

Teach Africa™



World Affairs Council of Houston



Conservation Heroes of Africa

Laila Iskandar Kamel

Recycling Garbage and Improving Lives in Egypt

Long before recycling was known as a key industry, a community living on the outskirts of Cairo was barely making a living recycling the city's household waste. From just after midnight until the break of dawn, family-owned donkey carts moved along routes collecting garbage. Traditionally, adult male members of the family collected the garbage, bringing younger children along to sit on the carts and guard them. One person's trash is another person's treasure.

Laila Iskandar Kamel first became involved with the community of garbage collectors, or *zabbaleen* in 1982 when she started an informal school. Since *zabbaleen* children



go with their fathers to collect garbage from an early age, she organized the school so that attendance is flexible. With its emphasis on health and hygiene, school work was designed to help the children deal with their surroundings. The school provides educational models of learning in the context of recycling, such as students taking shampoo bottles and preparing them for the recycling process. Girls and boys are actually learning math and logic fundamentals as they help in providing for their community.

Meanwhile, at Kamel's Rug-Weaving Center, girls from the community are reviving the most ancient of Egyptian crafts, weaving on a hand-loom. Made from discarded cotton remnants, the colorful rugs are sold at handicraft fairs, and earnings are divided among the aspiring weavers. As part of this "learning and earning" project the girls learn basic math and literacy skills.

To help further improve the lives of the

zabbaleen, Kamel has created innovative environmental projects in this region. Her Community and Institutional Development Group is a non-profit organization that takes items that have been disposed as trash and recycles those that can be re-used. In one project, people bring organic waste to a neighborhood composting plant, which refines it into high grade compost that can then be sold.

In another endeavor, Kamel taught young men how to separate the garbage of the town into two parts: food and non-food. The organic matter is delivered to the Bedouins who raise their goats and camels on it, and the non-organic waste goes to a sorting and processing transfer station. This project brings together all the participants in each town—local government, investors, Bedouins, residents, hotels, tourists—around the issue of creating sustainable tourism developments in the South Sinai. Such experiences have helped the *zabbaleen* break the cycle of exploitation and receive proper payment for their valuable work.

To the outside eye, it may appear that the *zabbaleen* still live in poverty—however, this trash is their livelihood. Every ton of trash they receive translates into 7 jobs. With Kamel's dedication and vision, the recycling industry has turned this previously impoverished community into a business enterprise. To learn more, visit www.cid.com.eg.



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