



Press Release

68th Cairo Climate Talks

2nd September 2020

On the 2nd of September 2020 the 68th Cairo Climate Talk took place virtually via Zoom on the topic of: “Water Pollution, Medical Waste and PPE: How do we deal with Covid-19 related solid waste?” Solid waste is posing a major threat to the environment, livelihoods and human health. According to the World Bank [2.01 billion tonnes of municipal solid waste are already produced yearly](#) and ongoing pandemic mitigation measures increase the usage of non-recyclable waste such as Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and single use plastics dramatically.

Uwe Gehlen, Head of Cooperation, who opened the panel discussion on behalf of the German Embassy, mentioned that it was not only technology of efficiency that led to German’s elaborated waste management system, but an increasing awareness and public dialogue about environmental protection beginning in the 1980s, an approach that could be beneficial for Egypt, too. German-Egyptian partnerships in both the procurement of PPE and the raising of awareness through campaigns and training programs have already contributed to protecting waste- and medical-workers during the phase of heightened exposure. This cooperation was commended by both project partners **Ruth Erlbeck**, Head of the National Solid Waste Management Programme Egypt (NSWMP) on behalf of the GIZ and **Eng. Essam Abdelaziz**, Manager of Hazardous Medical Waste Management, on behalf of the MOE.

Salem Massalha, Co-founder of Bassita and VeryNile, pointed out that waste-workers in Egypt, locally known as the Zabaleen, continue to be marginalized and stigmatized by parts of the population. He celebrated them by calling them “the heroes of the city of Cairo”. Not only do they clean the city at a much lower cost than for example Paris’ municipal waste collectors, but they are also real entrepreneurs, making a living off what they have. **Syada Greiss** who is the board chairman of the Association for the Protection of the Environment (APE) located in Manshiyat Naser – the biggest settlement of Zabaleen in Cairo – stressed on the fact that in order to improve solid waste management in Egypt, waste workers need to be recognized as full citizens with access to education

and health services, as well as spaces in which they can safely separate the collected waste, as many continue to separate the waste in their homes.

The need for stronger regulations and legislations was stressed by all invited experts. **Ruth Erlbeck** praised the introduction of new waste laws on August 19, 2020, as they are at the core of the ongoing reform of the waste management sector. The private sector is a vital partner in addressing solid waste challenges as they can add vital waste management plants, however the private sector will follow profit. This means that if valuable waste is not collected and attractive conditions are not provided, the private sector will not move into the waste sector. It is also important to make sure that regulations are in place to ensure ethical and sustainable waste treatment.

Especially when it comes to medical and hazardous waste, Egypt has been struggling with safe waste disposal facilities. While subscriptions are mandatory and most medical facilities pay for the disposal, according to **Ayman Sabae**, CEO and Specialist in International Health Systems Management at Shamseya, recent assessments have shown that the frequency and safety of this collection is often far from ideal. He added that Corona made the situation more complex as “we are forced to look at household waste as a potentially contagious one.” While segregation of the waste seems to be a possible solution, it became clear through the expert’s insights that the segregation needs to be preceded by a holistic awareness campaign, otherwise the separate wastes will be thrown together by the waste collectors or during the manual sorting process.

In addition, **Ruth Erlbeck** pointed out that many hospitals have their own medical waste treatment plants, but they do not always meet the highest standards. A centralized approach to ensure safe disposal could be a possible future scenario for the Egyptian medical sector, especially given that medical waste discarded in landfills poses major health and environmental threats.

“We need to organize and not compete with each other in order to solve the challenges” **Syada Greiss** said. While many reform strategies for waste management have been written, it is actions we need to see, she stressed. The lessons learned during the Covid-19 crisis may lead the way forward for the Zabaleen and the waste sector, as Uwe Gehlen said: “a lot of things can be achieved, can happen when they are pushed by internal or external shocks”.

Background Information:

The Cairo Climate Talks are conceived, organized and hosted as a cooperation between the German Embassy in Cairo, the Egyptian Ministry of Environment, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ).

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