

Dump Second Home for Children

Author: [Barham Omar](#)

Despite economic growth in some quarters, extreme poverty is forcing youngsters to pick through trash. Every day before school, seven-year-old Mohammed Fariq Rostam goes with his father on their donkeys to scrounge through Sulaimaniyah's garbage dump.

Mohammed's eyes often burn from the smoke that rises from the rubbish, and his forehead bears a scar from when he slipped on trash and sliced it on a piece of glass.

But he is proud when he helps his father find a source of income for their five-member family. That could be aluminium cans that they can resell in the market, or a piece of electrical equipment that has been thrown away but can be repaired. Shoes and clothes, though torn or stained, are also prized.

"This isn't a place for him," said Mohammed's father Fariq, 31, who is illiterate and unemployed. "I want him to have a better future."

The dump lies in an industrial area 11 kilometres southwest of Sulaimaniyah city, near seven villages that are home to more than 100 families. It has become a source of income for many like the Rostams who are out of work and looking for anything that can be resold or reused.

Zereen Abdullah, 12, sashes through garbage with a pair of muddy boots - one of her many finds. She has rashes all over her body from the trash that itches her skin, but triumphantly announces, "I have found three dolls, and whenever I go home I play with them."

Mohammed and Zereen have missed out on the economic prosperity enjoyed by Sulaimaniyah following the fall of the Baathist regime and the end of crippling economic sanctions.

New construction abounds and the Kurdish regional government has dreams that oil-rich Iraqi Kurdistan could one day resemble Dubai.

But while Sulaimaniyah is booming, its outskirts remain poor and badly served by municipal services.

Parents in the area close to the dump criticise the government for not providing basic services for their children such as kindergartens, parks or a playground. Their relatives don't visit, they say, because of the stench of the rubbish heap, which clings to their clothes even when they return.

For local children, though, the dump is an a big attraction, so much so that some say they dream of becoming garbage workers when they grow up - much to the consternation of parents, who they want more for their families.

"Our children have nowhere to go during vacations except this garbage dump," said Parween Muhammed,

Sulaimaniyah officials have tried to discourage the scavengers, but as the dump is not barricaded, they cannot prevent people from sifting through the garbage.

"We started arresting them, but it didn't work," said Rizgar Ahmad, head of public services for the municipality.

The scavengers use iron hooks to rip the trash bags, which some municipal worker workers say have been used to threaten them. "They threw stones at my bulldozer, and when I got angry at them, they came with their hooks," said Sardar Ibrahim. "They were about to kill us."

Talar Midhat is a mental health researcher with the Dutch non-governmental organisation ACORN in Sulaimaniyah, which helps children with disabilities. She said poverty drives the children to the dump and called on NGOs and the government to push for greater protection of children's rights and ensure that they attend school.

She said the few services available for children are in the centre of the city, but the agency providing them, the ministry of social affairs, has a poor record in this part of Sulaimaniyah. "So you can imagine its (effectiveness) outside of the city," said Midhat.

Responding to questions about the rubbish-dump children, Shno Shiekh Latif, Kurdish minister of labour and social affairs in Sulaimaniyah, insisted that poverty was declining daily in the region. "We certainly have a wide-reaching project to help families so they don't need to send their children to work," he said.

NGOs, meanwhile, says there's little they can do to aid the garbage scavengers.

Bakhtyar Kakan Salih, who heads Kurdistan Save the Children's Kaziway Sarshaqam Educational Centre, said, " We can only give them moral support."

Barham Omar is an IWPR trainee journalist in Sulaimaniyah.

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