

#### How it all started

There is an overwhelming level of poverty affecting the majority of the Egyptian population, which is often unknown, or overlooked. In rural areas, when subsistence farming is no longer able to support either families or village communities, people migrate to Cairo in search of work. This has resulted in an over-population of the city – a situation that has intensified with the recent return of two million Egyptians from Iraq. Housing conditions are poor and cramped and regular employment is in short supply.

One particularly extreme case of poverty can be found in the Ezbet El Nakhl sub-district of Cairo, where a rubbish dump houses 15,000 people. The people of this area, the Zabaleen (meaning 'rubbish pickers'), live in small huts which are literally built from the rubbish that surrounds them.



Living in absolute poverty and squalor, the Zabaleen scrape a living by salvaging whatever they can from the rubbish dump, and selling anything recyclable. Until recently they kept pigs, fed on scraps of food from the dump – but these were slaughtered during the swine flu outbreak in 2009, which has yet worsened the people's situation. Infection and parasites are rife in these appalling conditions and there is a constant danger of injury from the unknown contents of the dump.

Conditions at Ezbet El Nakhl are so appalling that they are hard to imagine. The area is affected by chronic overcrowding, pollution, illiteracy, high unemployment, high infant mortality and a lack of basic health, hygiene and welfare services. The temperature in the rubbish dump regularly exceeds 100°, making the rubbish the perfect breeding ground for flies. Due to these dreadful living conditions, the Zabaleen people are at the highest possible risk of infection and epidemic.

This is where the Salaam Centre for Medico-Social Services (SCMSS) works. The centre was begun, in 1976, by some Sisters of the Convent of St Mary's Daughters, a convent of the Coptic Orthodox Church. In its beginnings, the Sisters lived in a small hut in the middle of the rubbish dump, visiting every family, sharing their experiences and building relationships with them.

#### Key facts

Founded: 1976

Location: Ezbet El Nakhl,  
Cairo

First Grant from BibleLands:  
2000

BibleLands' Grant:  
£27,840p.a.



## Current Activities

The centre began by providing basic primary healthcare and emergency medical aid but over the years has expanded extensively. Now its three main programmes are a hospital, child healthcare, and a school for children with mental and / or physical disabilities. The centre serves those who live in Ezbet El Nakhl and another seven surrounding sub-districts – a total of 1,000,000 people.

The Under Fives Healthcare Programme began in January 2001. Children, particularly under the age of five, who live and work in the rubbish dump are hugely susceptible to many diseases and conditions such as hepatitis, malnutrition, chronic chest complaints and serious eye infections, while skin disorders caused by the filth are also common. The centre aims to improve the health of these children, and to teach the families basic health care.

Children receive twice-yearly checkups, and those with special needs are given the appropriate treatment, or referred to a nearby hospital. Each child receives immunisation against the most rife diseases and the centre gives vitamins to more than 800 children, whose parents contribute about 10p per child, per month. The local pharmacy and the centre cover the rest of the costs. The centre has a fund to help pay for any emergency medical care that a child may need, if their families are unable to afford the costs.

One of the first children that the centre saw was George. He was 4-years old and totally blind. He was malnourished, anaemic and infested with parasites. Despite his disability, he was expected to help his family survive by sorting items and, because he had no sight, he was covered in cuts from sharp objects in the rubbish. The Salaam Centre taught his parents how to care for him properly and he received treatment for his parasites. The centre also bought him an Arabic Braille Bible. This holistic care is provided to around 650 Zableen children.



Each child who attends the centre has their own medical records, charting any problems and illnesses, and the treatment that they have received. Whilst this is ordinary practice in Western culture, it is a fairly new concept in Egypt.

Community health workers make home visits, giving health advice and challenging unhealthy cultural traditions related to family planning and female circumcision, an all too common issue across Egypt. The centre provides pre- and postnatal care to mothers and their babies, which has had a direct impact on the decrease in maternal and infant mortality and illness rates.

Through its child healthcare programme, the centre is able to identify those children with disabilities, who can then be referred to the specialist school that the centre runs. Those children with physical disabilities are visited by the community physiotherapist, and provided with rehabilitation equipment.

All of the centre's services are provided at a reduced cost, or free to those who cannot afford to pay anything. They are crucial in helping to better the general health of this incredibly impoverished and neglected community.

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