

Egypt's trash problem

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: For generations, the Zabbaleen people have hauled away Cairo's waste and lived on the fringes of society. But thanks to a **recycling school set up by Laili Iskandar**, the poor and mostly illiterate people of "Trash City" are receiving education and job training for the first time.



If these students seem a bit old for their tasks, it's because none of them had ever set foot in a school until this one opened two years ago. The kids come from generations of illiterate and poor garbage collectors.

LAILA ISKANDAR, social entrepreneur: This is how we learn numbers. These are ones, so there's tens of those in this. It's complicated if you don't touch and feel.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: Laila Iskandar has taken it on herself to change the world of those who live in Medina Zabbaleen, literally, "Trash City," on the outskirts of Cairo.

For decades, the collectors, also called Zabbaleen, have hauled home what the people of Cairo threw away. Eighty percent of it was recycled and sold. Organic waste was fed to pigs owned by the Zabbaleen. Pigs are considered unclean in this largely Muslim nation, but the Zabbaleen are Christians. Their garbage collection earned them little money and even less respect.

LAILA ISKANDAR: They're viewed dirty. They don't wear a clean uniform. They don't really wash their trucks. They used to raise pigs, and that's not a very clean enterprise.



FRED DE SAM LAZARO: A decade ago, the government tried to modernize waste management by hiring companies to pick up trash in Egypt's major cities. But Cairo's 17 million people, who produce 13,000 tons of garbage every day, were used to door-to-door pickup by the Zabbaleen. Iskandar says they didn't like sorting, recycling and carrying trash to bins. The companies also had trouble finding workers.

LAILA ISKANDAR: The Zabbaleen refused to work for them. They said, we work for ourselves. Do you think we really enjoy going out and handling garbage because we love to get dirty? We are recyclers.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: Finally, Iskandar says, the trash companies and Zabbaleen made an agreement. The Zabbaleen were allowed to again work door to door in some neighborhoods (since the trash companies couldn't manage to pick up trash from the whole city anyway).

But in 2009, the Zabbaleen families were badly hurt by a government decision. In 2009, the Egyptian government, responding to the swine flu epidemic, ordered all pigs killed in the country. Some 300,000 of the animals were culled.

For the Zabbaleen, farming pigs was a source of both income and protein. With no pigs to feed, they had no reason to pick up organic waste. Tons of it is now strewn along streets and in overflowing bins. Neither goats nor the methods of rich countries, where trash is separated by households and dumped in large landfills, have worked here, says Iskandar.



LAILA ISKANDAR: You can't copy-and-paste systems that work in one culture and automatically use it in another culture. It may not work. And it wasn't smart in the first place.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: She thinks the solution is to train and educate the next generation of Zabbaleen to collect and recycle garbage in more modern ways. Many children in Egypt are too poor to attend school, and Zabbaleen children seldom go to school. So she started a school that teaches Zabbaleen children and teens. When they learn to read, they study vocabulary they need for trash recycling.

LAILA ISKANDAR: *Pert Plus, Pantene, Head and Shoulders*, these are the first words we learn in our literacy class.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: *Pert Plus, Pantene, Head and Shoulders* because their maker, Procter & Gamble, pays a few cents for every container that is recycled. Procter and Gamble pays because they don't want the empty containers refilled and sold with fake contents.

The reading taught here is practical: how to read city maps, spreadsheets, how to get a better work contract with the city or private trash companies.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: Iskandar trying to improve the lives of garbage collectors and recyclers. But there is a need to teach all Egyptians that they have a garbage problem in Egypt. They must recycle. And it's not just a problem in the cities, but also in rural areas like the Sinai Peninsula.



In the Sinai Peninsula, Sherif El Ghamrawy works to provide jobs and to teach recycling. Ghamrawy started a resort along this coast in the 1980s. Everything, from food to furniture, is recyclable or recycled. But with the growth of tourism came another opportunity.

SHERIF EL GHAMRAWY: After I saw how a lot of hotels started building here, I saw that there was soon trash all over.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: He designed a recycling program and signed agreements with the surrounding towns – and especially the area's large hotels and resorts – to handle their refuse.

Organic or food waste is given to the livestock of Bedouin herders in this desert region. Plastics and inorganic materials (paper, glass, metals) go to a center set up by Ghamrawy's organization, *Hemaya*, or "Protection" in Arabic.

SHERIF EL GHAMRAWY: You can see that we work in a tourist area with lots of bottles.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: Glass bottles of every color and shape, cardboard and papers and plastics destined for a variety of recycled uses.

SHERIF EL GHAMRAWY: This is used in the padding for shoe soles, and also hair rollers.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: But what would happen before you came?

SHERIF EL GHAMRAWY: It was not very well-organized. Everyone was collecting their own trash. They threw it somewhere in the desert. The plastic bags, they flew into the sea and kill the corals or kill the fish.



FRED DE SAM LAZARO: Ghamrawy's project has turned much of that debris into profit, exporting materials like plastic to China.

SHERIF EL GHAMRAWY: This plastic is very expensive material. We can sell it for about \$600 per ton.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: About 100 young men work for him. Most of them are migrants from the poorer regions of Upper Egypt.

ABD EL NABY, employee: We came to make a living. There are no jobs. The economy is very depressed in Upper Egypt. We don't mind doing this. It's better than working for the government or in a city job.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: Their pay, including a share of the profit from selling the plastic, is about \$200 U.S. a month. That doesn't sound like much, but you can live on that in Egypt. Much of it is sent back home to their families.

SHERIF EL GHAMRAWY: They earn more than a lot of university graduates in Egypt.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: Back in Medina Zabbaleen, Laila Iskandar is very proud of one of her best students, Moussa Nazmy. At 24, he has started his own business recycling plastic into pellets. They will be exported to China.



MOUSSA NAZMY, business owner: Through this school, I became the first person in my family to read. If I go to do business, I can keep written records. I also learned new recycling methods at the school. I work differently than my father in this job.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: For Iskandar, it's the first step in bringing respect for him and for a trade that she says will be critical if developing countries like Egypt are to have healthy economic growth.

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