

EGYPT

The people who recycle Cairo

For decades, a community of rubbish collectors in Cairo has sorted and reused much of what the city throws away.

WHERE	Cairo
WHO	The Zabbaleen, Cairo's rubbish collectors, mostly Coptic Christian families from southern Egypt
WHEN	1940s to today

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Cairo, the capital of Egypt, makes about 10,000 tonnes of rubbish every day, a 2011 report says. About 60 percent of it is collected, mostly by one community, the Zabbaleen. In Egyptian Arabic, the word means “garbage people.”

Most Zabbaleen are Coptic Christians. Their families came from farming villages in southern Egypt and moved to Cairo in the middle of the last century. They found work taking away the city’s rubbish, and they raised pigs that ate the food waste.

They collect the rubbish from homes with donkey carts and trucks. Then they carry it to Mokattam, a neighbourhood at the edge of Cairo that people call Garbage City. There, families sort it by hand. Plastic, metal and glass are melted down and made into new things.

> **The story of the Zabbaleen highlights the ingenuity of informal services.**
>
> CAIRO FROM BELOW, A WEBSITE ABOUT CAIRO, 2011

60%

of Cairo’s rubbish collected, mostly by the Zabbaleen

80–85%

of what they collect is reused or recycled, by two estimates

300,000

pigs killed in 2009, by one estimate

Those recycling figures are estimates, not official measures. Treat them as a guide.

Replaced, then missed

In 2003, Cairo hired three European companies to collect its rubbish. Their large trucks did not fit in many narrow streets. Many people said they preferred the old door-to-door service. Later the companies hired some Zabbaleen as workers, but some Zabbaleen said the pay was too low.

The pig cull

In April 2009, Egypt ordered all pigs killed, over fears of swine flu. Experts generally agree that the flu does not spread from pigs. Egypt also had no cases at that time, Wikipedia says. The United Nations criticised the decision. Rubbish then piled up in the streets.

Today the Zabbaleen still earn little, often less than a dollar a day, the 2011 report says. Many get skin diseases from the work. Even so, Middle East Eye reports that small businesses and community groups have grown in Garbage City. Some people hope they will help the Zabbaleen keep doing this work.

How it unfolded

- **1970** Zabbaleen families are evicted from Giza.
- **1975** A church is founded in Mokattam. Families begin building with brick and stone.
- **2003** Cairo hires three European companies to collect its rubbish.
- **2009** Egypt orders all pigs killed. Rubbish piles up in Cairo.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

A poor community built a recycling system by hand, long before recycling became policy. When Cairo tried to replace it, many people missed it.

The story is not simple. The work is hard, the pay is low, and the figures are only estimates.

OUR TAKE

The people who do the hardest, least-seen work often know the system best. Ask them before you replace them.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 See value in waste

The Zabbaleen sort rubbish by hand and reuse or recycle most of it.

Try this: Before you throw something away, ask who could use it.

2 Ask the people who do the work

Large trucks did not fit narrow streets, and many people missed the old service.

Try this: Talk to the people doing a job before you change how it is done.

3 Look after the people who clean up

The Zabbaleen earn little, and many get sick from their work.

Try this: Treat people who clean up after us with respect, and pay them fairly.

4 Count the cost of a rushed choice

Pigs were killed over flu fears, and rubbish piled up in the streets.

Try this: When you decide fast, ask who will pay for it.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

Those who clean up after us are part of the system, not outside it.

Sources

Middle East Eye
Pictures of life in Cairo's Garbage City

Cairo from Below
The Zabaleen: Cairo's innovative garbage collectors

Wikipedia
Zabbaleen

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the broad story and differ on some figures. Cairo's waste: Cairo from Below (2011) says some 10,000 tonnes a day, with about 60 percent collected, mostly by the Zabbaleen; Wikipedia gives older figures (1997), so the story uses the 2011 ones and says so. When the Zabbaleen came: Wikipedia says since about the 1940s, with a wave of landless farmers from Asyut in the 1930s and 1940s; Cairo from Below says the 1950s; the story says only the middle of the last century. Recycling rate: Cairo from Below says about 85 percent, against 70 percent for modern systems; Wikipedia says up to 80 percent, against 20 to 25 percent for Western companies, partly from the website of the film Garbage Dreams, which is not neutral; these comparisons conflict, so the story gives only the 80 to 85 percent range and calls it an estimate. We did not check it against an independent study. Population is disputed (Wikipedia: 50,000 to 70,000, and some say over 80,000), so the story gives none. The 2003 contracts with three European companies are from Middle East Eye and Wikipedia; Cairo from Below says the plan collapsed after one year, which Wikipedia does not say, so the story does not claim it. The narrow streets, residents' liking for door-to-door pick-up and the low pay offered later (claimed by some Zabbaleen) are from Wikipedia only. The pig cull in April 2009 is in all three sources. The 300,000 pigs, the UN's criticism, the general agreement that the flu does not spread from pigs and the lack of Egyptian cases are from Wikipedia only; Wikipedia also reports violence during the cull, which the

story leaves out because we could not check it. Pay under a dollar a day and skin diseases are from Cairo from Below (2011) and may be out of date. The 1970 eviction and the 1975 church are from Wikipedia only. The quote is the writer’s opinion in the closing part of the Cairo from Below article. Worldcrunch, Egypt Independent, NPR and BBC could not be opened (403 or 404). The pin shows Mokattam. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.