SYNTHESIS NOTE

WEDC

Recognising **livelihoods from urban waste**

Livelihoods from urban waste

One person's waste is another person's livelihood. Dealers in waste material are common everywhere, whether it is the second-hand merchant or scrap metal dealer.

In low-income countries, a number of other livelihoods are derived from waste. The two most common groups involved in these activities are waste pickers and street sweepers.

Waste pickers separate re-saleable materials, such as paper, plastics and glass, to sell on in the recycling chain. Sometimes they take over and hold on to a single site that yields waste, such as a rubbish dump, and sometimes they move from place to place, collecting waste that is discarded from offices and factories, schools and hospitals, as well as residential neighbourhoods.

Sweepers are those people involved in street cleaning and primary waste collection. They are usually employed by municipalities, private waste collection agencies or are self-employed small-scale operators who make a living by charging households a fee for providing a primary collection service.

What do we mean by livelihoods?

Livelihoods involve income earning as well as a wider range of activities required to sustain a means of living. These include gaining and retaining access to resources and opportunities, dealing with risk and negotiating social relationships. Urban poor pursue livelihoods from waste often to overcome the vulnerability. They do so by deploying both tangible assets, such as material resources and skills, as well as intangible assets, such as rights of access or social resources.

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Why are waste pickers vulnerable?

Waste pickers are vulnerable because they are often among the poorest of the poor and have few assets on which to fall back when facing external or internal threats. Using the example of paper pickers, external threats could result because extensive poverty and unemployment increases competition for access to sources of waste paper, because technological changes to collection and disposal systems or the coming of the rainy season makes collecting paper difficult, or because prices paid by dealers drop due to competition from imported waste paper. Waste pickers turn to waste picking because they have few alternative livelihood opportunities (either at all or at particular times of year). They also face a number of internal threats, such as health and safety hazards, from the conditions under which they work, as well as conflict among different groups of pickers over issues of access. This might be between different ethnic groups, newcomers and more established groups, men and women or young and old. Finally, waste pickers risk being controlled by the dealers to whom they sell and are often in debt bondage.

Why are sweepers vulnerable?

Sweepers are not usually as materially poor as waste pickers, but they are often just as vulnerable and face a number of current threats to their livelihoods. In many countries, labour-intensive strategies of waste collection and disposal are on the wane for a number of reasons. These include the mechanisation of waste collection systems, the use of NGOs and CBOs as contractors of waste collection services, as well as privatisation initiatives such as the contracting out of waste collection services. Private contracting, in particular, is often associated with the declining influence of trade unions, a downsizing of the labour force, lower wages, less job security and fewer long-term benefits. As sweepers are stigmatised by the work they do, they face problems finding alternative forms of work. For all these reasons, sweepers face increasingly insecure livelihoods, particularly in contexts where they are from minority groups.

Do pickers and sweepers have any assets?

Waste pickers and sweepers are stigmatised, they are from low status social groups and are often poor. Thus, they lack financial and physical assets. Nevertheless, they have a number of other assets, not least of all their skills. For *pickers*, knowing where waste is located, what waste has a value in the local recycling market and how to rapidly retrieve and sell on good quantities of the most valuable waste materials, are all important skills. It can be argued that waste itself is a common pool resource in much the same way as the environment is described as natural capital in a rural context. Equally, however, it can be argued that waste soon acquires value to someone and as such, if it has any resale value at all, becomes physical capital as soon as it is discarded.

Sweepers are not simply people who empty bins and clean streets. Waste collection also involves a range of social skills, which include pleasing clients, appeasing supervisors and even managing workers themselves. Sweepers are quick to identify residential households that need extra work done, who pay well and which have influence in a neighbourhood. They know when to be rigid about tasks and to ‘work to rule’, and when they need to be flexible to enable supervisors and inspectors to meet their performance criteria. Sweepers often subcontract their work on a long-term basis to other people without jobs or on a short-term basis to friends and family, and this requires managerial skills, as does their control, for a fee, over pickers’ access to waste sources.

Both pickers and sweepers often form part of close knit kinship or wider social groups and have a number of social assets in the form of longstanding networks of mutual support and reciprocity. The most vulnerable among them are those that are isolated or ostracised from their groups.

Challenges and opportunities for promoting livelihoods from waste

It is tempting to leap to the conclusion that integrated approaches to solid waste management should incorporate into the formal system of waste collection and disposal, the informal activities of waste pickers and sweepers that take place outside of it. We know that vast quantities of waste are retrieved and fed into the recycling chain by pickers in low-income countries. Is it, then, possible to involve pickers formally in waste collection? We know that sweepers operate privately as door-to-door waste collectors and cleaners. Is it, then, possible to subcontract primary waste collection to sweeper micro-entrepreneurs?

In theory, these things are possible and there have been some good examples in practice (see cases). However, there are a number of constraints and threats that might increase the vulnerability of these groups. For example, there may be vested interests, which would attempt to sabotage any attempt to reduce their control over pickers or sweepers or the dependence of the latter on them. Alternatively, it might be that the successful operation of informal systems of waste collection depend on them remaining exactly that — informal. In such circumstances, an arm's length relationship might be better than full integration into the formal system.

A case of integration — Faisalabad, Pakistan

In Shadab Colony in Faisalabad, where municipal waste collection was failing, the community contracted a private sweeper to take charge of waste collection. Initially, the local CBO contracted a private sweeper who was not part of sweeper networks. However, the municipal sweepers and pickers working at the local transit site would not allow him to dump the waste he had collected. Eventually, the CBO contracted someone from the local sweeper network and the system has worked smoothly since. Also, with the help of a local NGO, the CBO is working with the municipality to share their experiences and to get assistance from them for other services.

A case of arm's length cooperation — Bangalore, India

In Bangalore, India, there are a number of NGOs which have worked with waste pickers over a long period. They have tried to incorporate pickers into neighbourhood-based primary collection schemes and have worked with the city corporation to develop integrated approaches to solid waste management that incorporate the pickers. Nevertheless, experience has shown that the most successful approaches are those where picker children are not separated from their families, where alternatives are provided but where customary patronage relationships with dealers are not challenged and where picker groups can operate with some autonomy. So, for example, the Rag Pickers Education Development Scheme (REDS) not only works with street children who are alone, but supports the efforts of picker families to take responsibility for and reap the benefits from collecting and selling waste from prescribed residential and commercial areas, by helping them negotiate and protect their interests and livelihoods. This is with the knowledge and acceptance of the corporation, local business and residents, but without their interference.

Lessons learned

There are three key lessons to be learned from the experiences gained from recognising that livelihoods are derived from urban waste:

- Solid waste management is not just a technical or managerial affair, but one that impacts directly on people who depend on the collection and retrieval of waste for their livelihoods.
- Before planning and implementing innovations, a careful social impact assessment and institutional analysis should be undertaken, as enhancing livelihoods in one way may reduce livelihoods on another.
- There are no blueprints but only guidelines that should be applied to specific social and economic contexts.

This note presents the synthesis of a knowledge review on 'Livelihoods from Urban Waste'. The research project aims to build capacities of government and non-government organisations in primary collection of solid waste. This note is written for organisations and individuals who in one way or another support the development of primary collection systems in low-income countries.

References / Further reading

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Other titles in this series include:

- The role of micro-enterprise in solid waste management
- Vehicles for primary collection of solid waste
- The role of community-based organisations (CBOs) in solid waste management
- Recognising gender issues in the management of urban waste

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