

Africa's Queen of Recycling? That makes me happy ...

From humble origins in rural Gambia to saving Africa's natural environment and creating social change, one handbag at a time...

"How many lives has this purse saved?" says Isatou Ceesay, 48, toting a pretty, pale blue woven handbag.

Raised in Njau, a humble village in The Gambia, from a young age Ceesay was struck by the environmental degradation caused by the overuse and poor disposal of waste. The rivers in her rural region of the West African state were clogged with plastic bags, with the burning or dumping of toxic waste leading to a host of health implications for her fellow villagers, from respiratory illnesses to cholera, as well as sickening the livestock communities depended upon.

"The idea of recycling came to me very young, when I looked at the environment I lived in and people didn't have the idea of taking care of their waste," Ceesay says. "People were simply not aware of what I was talking about." But Ceesay had social barriers to overcome in making the villagers understand the benefits of good environmental custodianship. "I was very young, I lacked money and I was uneducated," Ceesay says. "But one thing I did have was commitment." Plus, she adds, with a smile: "I wanted to prove them all wrong."



Isatou Ceesay - The Queen of Waste Plastic

What a difference two decades make. Today Ceesay's revolutionary community recycling project, Njau Recycling and Income Generation Group (NRIGG), employs 1,100 people in four separate communities in the Gambia. The project proceeds on the basis that many of the items that are poorly disposed of by Gambian communities have reuse value. Using novel crafting methods, NRIGG employs marginalised women to make recycled bags, mats, purses and jewellery for resale at markets or via the charity's site from reclaimed items, including plastic bags, and the plastic bottles that are the scourge of local waterways. The organisation also trains unemployed women to be community waste and recycling experts, training villagers in composting and recycling, kitchen gardening and the societal benefits in planting trees. This advocacy work, Ceesay says, has improved child and maternal weight and wellbeing in the communities her organisation works with. "When I return to a village and see there are vegetables growing, the environment is clean and nutrition has improved, that's the best thing for me," Ceesay says.

NRIGG is now turning its attention to forest preservation, perfecting a simple method of making compacted cooking fuel from discarded kindling and coconut shells to prevent deforestation for charcoal. "This is important," Ceesay says. "Without forests we cannot have a healthy life."

For Ceesay, social justice goes hand-in-hand with good environmental stewardship. "If women and young people are not part of this work it will not have a future," she says. She has recently launched a project that gives recycling work to disabled Gambian women who otherwise have little option but to beg. "They are some of the best workers we have," she says, "but society sees them as having no worth." Now Ceesay's dream is to see more women taking leadership positions in African countries. "That is something we are really lacking," Ceesay says.

Apart from Ceesay, of course. In 2012, the environmental trailblazer was recognised with an award at The International Alliance for Women Difference Maker award in the USA. In her homeland, she's popularly nicknamed the Queen of Recycling, a moniker she doesn't mind one bit. "When I wake up every day I still have the heart to deliver a better life," she says.

Isatou Ceesay was photographed for Climate Heroes, a documentary series about the women and men around the world who fight to protect our environment and mitigate climate change, climateheroes.org.

Learn how to recycle plastic bags into purses with Njau Recycling's technique: [Watch Here](#)
Buy their creations at [One Plastic Bag](#)

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