



United Nations
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Success Stories

Egypt: Learning and earning in Cairo's Garbage City

by Hoda Baraka



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14,000 tons. That is the official estimate amount of daily waste produced in the mega-city of Cairo. But the city authorities cannot cope with the amount thus creating a serious waste management problem. Consequently, Cairo relies heavily on informal waste collectors although they are not contracted by official authorities.

There are six Zabaleen communities located on the outskirts of Cairo whose inhabitants earn their living through waste collection. They recycle about 80 per cent of all the garbage they collect.

All settlements are considered 'squatter' settlements; the largest of these is located in Mokattam and has approximately 60,000 inhabitants. It is known as Garbage City.

Needless to say, the Zabaleen live in poor conditions and most children in the community lack education. From an early age boys accompany their fathers on daily garbage collection forays while girls remain at home to sort the recyclables.

In Mokattam the Recycling School for Boys stands out as a unique initiative which aims to improve living conditions for the community through non-formal education. To date, the school has reached approximately 350 children. One such student is Moussa Nazmy.

At 26, he is the first person in his family to read and write and now runs his own business granulating plastic that will eventually be exported to China. He also works as a public relations officer for The Spirit of Youth Association, a non-governmental organization based in Mokattam.

Nazmy stresses that education enabled him to seek a better life. "After graduating from the recycling school I decided to continue learning through formal schooling. Now I am about to take my final secondary school exams because I want to go to university. I know that through education there is no limit to what I can achieve."

The inception of this project came at a time when the community faced major challenges.

Since 2000 the living conditions have been particularly difficult for the community. The informal sector of garbage collection faced a serious threat with the advent of multinational waste management firms contracted by the Egyptian government to develop a centralized waste collection

system. The income and livelihood of the Zabaleen was threatened. It became urgent to find the means to become part of the centralized system.

At this critical juncture the consultancy firm Community and Institutional Development (CID), with continuous support of the UNESCO Cairo Office, set up the Mokattam Recycling School for Boys as a way to help the informal waste collectors to graduate out of long-term poverty.

“The school implements innovative methods of non-formal basic education specifically designed for those who are caught in the poverty trap and cannot access formal schooling.” says Dr. Laila Iskandar, founder of CID. “Non-formal education links the learning process to work-related contexts. In the case of the recycling school, flexible school hours are in place to allow the students to continue working with their parents. Thus, the informal waste-recycling sector has become the setting for non-formal learning and skills acquisition for thousands of youth in Cairo. Through education the new generation can break out of the endless cycle of poverty and marginalization.”

The Mokattam Recycling School for Boys is designed to incorporate education, work experience, environmental protection, poverty alleviation and earning to create a matrix where one project improves an impoverished community on many levels. This alternative learning opportunity then serves to facilitate their integration into the new, centralized waste management business.

In December 2001 CID designed and launched the Recycling School for Boys in Mokattam through a USD 500,000 grant from UNESCO and under the auspices of the Association of Garbage Collectors for Community Development. Today, the project is under the auspices of the Spirit of Youth Association for Environmental Services, which was established by youths in Mokattam neighbourhood in 2004.

The school follows a unique “learn-and earn” programme in line with the non-formal education model. The programme entails the boys collecting empty plastic bottles during their daily garbage collection rounds. They are compensated for each collected bottle that is inventoried and granulated for recycling in the school. This business model necessitated that they learn to read and write, organize information, and perform mathematical functions.

According to Ezzat Naem Gendy, who set up The Spirit of Youth Association, the school’s curriculum content was devised with this in mind and thus included “literacy, numeracy, business math, personal and environmental hygiene, income generation and recycling, computer literacy, principles of project management, bookkeeping and simple accounting, along with recreational theatre arts.”

As explained by Dr. Iskandar, the founder, “freed of the constraints of time and place, and building on the reality of local communities, this type of learning (upheld by UNESCO), integrates the natural learning processes of young people trying to survive in difficult circumstances. Learning is anchored in the local practice of recycling, the fulfillment of earning income, the dynamism of trading, accessing credit, and the imperative of organizing communities.”

In moving forward to improve the lives of informal waste collectors at large, any system would need to factor 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, all based on the traditional management of waste.

“Rather than replace this with another ineffective corporate model financed by large capital, Egypt would do well to upgrade and integrate the informal private enterprises rooted in traditional systems,” commented one visitor to the school.

“Integration of the Zabaleen into the formal system is of utmost importance,” stresses Gendy, founder of The Spirit of Youth Association, “Otherwise, we will remain on the fringes forever.”

Further information:

www.cid.com.eg

As lead agency for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), UNESCO promotes an education that allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.

Education for Sustainable Development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development.

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