the event.

PERSISTING PROBLEMS: For the *zabaleen*, garbage represents an asset. They have been collecting it door-to-door in many neighbourhoods since the 1970s, and having done so they sort it, recycle the solid parts, and feed the rest to pigs. However, the foreign companies brought in to rationalise the cities' garbage-disposal systems

were not necessarily keen to hire the *zabaleen* to help them, and the respective governorates did not necessarily succeed in regulating the relationship between the *zabaleen* and the companies.

Moreover, the companies operating in Cairo and Alexandria were contracted to collect garbage from large bins placed outside apartment buildings, which was not at all what most householders have been used to, since garbage has traditionally been collected door-to-door, except in Giza. While the authorities have managed to correct this problem, even asking the companies involved to hire the *zabaleen* to continue door-to-door collections, problems have persisted because in many cases the garbage is then sorted out in the streets. People have also found themselves paying for garbage-collection as an addition to their electricity bills, while continuing to pay the traditional *zabaleen*. While this was ruled illegal by an administrative court ruling in 2004, company collection has continued, as have monthly fees to the *zabaleen*.

The authorities have instructed people to resist demands for payment from the *zabaleen*, who are now paid subcontractors of the companies concerned, but many people are prepared to pay them as they used to, since either they feel loyal to the people who have collected their garbage for decades, or they fear that their garbage will go uncollected if they do not pay them.

Despite all these obstacles to the implementation of the new system, most people see the new methods as inevitable and a great improvement on the past. According to Shakinaz El-Sharqawi, a professor at the Faculty of Engineering in Cairo who teaches recycling and waste management, one main problem Egypt faces is the fact that people still tend to look down on those responsible for dealing with waste. "People see it as a degrading job. Yet, if they saw it as simply a way of managing waste it could raise a fortune. Since waste management has traditionally not been a job that has been managed properly by the government, it has tended to grow up informally as a result."

PLAYERS VS MONEY: According to Ahmed Ali of the Cairo Cleaning and Beautification Authority (CCBA), the companies concerned are currently being paid some LE50 million per year to dispose of waste subsidised by the Ministry of Finance. However, this, he says, "is not enough, as the contracts include annual increases in fees. In order to clean better, they need more resources. Although they have done good work, there is still more to be done, since they have not studied the culture well enough" to understand how things traditionally have been done. Ali also admits that waste-management is a problem for society. "If people continue simply to throw their garbage in the streets, then however many companies are hired to clean it up will hardly make a difference."

According to one of the companies concerned, Europe 2000, which was founded in 1996 to serve Maadi, Abdeen and another eight districts in Cairo, the problems include the fact that street vendors leave waste behind them and that garbage is commonly sorted out in the streets. According to Ahmed Mahmoud, a company representative, "people even turn bins upside down to feed the contents to their animals, and sometimes they steal the bins, or set fire to them." Another drawback is the fact that company contracts commonly do not require the contractors to dispose of construction and building waste, and as a result this is often left uncollected in the streets.

Having realised that the current contracts are not necessarily always working, the CCBA is currently renegotiating them in order to correct such problems. According to Ali, the companies

the cities; the first landfill by Onyx company in Alexandria also got its share of criticism when it was inaugurated due to its proximity to the north coast resorts, pushing the government to fund another far landfill; donkey-driven carts owned by young *zabaleen* are still a common site all over the cities. They use them to sort out garbage from the bins in the street.

"used to clean in the morning and at night, but this left the streets in an untidy state during the daytime. Their understanding of what was required was different from ours, because what we want is continuous cleaning throughout the day. We are also renegotiating clauses relating to door-to-door garbage collection in order to improve this service" and an increase in the number of employees in certain neighbourhoods.

Cairo alone, according to CCBA's Ali, currently produces an estimated 12,000 to 15,000 tonnes of waste, in addition to 4,000 tonnes of construction and building waste every day. Giza follows with more than 3,500 tonnes and almost 2,000 tonnes of construction and building waste every day, according to Ahmed Nassar of the Giza Cleaning and Beautification Authority (GCBA). He says that one main problem Giza faces is the interpretation of the term "service" in the contracts awarded to the cleaning companies. "When the companies started work in 2003, they were not aware of Egyptian reality, and as a result the Spanish company FCC withdrew from their contract due to differences over the work required." This case then went to arbitration, with the GCBA currently negotiating with FCC over the latter's financial demands.

For Amin Khayal, director of the Waste Management Unit at the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA), it is hard to think of all this daily waste as an asset. "How much would it cost to recycle or to collect properly?" he asks. "It has been shown that landfill disposal would be the cheapest option, at LE10 million per site, yet in order to run a really efficient system I would need some LE2 billion, and the money presently available is not sufficient to manage the system." Ali agrees, saying that if people want a cleaner city then more money will have to be provided for the CCBA.

According to Hassan Abaza, development and communications director of Veolia Environmental Services, which is in charge of cleaning up Alexandria, a further problem has been the company's relationship with the existing *zabaleen*. The company's policy has been to let them take whatever they want from the waste in exchange for keeping the streets clean. While the company was not obliged to hire the *zabaleen*, "when we found that otherwise we would have societal problems we managed it that way." Nevertheless, though the company offered the *zabaleen* employment paying between LE600 to LE1,000, "many of them refused because their present way of working on the streets can provide a better income."

Sobhi Abdel-Massih, chairman of the Horus Environmental Protection Association and a member of the *zabaleen*, explains their side of things. At one waste-sorting site at Ezbet Al-Nakhl outside Cairo, there are between 20,000 to 25,000 workers working for very little money, he says, with many of them only receiving 50 piastres per apartment according to the contracts with the waste-disposal companies. "These people are doing the work," Abdel-Massih says, "while the companies are reaping the rewards."

RECYCLING DILEMMAS: Recycling and its costs remain one of the main disputed areas between the different sides of the business. According to Berti Shaker of the CID consulting firm, the ways in which the *zabaleen* have traditionally recycled waste could be further utilised. "These are poor people originally from Upper Egypt, who have worked with the *Al-Wahiya* people from Al-Wahat to deal with Egypt's urban waste. They have taken care of organic waste, using it to raise pigs, while the latter have cared for solid waste, originally mostly paper." Today, there are almost 60,000 *zabaleen* living in the areas of Manshiet Nasser, Ezbet Al-Nakhl, Al-Motamedia, Al-Baragil, Tora and Helwan on the outskirts of Cairo, and according to Shaker these communities used to be responsible for collecting one third of Egypt's waste before the foreign waste-disposal companies arrived.

"It is true that the *zabaleen* have not always been bothered with hygiene or work safety, but that does not mean we can simply get rid of them. Instead, we should help them upgrade their work and provide them with micro-loans to help them develop recycling businesses. They have a good eye for recyclable materials, and we should capitalise on that," Berti says.

However, this is easier said than done, and according to Mohamed Fathi of the AMA company that has had the contract for cleaning northern Cairo since 2002 and western Cairo since 2006, "we agreed to incorporate them in our system as long as they keep it clean and do not hire

children. However, we have faced problems with these subcontractors in maintaining company cleanliness." The Spanish company Enser, which previously had the contract for western Cairo, found it impossible to carry out the work required, and the matter eventually went to arbitration.

For Fathi, the *zabaleen* do not have the proper attitudes to the work, and they are a liability rather than an asset. "It costs millions to remove the garbage from the city, but what has been happening is that it still stays inside. The *zabaleen* take what they want and leave the rest to litter the streets." In addition, Fathi says, the district of Manshiet Nasser, the main neighbourhood of the *zabaleen*, "is still in the heart of the city, contrary to the rest of the world's concept of solid-waste management."

Fathi's words do not ring true to the members of the Al-Shabab Al-Nahed Association in Manshiet Nasser, which promotes the interests of the *zabaleen*. According to Rezk Youssef, a university graduate and member of the association working in plastics recycling, such allegations are deeply upsetting to all *zabaleen*. "Years ago, we were on the outskirts of the city, but as the city has grown bigger, we have come closer to the centre. Anyway, we are the ones who do your dirty business for you, collecting garbage every day from your homes. We do not say that 'garbage is treasure'. The only thing we say is that this is our job."

Youssef's complaints notwithstanding, others, such as the EEAA's Khayal, have not been convinced that the *zabaleen* are using the best recycling techniques, even if there is money to be made from recycling waste like plastics, glass, wood and paper. "Primitive recycling of this sort does not take place anywhere else in the world," Khayal says. "On the whole waste is a curse, and those who say it is a source of money are talking nonsense."

For his part, however, Berti remains adamant. In dealing with the problem of urban waste-disposal "we should not be copying other countries in collecting, moving and then burying waste in land-fill sites. Instead, we should be looking at the job differently and look at what the *zabaleen* are best at."

HEALTH HAZARDS: Hygiene has long been a major concern, since the sorting out of garbage is done by the *zabaleen* on their land in unsafe ways and in the midst of populated areas, and there have been many plans to move them further outside cities. However, all such plans have failed. The pigs raised by the *zabaleen* on the organic waste have become another concern, this one gaining attention recently as a result of the swine flu that has struck various countries. While Egypt has no reported cases of swine flu, the government and People's Assembly have agreed that the pigs should be slaughtered as a preventive measure against its spread. Even as those present at the CEDEJ meeting discussed waste management, tensions were rising in Manshiet Nasser as the police clashed with residents over slaughtering the pigs.

According to Soheir Mourad of the Association for the Protection of the Environment whose work is directly related to Manshiet Nasser, some small pig breeders had agreed that their herds could be slaughtered. However, as they were delivering their animals to the police, other residents of the area started to protest, perhaps suspecting the presence of government agents. The tension started, Mourad says, when one of the lorry drivers was beaten up, and in the violence that followed more than 20 people were arrested and 16 policemen injured.

Although accurate figures for the number of pigs in Egypt do not exist, one recent official figure puts their numbers at around 190,000. According to Mourad, in Al-Qatamiya alone there are some 10,750 pigs. Wagih Anwar, a lawyer and member of the Al-Shabab Al-Nahed Association of Manshiet Nasser, gives an estimate of the numbers in Manshiet Nasser, saying that as there are some 500 farms in the area "there could be as many as 150,000 pigs." Anwar, who has been a member of the *zabaleen* community for the past 40 years and has watched the various changes coming to the community, believes that "people were probably scared of losing their source of income."

While Anwar considers that the government's decision to slaughter the pigs was unreasonable, since Mexico, where the flu originally started, had not taken any such decision, he thinks that people could be persuaded to agree if they were suitably compensated. However, "the

government only talked to Father Samaan, and he is a man of religion, not a businessman or a politician. As a result, the government thought that everything was under control, but it was not." For Youssef, too, people would agree if they thought the government would really compensate them. However, as they do not have any other source of livelihood, they need to find a way out of their problems.

Though land was allocated years ago to move the *zabaleen* outside Cairo to the Al-Qatamiya-Sokhna Road where they could farm their pigs under more hygienic circumstances, this idea was later fought against by the EEAA, which argued that this was protected land. As a result, Youssef says, "after some of our people moved there they were asked to leave. It has always been like this: the government hasn't been able to find proper land."

Speaking on behalf of the EEAA, Khayal told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that land had been found "11km away from the Helwan-Korimat Road" that would allow the *zabaleen* to move their farms outside the city. However, Mourad is still sceptical. "I heard that the land in question is close to residential areas, so the location could change one more time," she says. Meanwhile, she and the association have been busy with their own plans to help the *zabaleen*.

"We have set up two committees led by the head of the association, Yousria Loza, one to provide an awareness plan for people to help them take care of hygiene, and the other to devise a plan that will be proposed to the government on how to find solutions for people who lose their jobs as a result of the slaughtering of the pigs."

As Egypt is currently the only country in the world to have announced a plan to slaughter pigs, some believe that the move is designed to get rid of the hygiene issues related to the *zabaleen* community and to oblige them to focus their activities somewhere else. Yet, in addition to the social problems the proposal has raised, there may also be more practical issues at stake. Khayal points out that there are only two abattoirs for pigs in Egypt, and even "with two shifts per day, this process could not be completed for three and a half months."

Thus far, the government has proven to be serious in its plans to slaughter the pigs, but the *zabaleen* are still waiting for it to be serious when it comes to compensating them. It seems certain that not all of them will agree to getting rid of their pigs and moving somewhere else. For Youssef a further problem will be how to get rid of organic waste after all the pigs that had previously consumed it have been slaughtered. More effort would surely be required of the waste-disposal companies, she says, if the waste was not to be left rotting in the streets.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS: At the recent CEDEJ meeting, presentation of the problems and challenges took up the bulk of the time. However, there were also some proposals and some positive experiences.

Omar Negm, an engineering student working on a thesis to produce biogas from organic waste, presented his work to the audience. For example, "two kilos of household waste could produce two hours of gas per day," he says. "We have manufactured a trial device for a resident in Manshiet Nasser, and we hope to scale it up, as has been done in India and China."

A number of participants also discussed the idea of sorting the garbage at source, proposing that people should be encouraged to take part in recycling by placing their garbage in different bags, one for solid and the other for organic waste. With this in mind, Magdi Habib of the Feda Association shared an experience carried out in the Gammaliya district of Cairo, where bags had been distributed free to residents. While the experiment started well, he says, people found it hard to continue it after the first few months, and the project had been suspended in February 2008.

"We had hoped for a clean Gammaliya, and we wanted the kids to share in the cleaning. While the parents looked down on the idea, we came in ourselves and showed them we could do it. People were encouraged to participate in the end."

Engineer Karem El-Dahan, present at the meeting, is also a believer in the idea of sorting

garbage at source. "My family does that, and I hope the idea will spread," he says, suggesting that sponsors could be found for the idea. Yet, for Khalil Shaath of the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and an assistant to the Cairo governorate in the development of shantytowns, there are many problems bigger than waste in the shanty areas.

"There are high levels of unemployment," Shaath says, "and the problem of people who do not feel part of society. How will you convince them of the value of such projects if there isn't a benefit for them?" Shaath believes the best way forward would be to develop the idea of citizenship first and to help people feel part of the system. In one of the projects he was responsible for, he explained, he had invited children from the neighbourhood to meet once a month at 8am in order to help clean the streets where they live. The project had succeeded, Shaath says, citing it as an example of encouraging "development by endorsing participation."

Other ideas were also put forward. For Ali from the CCBA one way forward would be to set up a national campaign under the patronage of Mrs Suzanne Mubarak to raise people's awareness of the issue. Another proposal, put forward by Khaled Farouk, a projects coordinator with Europe 2000, envisaged the establishment of a database of city streets and areas, in order that the CCBA and GCBA could better monitor garbage collection in Cairo. This would save time and effort, he says, and it would allow people's complaints to be properly investigated.

Veolia's Abaza, on the other hand, believes that the media has a major role to play. While the companies concerned are supposed to help raise public awareness, Abaza argued that it was difficult to do. "TV advertisements are very expensive, and we have to pay taxes on them," he added. "So we believe that the Ministry of Education has a key role to play here, and they are already changing their curriculum to include awareness of the problem."

While those present at the meeting did not arrive at any unified vision of the steps to be taken, the discussion did allow them to share opinions and review challenges. The main impression left by the meeting was that the situation regarding Egypt's garbage is becoming increasingly serious, and that opposing interests will have to be catered for if the country is to have the clean cities it deserves.

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November 2009

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