

Agnès Deboulet and Waleed Mansour (dir.)

Middle Eastern Cities in a Time of Climate Crisis

CEDEJ - Égypte/Soudan

Useful! For a Recognition of Waste Pickers in the Circular Economy

Romani Badir and Benedicta Florin

Publisher: CEDEJ - Égypte/Soudan
Place of publication: Le Caire
Year of publication: 2022
Published on OpenEdition Books: 24 November 2022
Series: Dossiers du Cedej
Electronic EAN: 9782900956090



<http://books.openedition.org>

Printed version

Date of publication: 28 December 2022

Electronic reference

BADIR, Romani ; FLORIN, Benedicta. *Useful! For a Recognition of Waste Pickers in the Circular Economy*
In: *Middle Eastern Cities in a Time of Climate Crisis* [online]. Le Caire: CEDEJ - Égypte/Soudan, 2022
(generated 24 novembre 2022). Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/cedej/8589>>. ISBN: 9782900956090.

USEFUL! FOR A RECOGNITION OF WASTE PICKERS IN THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

A N INDISPENSABLE BUT UNRECOGNIZED COMMUNITY
Called the ‘Zabbaleen’ in Egypt, the waste pickers of Cairo are located in ‘garbage zones’ that occupy some of the deepest and least accessible recesses of the city’s extensive outer fringes, although some neighbourhoods are now integrated into the city due to urban sprawl.¹ Despite the Zabbaleen’s enormous historical – and discreet – contribution to the everyday functioning of the city since the 1930s, they are frequently threatened with eviction because of their practice of raising pigs and because they live surrounded by piles of waste. The Zabbaleen have been neglected by authorities despite providing a

* **Romani Badir** is a waste picker in Cairo. He lives and works in the largest of Cairo’s seven recycling districts: Manshiyet Nasser (also called Muqqatam), which has over 60,000 inhabitants and a large number of recycling workshops. He is considered an expert in recycling and a great connoisseur of his community by NGOs and international institutions.

Bénédicte Florin is Assistant Professor of geography at the University of Tours and a researcher at EMAM (Equipe Monde Arabe et Méditerranée) of the research centre CITERES (Cités, Territoires, Environnement et Société). Her research focuses on cities in the Arab and Turkish world. Since 2007, she has been particularly interested in the issue of waste pickers and waste-management policies and systems in Cairo, Casablanca, Istanbul and Paris.

1. This article is the result of a presentation by Romani Badir at the Cairo conference on climate change in March 2022 and the many discussions he has had with Bénédicte Florin since 2007. It also includes excerpts from Florin’s article ‘The Ragpickers of Cairo: The Dregs of the City or Garbage Businessmen?’ (2015).

crucial but unpaid public service. This community was invisible for a long time in geographical, social and professional terms; paradoxically, they were better known abroad, by associations and charities, than in their own country. And, paradoxically again, they were brought to light from the 2000s by public policies that were carried out without consulting them. The other event that suddenly brought them to the fore was the slaughter of their pigs in 2009.²

Following a complex system of territories, they collect household waste door-to-door on each floor of thousands of buildings, providing an otherwise almost non-existent service. As Romani Badir explains: 'Regarding the collection of waste in Greater Cairo – exclusively, without mentioning the rest of urban Egypt – we receive around eleven thousand tons of waste on a daily basis! Needless to say, how big that number is!' The Zabbaleen's recycling workshops require a steady supply of raw household waste, which is also used to feed their pigs. Their fine-grained knowledge of when and where they can circulate and the optimal times and places for high-quality waste often leads them to venture quite far outside their neighbourhood.

THE RISE OF MANSHIYET NASSER: A QUASI-INDUSTRY OF RECYCLING

The overall volume of waste that is sorted and recycled by the Zabbaleen – primarily in the privacy of their neighbourhood – grew significantly in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in one of Cairo's largest recycling districts, which is home to 60,000 of the capital's 100,000 waste pickers. This district is located in Manshiyet Nasser. There, workshops, tools and machines, often built by the workers (testifying to their ingenuity), are gradually multiplying. Today, there are estimated to be more than a thousand recycling workshops with machines, mainly for plastics but also cardboard (which requires a lot of space), while a few recycle aluminium. Badir explains:

2. In May 2009, under pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian government brutally butchered 300,000 of the waste pickers' pigs. The AH1N1 flu outbreak, which was falsely labeled the 'swine flu', triggered this scientifically unjustified and egregiously unfair decision.

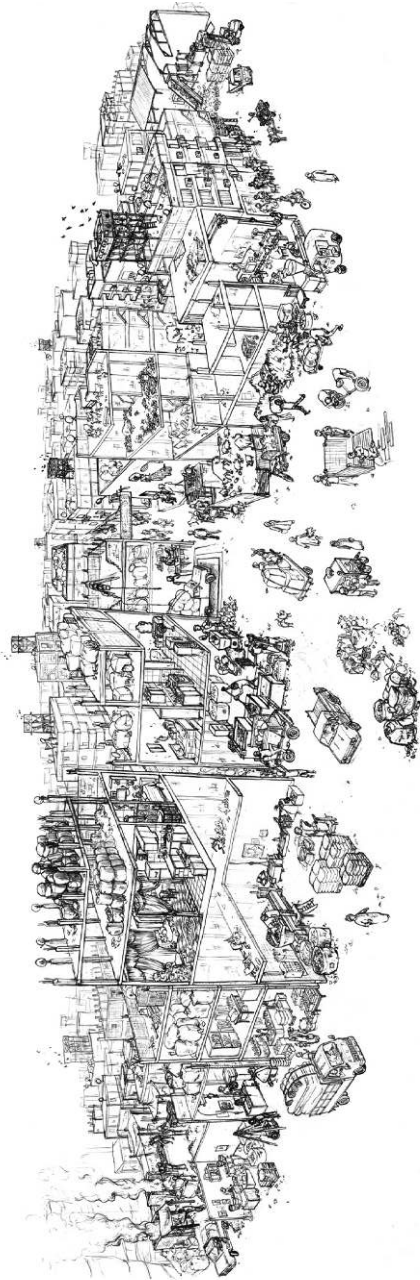


Figure 1. Section of the Zabbaleen district Manshiyet Nasser. Source: Batchou, 2017. Graphite and china ink on paper, Rothau, France.

The main point is the idea of the presence of small projects, or enterprises in a way, that operate by collecting this waste from a place where the workers collect, sort the waste into solid waste, organic waste, etc. All being separated, each item then goes to the Zabbaleen's recycling workshops to be recycled and repurposed. ... The development that we as Zabbaleen aim for is working and working some more, even if it means copying foreign recycling machines; mainly because of their original expensive price, which we reduce by copying them.

THE ROLE OF PIGS AND MOVEMENTS OF MATERIALS IN THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Before 2009, a Zabbaleen family's wealth was based on the number of pigs it possessed. Because pigs consumed 40 per cent of the organic contents scavenged from garbage bins, they were a crucial link in the waste chain. Pig excrement fetched a high price as fertilizer, as did their meat, which was sold to Cairo's four pork butchers. Indeed, far from being an isolated activity, the recovery of materials is integrated into specific networks and is deployed at different scales. These networks, which tend to take years to develop, are indicative of the highly refined negotiating skills of a community often treated as pariahs. Some Zabbaleen have even developed retail outlets to re-sell cardboard boxes and plastic drums, while others have negotiated to collect prized organic waste from the city's large hotels, as Badir explains:

Normally, we don't sell organic material because when it comes from homes the quality is poor, but when it comes from a large hotel, we sell it to neighbours who need it to quickly fatten up their pigs. Before we butcher the pigs, we are even prepared to pay the hotels! ... Now, as I often tell people, they can eat their garbage themselves!

Sales networks for pre-sorted or recycled materials have also proliferated and diversified. Wholesalers purchase manufactured goods from Manshiyet Nasser, while compacted boxes and cans are sold to factories in the official sector and plastic balls and palette-loads of compressed plastic bottles were distributed to a Chinese-owned factory and shipped to China (this destination was replaced by an Egyptian

company in 2021). Distribution agreements between workshop bosses in Manshiyet Nasser and Zabbaleen located in provincial cities or tourist sites have also increased, reflecting the community's ability to maximize the yield of the capital's voluminous waste stream.

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF THE ZABBALEEN

Sophisticated recycling techniques involving a range of materials, expertise in negotiation and sales and collaboration with other industrial networks illustrate the rapid professionalization of the trade. Individuals who scavenged for scraps of food for their animals as children have been transformed into influential bosses in a decentralized system that has organically but steadily expanded. While a high degree of professionalization is not necessarily universal among the waste pickers, it has had a number of side effects that include initiatives to educate children and improved housing in new apartment buildings, particularly since the revolution and rising demands for labour rights. These positive developments have all been strictly dependent on continued access to household waste.

Similarly, entrepreneurial initiatives have multiplied, increasing recycling efficiency, as Badir explains:

If you want something to become a success, it has to be useful. Taking the operation of waste recycling for instance, we recycle 90 per cent, and the other 10 per cent, we don't. These 10 per cent aren't left aside because of our incapacity to recycle them but mainly because they aren't of much use. In other words, their raw material is far cheaper than the wage of the worker who's going to handle it: for example, recycling fifty kilos of waste with the wage of two workers while those two get their wage usually for recycling 300 kilos of waste – it's unfair! In addition to that, it's extremely difficult to deliver 500 tons [those 10 per cent] to dumpsters that have the capacity of only a 100 [tons], as this would lead to the existence of dumpsters [in an unorganized manner] everywhere in Egypt.

The Zabbaleen of Manshiyet Nasser lost the right to burn non-recyclable residue over ten years ago. However, waste is still responsible for a very large part of Greater Cairo's CO₂ emissions, in particular because of deposits of waste burned in unserved neighbourhoods.

These questions of pollution linked to waste – in particular toxic waste – are the subject of increasing awareness. But the lack of pre-sorted collection makes it difficult to find solutions today, according to Badir:

To cite an example, especially that of batteries that contain toxic substances, each of us should first place them in a sealed plastic bag, because they must be recycled separately. They contain heavy substances (cadmium and lead), which can leak and contaminate other waste such as organic waste, which would cause huge problems. This organic waste – then poisoned – is often reused as animal feed and the manure is also used as organic fertilizer for agricultural land. Therefore, toxic products come back to us and also poison us through food. This paves the way for kidney failure, liver failure and many other dangerous diseases.

RECYCLING AS A PROFESSION AND ITS IMPACT

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the organization of the work is changing at the scale of workshops and of the district of Manshiyet Nasser, as Badir states:

Certainly, since each Zabbal works in person in his own workshop, he cannot be regarded as an employee but is rather an owner. The difference to be highlighted is that in case of an employee, he's only bound to work certain days, even if up to thirty days a month, for set hours and then gets his salary. While in the case of an owner, he has a bigger interest [than salary], that is profit. For him to achieve that, he must look for two main factors: the quality and quantity of work [waste] to be done. Giving the example of recycling various types of plastic, such as polypropylene, polyester, etc., for them to be developed [into profit], I need to search for quality. This quality is never achieved by getting them out of the trash without cleaning, sorting, etc. So, missing the quality, it shall be sold very cheaply, which won't achieve the desired target: profit. A ton of waste guarantees job offers for six families – a worker of each: where a collector, a categorizer, a handyman, another for compressing cardboards, etc. are needed.

Cairo's Zabbaleen have often been 'studied' and held up as an example of exceptional recyclers, even though dire working conditions

(particularly for women who sort or children at work), health issues and their non-recognition in terms of social rights and labour rights have still not been resolved. Their know-how and ingenuity in recycling remains essential because, as Badir says, the ‘end of plastic’ will not come tomorrow:

Repeatedly and often have I heard that many are expressing the necessity of giving up plastic [use]. Honestly, from what I know, plastic is considered one of the miracles that happened to us within the last two hundred years. As such, I cannot give up plastic, but I can very much reduce its usage. Plastic that is used to cover copper wires to avoid electrical shocks, the same for electrical pipes. Also used in cars’ tyres, we obviously need its presence. So, the issue to address should be how to reduce its usage by finding alternatives for it where it’s mostly used, but never to give it up.

The question that arises is how best to support the work of this community after the successive obstacles encountered: the modernizing reforms of the 2000s excluding them, the slaughter of their pigs in 2009, the demolition of some of their neighbourhoods, such as Batn el-Baqara, etc. Although they seem to receive a little more respect than fifty years ago, the Zabbaleen’s position has not changed. Meanwhile, huge competition around waste will increase in the future. We have seen this in Turkey, where ‘informal’ wholesalers are driven out of Istanbul, replaced by official companies or ‘friends’ of the municipality (Florin 2016).

Let Badir have the final word:

Recycling works; we take it as a job where we are inventive and creative. Thus the collection of approximately 1,000 tons of paper and cardboard makes it possible to deliver to the factories. As you know, their raw material is trees. Collecting these materials from the waste automatically means that we have protected/saved over a thousand tons of trees from being cut down. These trees are known for their operation of photosynthesis using carbon dioxide to provide us with oxygen. So, through our recycling work, we protect the lungs of the earth [the trees] and by default the oxygen we breathe.

We – the Zabbaleen – are so proud that we’re doing something [about climate change] and taking up a challenge. A tough job, but we’re most certainly capable of doing it and we’re welcoming any of those who want to see [our work]. The situation raises the question of “What can I do?” to protect durable cities? Start with yourself [I would say]. There isn’t such thing as someone who doesn’t work, even students, many have their work day starting at 3 or 4 a.m., etc. Our area, for instance, is taking up to 15,000 workers, mostly from Upper Egypt of course. We’re still creating job offers, guaranteeing the presence of foreign currency and we recycle. With recycling, I urge every person to start with him- or herself, to be a leading example when it comes to the protection of the environment, whether when it comes to their work or anything/anywhere else.

REFERENCES

- Florin, Bénédicte. 2015, ‘The Ragpickers of Cairo: The Dregs of the City or Garbage Businessmen?’ Translated from French by John Angell, *Ethnologie française* 3, no. 153: 487–98.
- Florin, Bénédicte. 2018. ‘When the Waste-Pickers Get Out the Margin: Little Battles and Mobilization of Istanbul Waste-Pickers (Turkey)’. In *Alternatif Politica*, May: 115–34.