

Isatou Ceesay

Isatou Ceesay was born in 1972 in a small village in Gambia, Africa. When she was a child until she was a teenager, she used a woven basket to carry goods to and from the market. When the basket broke, she took a plastic bag and started using it. She likes how strong and light the plastic bag was.

Other people in the Gambia think the same and see the same benefits found in plastic bags. Soon, people began to use the bag and year after year, plastic bag users in the Gambia grew.

The problem was that they did not reuse the bag and immediately threw it to the ground. In Africa, it is normal for women to throw family trash behind their homes so that plastic bags stacked behind their homes.

As a child, Ceesay was forced to drop out of school at a young age but that did not allow anything to stop her determination to keep growing and to keep learning from the surrounding environment and still dare to take action.

Isatou Ceesay the Queen of Recycling

She was nicknamed "Queen of Recycling," because she was an activist who started a recycling movement called One Plastic Bag in the Gambia. She educates women in the Gambia to recycle plastic waste into income for themselves. Plastics are indeed one of the worst polluters in the environment. Ceesay serves to educate citizens about recycling and reduce the amount of waste made.

She founded a project that created plastic threads and formed bags of waste that had been wasted and had become garbage. Not only does the project dramatically reduce the amount of waste in her village, but it is also able to employ hundreds of West African women and give them monthly income. The impact was very positive for local villagers.

The movement began in 1997 by Isatou and four other women, the N'Jau Recycling Center, in her native village in the northern Gambia. In the beginning, the movement had a mission to educate their village colleagues about the need to reclaim garbage and recycle plastic, rather than letting the garbage accumulate behind their homes.

Isatou Ceesay and her Challenges

Over time, the movement became big and able to support and provide income to women around and was also able to drastically reduce plastic waste in the Gambia. Collecting trash remains full of a struggle because it is not always dry and easily collected.

During the rainy season, plastic waste becomes wet and difficult to take and after that still takes patience to dry it before it can be processed. She explained that during the rainy season it would be more difficult to collect garbage. Plastic waste will certainly be wet so it needs to be dried before it can be used.

"As a habit, people are accustomed to pouring their garbage behind their house, and because it is not visible, they forget it. But the bad effects again knock on your door very quickly: dirty air, developing the disease. In Africa, we say that 'if your house is clean but your neighbor is not, then you are also not healthy'."

She is very active and has worked for the US Peace Corps office in the Gambia, the Swedish organization Future in Our Hands, and as a consultant for development organizations. The recycling project, which began in 1998 in the midst of a lot of resistance still running and growing right now.

In 2012, she was awarded the TIAW “Difference Maker” award in Washington, DC, United States. She remains humble and not arrogant even though there is a book written about her and hopes that it will inspire others to join or can become makers of change in their own communities.

For 17 years, Isatou Ceesay has empowered women and contributed to one of the most important problems around the plastic waste.

