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PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACHES TO WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

Community Participation in Solid Waste Management

I. Ofong, Nigeria

In Nigeria today, most urban centres are experiencing an increased rate of environmental deterioration, with refuse dumped along the streets, behind homes and drainage channels. Therefore the urban dweller is very much in contact with the waste generated by him. The government has not been able to handle satisfactorily the problem of solid waste. Every state government in Nigeria has an urban council charged with, among other things, keeping the urban environment free of solid waste. The Enugu State Environment Protection Agency [ENSEPA] is charged with this responsibility in Enugu, Nigeria. We only need to come out of our houses, and the next thing we see is refuse heaps not up to ten metres away from the house. It is evident from the above discussion that the sanitary condition in Enugu, and in fact most of our urban areas present a dreadful picture. The main problem could therefore be inadequate arrangements for the collection and disposal of solid waste. However, in our rural communities, it has been observed that household solid waste does not pose a problem. This might be due to the fact that the rural communities organise themselves into community action groups, to keep their environment clean. Public places such as markets, village squares, cemeteries, streams or springs- water areas, as well as pathways connecting various compounds and villages are kept in good sanitary conditions. There is a kind of togetherness or neighbourliness going on in the rural communities. This communal living may have encouraged participation in local activities. Is it possible that we could encourage such communal living within urban neighbourhoods?

Introduction

As the size and concentration of people in urban areas increase, there comes a time when the government agency such as charged with the responsibility of solid waste management, Enugu State Environmental Protection Agency (ENSEPA), alone is no longer able to keep the urban areas clean, given the vast area of operation, limited financial resources, equipment and inadequate personnel required for a successful operation. Solid waste do not generate themselves, rather it is human beings living in the urban areas that generate these wastes in the course of their everyday activities. The same human beings dump these wastes on the streets, behind houses and drainage channels. Can community efforts be mobilised to achieve and maintain good environmental sanitation in Enugu, Nigeria?

In the past different attempts have been made to solve the problem of solid waste management in Nigeria without much success. This paper examines the community participation approach as the possible way out of the current poor solid waste management existing in most urban centres in Nigeria.

The study area

Enugu is the capital city of Enugu state, with about 2.5 million residents. It is located in the south eastern zone of Nigeria. Most of the residents are public servants, though a good number of the residents are traders and self employed.

The solid waste management existing in the city is that of open dumping along the streets, back of houses and drainage channels. Occasionally, the agency comes round with their truck to remove the refuse from the streets, but that is after causing health and environmental hazards. Residents pay sanitation levies without getting value for their money. This has earned the agency very bad reputation, and many residents have resisted further payments, which have often resulted to seizure of their property by the agency, and street fights.

The project

In March 2003, the State and Local Government Programme, a DFID funded project, in partnership with the state government, came in with the Enugu State Solid Waste Management Improvement. The project involved among other things, the location of a land fill site about 3 kilometres outside the city, where refuse from the transfer stations located within the neighbourhoods is dumped. Under this initiative, residents in the pilot area of New Haven urban community will tie their refuse in black plastic bags, dump them in refuse bins placed in front of their homes by the agency. The bagged refuse is then removed by the Private Service Providers [PSP] to the transfer stations using push trucks, from where the agency is expected to move the refuse to the landfill sites. Residents are expected to pay a fee to designated accounts for the services of PSP and ENSEPA.

Community involvement

Before the project actually took off, our organization, World-WIDE Network: Nigeria and two other Non- Governmental Organizations were brought in to undertake the process of community involvement in the project through advocacy meetings and consultations. We created awareness and sensitized the public on the new initiative. There were hand bills, posters and a whole range of IEC materials on the new initiative. The NGOs also organised and provided some sort of training to neighbourhood/community associations on the solid waste management improvement initiative. Interviews were conducted within the neighbourhoods /communities, and issues such as willingness to pay as well as mode of payment and how much they are willing to pay were all discussed. The neighbourhoods / communities made it clear they will not pay to the agency because of past experiences. The project also made it possible for PSP to operate within their neighbourhood.

Outcome of project

While the neighbourhood committees were involved on the operation of the solid waste management improvement, giving up land for transfer stations was not smooth sailing and this caused some delays on the take off date for the project. The project has finally taken off and plans are under way to extend the project to other parts of Enugu. The PSP cart away the bagged refuse to the transfer stations. However the agency does not evacuate the refuse from the transfer stations regularly. The result is that the transfer stations are now over flowing with refuse dumped by the PSP.

Problems/weakness.

The problem encountered initially in the project was the construction of transfer stations within the neighbourhood areas. Though the residents were involved in the implementation of the project, the economic value of land ownership came under way when construction of transfer stations started. Land ownership is a big issue in Nigeria, and so releasing portions of land even for the benefit of all and sundry does not come without some sort of compensation from those wishing to utilise the land even if it is the government. However in this case the government was not willing to compensate anyone, because of the assertion that government owns all the land in urban areas, and so could turn any land fancied to any use.

Those claiming ownership of the portion of land were not willing to let go without a fight. However in the end government had its way, and the transfer stations were constructed and are now operational, though not without some loss to government, as unknown persons removed the initial building blocks assembled for the construction of the transfer station.

While the neighbourhood /community and PSP participated in line with the project, the agency is not living up to expectation. Their job which is removing refuse from transfer stations to landfill sites for the actual disposal is not

carried out regularly as they should. Their reason ranging from inadequate personnel to lack of vehicles.

One is beginning to wonder if communities should be encouraged to participate in disposal. If so, what then will be the job of the agency?

Success story/lessons learnt

It is worthy to note that involving the neighbourhood committees in the initiative has worked. Many households now appreciate the danger of poor solid waste management. They agree that the government alone cannot effectively handle solid waste management. Refuse does not generate itself, they generate the waste and to that extent should participate in the management. Willingness to pay was another important factor, as it was often said that many average and poor households are unable to pay for sanitation services. The New Haven Solid Waste Management Improvement project has proved that once communities are involved in the implementation of a project, whether or not the project was conceived for their benefit they will buy in, and will participate in managing the project.

In addition, private participation in the provision of sanitation services can work if properly regulated by an approved agency. The government agency can work with the private service providers to provide service to residents, where the government does not have the required resources to provide such services to the residents.

Way forward

The overall interest in this paper has been to determine how to manage solid waste in our urban areas. The paper has also shown that neither the neighbourhood/community acting on their own, nor the agency charged with solid waste management could effectively clear the urban area of refuse accumulated. The paper has shown that the neighbourhoods as a community participated in refuse collection, through bagging and dropping at designated collection points. Before now the residents dumped refuse in undesignated points such as along the streets, behind their houses and drainage channels. Their participation has put a stop to dumping of refuse carelessly. The urban dwellers should be encouraged not only to participate in collection but also in final disposal.

From the foregoing, there is the prospect of increasing the level of environmental sanitation in our urban area and in particular solid waste disposal through eliciting community participation. This approach in the tradition of social planning could hold out some promise for more effective urban solid waste management in Nigeria.

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