

Sonia Dias

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Waste and Development—Perspectives from the Ground

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Abstract. Millions of people worldwide make a living collecting, sorting, recycling, and selling valuable materials disposed of as waste. Waste pickers contribute to public health, reduce the costs associated with municipal solid waste management, and significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions to the environment. In many countries, waste pickers supply the only form of solid waste collection. While waste pickers provide vital services to their communities, their municipalities and the environment—they generally face very difficult working conditions and in many cases have little or no support from local governments. Waste pickers have been organizing themselves into cooperatives, unions and associations and have found that forging solidarity links across continents is an important strategy, and have increased their global networking since the First World Conference of Waste Pickers took place, in 2008, in Bogota, Colombia. Supporting waste pickers is a key element in a people-centered approach to development.

Keywords. Waste management, environment, poverty, public health, livelihoods.

1 Introduction

The term “development” is a contentious term which has been perceived in various ways. The conventional approach uses national growth (GDP) as a measurement of a country’s stage of development. For a people-centered approach to development, one important reference has been Amartya Sen’s (1999) “capability approach” to poverty. In Sen’s approach, development ought not to be conceptualized as the achievement of modernization, industrialization and economic growth, but as the expansion of *people’s capabilities* and *functioning capabilities*, i.e. what people can do or cannot do and what people actually do or not do, respectively. According to Sen, people might suffer deprivations in various spheres of their lives, implying that poverty cannot be seen only through the lenses of its material aspects being, thus is multi-dimensional. This approach is important because it allows for development to be discussed in relation to people’s livelihoods. As pointed out by Krishna (2007), livelihoods had been defined by Chambers as ‘*the means of gaining a living, including tangible assets (resources and stores), intangible assets (claims and access), and livelihoods capabilities’ including coping abilities, opportunities, and sundry freedoms*. The livelihoods approach has

been seconded in various UN conferences¹ as a strategy in achieving poverty reduction.

The literature about informal waste workers shows that conventional approaches in solid waste management (SWM) usually lead to centralized capital intensive solutions that ignore the potential contributions of the informal recycling sector. With some exceptions, local governments² seldom engage in partnerships with this sector in most developing countries. The most common approach to modernization and development in the waste sector is financing and building of large scale infrastructure, privatization and mechanization, regardless of the impact these may have on the livelihoods of the urban working poor.

Modernization³ may offer opportunities as well as threats. This paper offers some examples of threats posed by modernization of solid waste in some cities of the global South, but also a few examples from city systems that have included waste pickers as service providers. The main objective of this paper, therefore, is to give some contributions from the ground to discuss waste and the potential it offers in poverty reduction and development, arguing that the goal of modernization in the solid waste area should not be decoupled from protection of livelihoods. It argues that poverty eradication goes beyond the design of policies for job and income generation. We

¹ To cite a few: Agenda 21 (Rio 92), “Platform for Action” (The World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995).

² For examples see Dias (2006).

³ For a conceptual discussion about modernization of solid waste see Scheinberg (2011).

should think of poverty in terms of citizenship empowerment, access to public services (health, sanitation, education), and to the decision making process. This seems to go along with Amartya Sen's "capability approach" to poverty and development, and with the livelihoods approach. The paper also discusses the importance of organizing informal waste pickers as a strategy for poverty reduction.

2 Threats to the Livelihoods of Informal Workers—Evidence from the Ground

The impact of the modernization process on the subsistence of informal workers in solid waste management is usually significant. As these workers are active in informal physical and social spaces and survive on resources that are public (waste), modernization processes (usually synonymous with privatization) tend to be a threat to informal waste pickers, resulting in: the "evacuation" of spaces where the waste pickers work, as they are "swept out" to the periphery⁴; *persecution by the authorities and the police; confiscation of material; and criminalization of the activity* (Dias, 2009). As stated by Scheinberg (2011) waste pickers

"...become losers in the modernization process when their access to waste is denied as a result of modernization of the landfill, restricted gate access, or competition from formal recycling activities. When the modernization process ignores pickers it risks depriving them of their common property use of the waste stream and disrupting their livelihoods, especially as the legal status and formal ownership of the waste changes and formal participants gain privileged claims to materials".

Some examples illustrate how the livelihoods of waste pickers are threatened by conventional approaches to modernization of solid waste. An internal impact assessment of a Waste to Energy plant, commissioned by KKKPKP—a trade union representing waste pickers in Pune, India—highlights the systematic displacement and dispossession of waste pickers as a fall out of the approach adopted by the company managing the dump site in this city, which deprived them of their livelihoods (Kulkarni, 2011).

Scheinberg (2011) also gives evidence from different places such as Bangkok, Thailand, where waste pickers were "officially" denied access to waste from the disposal site but allowed to "...continue picking under the condition that they

sell only to that company, at even lower prices" and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where a "...a large private waste collector holding concession to collect waste from downtown hotels threatened a women's group that wanted to collect plastic bottles from one hotel thereby causing the group to withdraw".

Samson's work has dwelled upon how privatization processes in South Africa have exacerbated the marginalized position of waste pickers. The author presents evidence on the case of the Metsimaholo municipality's attempts to formalize recycling on the Sasolburg landfill and its negative impacts on the livelihoods of the waste pickers (2008).

3 Opportunities & Protagonism of Informal Workers

Replacement of repressive policies on waste picking and adoption of inclusive policies focused on legal backing, redistributive measures, social recognition, and the strengthening of waste picker organizations is crucial to protect the livelihoods of informal waste workers. Some promising examples of legislation and policies that are beginning to take shape are briefly outlined below:

3.1 India

National policies are moving towards recognition of the informal recycling sector. The National Environment Policy, 2006, states that informal sector systems of collection and recycling should be recognized and enhanced. The National Action Plan for Climate Change, 2009 and other policy documents also refer to waste pickers. Progressive regional legislation has been passed in many states (Chikarmane *et al.*, 2008).

In Pune, waste pickers have been authorized to provide doorstep waste collection by the municipal government, which has also endorsed identity cards for waste pickers, and covered them under an insurance program, helping them to create an identity as workers and service providers and thus increasing their self-esteem as reported in Samson (2009).

In Mumbai, collection of post-consumer waste involving waste pickers and companies such as Tetra Pak for recovery of paper and plastic-aluminium into separate material, or Coca Cola for PET⁵ shredding units, can offer a niche for the informal workers.

3.2 Peru

Law 29.419, regulating the activity of waste pickers, was passed in 2010. This law, developed based on a participatory process involving representatives of the movements of waste pickers, establishes a normative terrain for the activity (Dias, 2011).

3.3 Brazil

The National Solid Waste Policy, 2010, recognizes waste picker cooperatives as service providers and, as a result,

⁴ "Hygienization" and "deodorization" processes in the urban public space exacerbate the pressures on the urban poor who live *on* and *live off* the street, and these are not things from the distant past. This is particularly true in relation to waste pickers, as is registered in numerous cases in literature seeing as the image of a modern city generally reflects the image and resemblance to cities in the so called North, which, in thesis, presupposes the absence of waste pickers. It is curious that even though the image that one has of these cities does not include the presence of waste pickers, the last ten years have seen a reemergence of the activity in several "global cities", such as Tokyo and New York, for example. For more on the subject, see the excellent ethnographic study by Duneir (1999) on 6th Avenue street vendors in New York where there is also a portrait of the daily routine of *magazine scavengers*.

⁵ Polyethylene terephthalate.

institutes a number of mechanisms to support cooperatives and municipalities that integrate informal workers into solid waste systems (Dias, 2009). Another important development was the recognition of waste pickers as a specific category in the Brazilian Classification of Occupations (CBO⁶) by the Brazilian Government in 2002. This development made statistics on waste-pickers in Brazil available for the first time. As a result, national databases now include data on waste pickers: specifically, the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD⁷), which provides socio-economic data on waste pickers both in formal and in informal employment⁸ and the Annual Listing of Social Information (RAIS⁹) which provides data on waste pickers formally employed by commercial establishments¹⁰.

Dias & Alves (2008) give many examples of municipalities which have adopted a progressive approach to solid waste management. In the city of Diadema, the waste pickers' organizations included in the municipal source-segregation scheme are paid the same amount per ton of recyclables collected as a private company would be. This was made possible by Law 2336/04, which entitles organizations to be paid by service rendered. Corporations and the industry can be supportive of waste pickers. Wal-Mart, for example, has partnered with the CAEC¹¹ cooperative in the state of Bahia, Brazil. In addition to installing recycling containers at collection points for its customers, it has also invested in the development of the CAEC, giving technical support and improving the cooperative recycling warehouses.

Cities like Araxá, Londrina and Brumadinho pay cooperatives for Environmental Services. As well, the BNDES (Brazilian Bank for Economic and Social Development) has opened a Social Fund that enables cooperatives to access funds for infrastructure and equipment (Dias, 2009).

⁶ The CBO is a fundamental classification underlying the employment data produced by Brazil and is based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations.

⁷ PNAD is carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics—IBGE on annual basis between the Censuses. It provides information on work, population, education, income etc. The fact that it is household based permits identification of the population that works informally, and even those who have a contract but work in households, such as maids. The PNAD enables, therefore, a view of the waste picker collected in his/her own home and *according to his/her own statement*.

⁸ The distinction of formal and informal in Brazil is directly linked to a body of legislation called CLT that contains rules for fair labor relations, which includes, work hours, minimum wage and other rights. Formal workers are those who are employed through a contract registered in a specific document called *carteira de trabalho (CT)*. Informal work under Brazil's definition would be workers without a CT plus own account workers and unpaid workers. With the inclusion of waste picking as profession this meant that waste pickers can be formally employed by commercial establishments.

⁹ RAIS is a national administrative register of the Ministry of Labor and Employment and with annual periodicity. *Employers are obliged to declare the individual status of each employee* with whom they maintain continued employment.

¹⁰ See Crivellari, Dias *et al.* (2008) and WIEGO, 2011.

¹¹ The Cooperative of Canabrava waste pickers.

3.4 Colombia

The Constitutional Court (April 2009) ruled in favor of waste pickers by granting them customary rights to access, sort and recycle reclaimable materials (Ruiz-Restrepo, 2008).

The impact of these examples is significant. National and regional laws establish the normative terrain for the activity. In some countries, the laws have created special financial mechanisms for capacity building and for access to funds for infrastructure. Also, waste pickers have been able to secure customary rights to waste at municipal level by using the law. Policies for integration of waste pickers as legitimate service providers pave the way to modernization of solid waste management systems coupled with livelihood protection. The examples of some cities such as those from Brazil and India show the role of local governments in shaping a pro-poor recycling system. As reported in the literature (Dias, 2011; Scheinberg, 2011; Samson, 2009; Dias & Alves, 2008) these promising examples have had positive impacts such as:

- a. Earnings: waste pickers who are integrated in door to door collection of waste/recyclables or other services have a stable monthly income.
- b. Working conditions and welfare: integration in solid waste systems enables improvements in working conditions (uniforms, specially designed carts and buckets for collection of waste; sorting spaces, etc.). In some cases the children of waste pickers can have access to day care or apply for an education scholarship.
- c. Assets: in some cities waste pickers have access to housing benefits or access to credit for house purchases and/or improvements.

4 Voice and representation—Key to Advancing the Demands from Waste Pickers Worldwide

Waste pickers across the world are increasingly demanding voice, visibility, and validity. The first step to overcome poverty and to securing the livelihoods of informal workers is to be organized, as evidence from the ground suggests. Waste pickers are organizing in many different ways—cooperatives, associations, companies, unions, and micro-enterprises¹². Some are even forming “women only” organizations in order to better address gender stereotypes. The extent and depth of these organizations of waste pickers varies across countries¹³.

Dias' (2009) thesis on Brazil has thoroughly documented the breakthroughs of organized waste pickers of that country in terms of impact in progressive public policies. Nevertheless, the author points out that there is another relevant feature, in the case of Brazil, which is State responsiveness to the demands for social inclusion emerging from the social movement of waste pickers¹⁴.

¹² See Dias, 2011.

¹³ See Samson, 2009.

¹⁴ The interest in the organization and integration of waste pickers derives from the willingness of the first municipalities run by the Workers

Colombia makes a strong case for the power of organizing. The organizing process in this country goes as far back as 1962, when the first cooperative was created in Medellín. The 1990's saw the creation of the ARB (the Association of Recyclers of Bogota) and the ANR (National Association of Recyclers). The year of 2009 saw a major breakthrough with the legal battle won by waste pickers, which guaranteed waste pickers' rights to recyclables in Cali¹⁵. More recently, they were able to stop a multi-billion dollars public bid for waste collection in the city of Bogota, where the Constitutional court argued in favor of the demands made by the Bogota Waste Picker Association, and canceled the public bidding process (Parra & Fernandez, 2012). Justice Juan Carlos Henao said that the constitutional rights of waste pickers had not been respected and that Bogota Municipality needed to create a new plan with inclusion of all waste pickers¹⁶.

The waste pickers of India are also organizing themselves and have formed a national network—the Alliance of Indian Waste Pickers (AIW)—with 35 organizations working with, and comprised of, waste pickers with a presence in 22 cities across India.

Waste pickers around the world are fighting many struggles on varied fronts: the threat of privatization of municipal solid waste management services faced by the *zabaleen* in Cairo, and waste pickers in Delhi; legal battles required to defend the right to work as waste pickers such as the *recicladores* in Colombia; and climate change issues on a global level, including the proliferation of waste-to-energy plants that burn materials that waste pickers could otherwise recycle. This has been one of the reasons and an important motivation for the creation of a Global Alliance of Waste Pickers¹⁷ that can articulate and influence policy issues at the international arena.

Thus, waste pickers have found that forging solidarity links across continents is an important strategy to push their agenda for recognition and integration in solid waste systems and have increased their global networking since the First World Conference of Waste Pickers in 2008, in Bogota, Colombia. Networking has helped showcase experiences of organizing and integration and has served as an inspiration to nascent movements in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, South Africa, and Kenya over the past 3 years.

Organizing has proven beneficial to waste pickers: it raises social status and self-esteem; it raises members' incomes and therefore improves their quality of life; it improves working conditions and thus contributes to improvements in health quality; it helps the development of networks; it provides institutional frameworks for hiring of waste pickers as service providers to local bodies and/or firms; it helps circumvent middlemen and thus improves gains; and it prevents harassment and violence.

Party, in the early 1990's, in terms of incorporating waste pickers' demands, due to this party's high responsiveness to claims coming from Brazilian social movements in general.

¹⁵ See CIVISOL note on this case on www.civisol.org.

¹⁶ Article 3 of the Auto 275, 19/12/2011, available in Spanish at <http://www.scribd.com/CIVISOL>

¹⁷ www.globalrec.org

5 Addressing the Demands of Waste Pickers

The needs and demands of waste pickers are shaped by local contexts, but measures to enhance the lives and livelihoods of waste pickers might include the following:

1. Increase earnings:
 - Payment for environmental services;
 - Preferential rights to work on source segregation schemes;
 - Authorized access to waste materials.
2. Improve working conditions through:
 - Capacity building courses: safety at work, technical aspects of recycling, etc.;
 - Provision of infrastructure for sorting, baling, etc.;
 - Ergonomic manual carts for collection.
3. Improved access through:
 - Clear tendering processes for waste collection so waste pickers can be bidders;
 - Provision of identity cards;
 - Legal frameworks for their integration;
 - Health care and social protection schemes;
 - Access to micro finance.
4. Address risks specific to the sector through:
 - Eradication of child labor;
 - Incentives to help families keep children at school;
 - Provision of work facilities such as crèches (day care services), etc.

Whatever the context of a country's approach to waste picking, it is important to bear in mind that waste pickers' issues need to be tackled by taking into account a combination of (1) *waste picker protagonism* (promoting the voice of waste pickers in urban governance, legitimizing their collectives); (2) *drafting of comprehensive public policies designed to integrate them into solid waste management, planned through participatory processes* (the State has a role to play), and (3) a *re-structuring of the recycling chain towards more equitable distribution of gains* to make the waste pickers' organizations and livelihoods sustainable.

6 Conclusions

The vision of modern Solid Waste Management systems is very often associated with mechanization and the use of high technology. In this approach to waste management, waste picking is seen as outdated, traditional, primitive work. This approach compromises the Human Rights of waste pickers as workers.

Therefore, one might well ask if it makes sense to simply introduce mechanization without considering real alternatives

for those who have been traditionally earning a living from waste in labor intensive economies. Should not the vision of ‘modern’ include an approach that while striving for improvement of solid waste services does not further social exclusion? Could we not engage the organizations of waste pickers in shaping an alternative approach to modernization of solid waste? Take the example of the waste pickers’ union of Pune—KKPKP—which has been advocating for the implementation of a decentralized solid waste model that integrates the waste pickers in door-to-door collection services, in composting and biogas plants. Such a model would allow for an improvement in standards in the provision of solid waste services in a way that also protect livelihoods of the working poor. Would not this be more beneficial to strive for a win-win approach?

In keeping with this line of argument, there is a growing body of literature that argues for a shift in thinking. Many researchers have been asking the question whether it makes sense to ignore the informal waste workers in labor abundant countries (Dias, 2009; Visser & Theron, 2009). Visser & Theron (2009) ask whether it makes sense to rely on collecting systems which are based on high fuel consumption in the context of climate change challenges.

This can be also understood as what scholars of the ecological modernization theory have called ‘modernized mixture’, a concept that captures the possibilities of a multitude of coexisting systems and actors in the provision of SW services which could account for designated roles for informal workers (Scheinberg, 2011). Why can we not conceptualize modernization processes of SW in a way that is reconciled with the need to address the livelihoods of waste pickers?

Therefore, there is a need for a shift in the paradigm that informs the modernization of solid waste management systems so that existing livelihoods can be enhanced. This is critical to long term sustainability of poverty alleviation and environmental projects.

In closing, we argue that giving incentives to the organizations formed by waste pickers and the recognition of the social and environmental role they play will contribute to creating and fostering the conditions that will enhance the social and economical well-being of informal waste workers. A people-centred approach to development in the waste industry is most crucial.

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