Governing garbage: Advancing urban sustainability in the context of private service delivery

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ABSTRACT

City governments across North America are increasingly pursuing sustainability aims through novel policies and practices. Such efforts frequently involve changes to municipal services that are provided by the private sector. However, the implications of private service delivery for public sustainability aims are not well understood. We use the experience of Minnesota’s Twin Cities metropolitan area with organic waste recycling programs to examine how different types of public-private relationships in service delivery shape the ability of municipalities to pursue sustainability through organic waste recycling programs. We find that municipalities with contractual relationships with waste haulers – “organized” systems - have greater success in introducing organic waste recycling than municipalities with licensing relationships with waste haulers – “open” systems. These findings point to the importance of institutional variation in public-private relationships to the success of urban sustainability initiatives and the ability of decision makers to affect change.

Cities have emerged as critical focal points for sustainability and climate change policies (Hughes, 2017; Portney, 2013; Svara, Read & Moulder, 2011). Local practices and services in waste, energy, land use, and water are central to achieving the aims of sustainability and climate change advocates such as reduced greenhouse gas emissions, improved air quality, and more accessible communities. Further, city governments may be well equipped to take on such issues, given their relative flexibility and awareness of local needs, contexts, and concerns. One often overlooked challenge in the urban context arises from the fact that while municipal services are critical leverage points for sustainability, they are not always publicly managed or delivered. While scholars have long pointed out that a range of actors are engaged in local governance, few studies have examined explicitly the implications of local public-private partnerships for the pursuit of urban sustainability.

We examine this dynamic in the context of waste management, a service area that has been at least partially privatized in many North American cities, and focus specifically on efforts to introduce organic waste recycling. Organic waste recycling is a service that can be offered by waste haulers to collect separately organic household waste such as food scraps and coffee grounds (sometimes called source-separated organics) and repurpose these materials using composting or incineration facilities. Such programs have been pursued or adopted by many cities across North America to advance sustainability aims. One survey shows that the number of U.S. cities introducing food waste pickup programs has grown by > 50% since 2009.¹ Organic waste recycling has the potential to reduce the amount of waste in municipal landfills, reduce greenhouse gas emissions from landfills, and repurpose organic material for higher uses (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2006).

Introducing organic waste recycling can be challenging for service providers. There are technical hurdles to siting and accessing facilities to handle the waste appropriately, and additional trucks or routes may be required to collect the organic waste. Further, effective programs require that households make the decision to separate their organic waste for collection, which some may be reluctant to do. Such hurdles can be overcome, as previous experiences with curbside plastic, paper, and metal recycling programs have shown, but require leadership and commitment from the public sector (Hage, Söderholm & Berglund, 2009; Lansana, 1993). However, when waste management services are privatized, as is the case in many U.S. cities, introducing a new service like organic waste recycling also requires the cooperation of the private sector. Different city governments have different relationships with, and influence over, their private partners and therefore potentially different capacities for overcoming the hurdles to organic waste recycling. In particular, cities can have a contracting relationship with private haulers (an organized system) or a licensing relationship with private haulers (an open system). Therefore, our aim in this paper is to better understand how (and indeed, whether) publicly determined

¹ According to a survey by BioCycle: https://www.biocycle.net/2012/01/12/residential-food-waste-collection-in-the-u-s/

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sustainability aims (such as a waste reduction target) are pursued and advanced in the context of private sector service delivery.

As a case study we use the experience of Minnesota’s Twin Cities metropolitan area with developing curbside organic waste recycling programs as a way of meeting waste reduction targets set by the state government. In 2014, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) established a goal for cities of 75% waste diversion by 2030. Organic waste recycling is generally considered to be necessary in order to reach this goal. The Twin Cities metro area provides a useful system to study because the 182 municipalities in its boundary differ in terms of the role that the private sector plays in waste management and whether organics recycling is being offered to residents. We draw on interviews with policy makers and key stakeholders, as well as surveys administered to metro area municipalities by state officials, to assess the broad patterns in waste management arrangements, the opportunities and challenges encountered by municipalities across the metropolitan area as they pursue Minnesota’s ambitious waste diversion targets, and the role that the private sector is playing in this process.

We find that all municipalities in the metro area – regardless of the role of the private sector – have faced political and administrative challenges in introducing organic waste recycling. Despite the importance of curbside organic waste recycling programs for the ability of municipalities to meet the state's target, they have yet to be widely adopted across the Twin Cities metro area; as of 2013, curbside organics recycling was available to only 9% of Minnesotans (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, 2013b). However, most organic waste recycling programs are being offered in municipalities with organized waste management systems, where the city maintains a contractual (rather than licensing) relationship with haulers. These contracts are providing a more direct means for municipalities to require organic waste recycling services. The programs being offered in organized systems are also having spillover effects on open systems, as haulers are able to service multiple municipalities. Our findings suggest that while setting sustainability targets such as waste diversion goals are important and laudable, city governments may lack the necessary authorities and capacities to pursue these goals when service delivery is fully privatized. New strategies and practices will likely be needed to pursue urban sustainability in such contexts.

1. Waste management, service privatization, and urban sustainability

Waste management practices are important leverage points for sustainability and climate change aims (Bulkeley, Watson, & Hudson, 2007; Davoudi, 2006; Nilsson, Eklund & Tyskeng, 2009). Waste management can represent as much as 10% of a city’s total GHG emissions, and traditional landfills management methods require increasingly scarce and expensive open space. A growing number of cities and states in the U.S. are setting waste diversion targets; some cities, such as Austin, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and New York City, have even set zero waste targets. Removing organic waste from the traditional waste stream can be an effective sustainability strategy for cities, and reflect what Bulkeley et al. (2007) refer to as eco-efficiency, or a governing mode of seeing waste as a resource. Organic material (such as food scraps and animal waste) that is collected and disposed of through traditional landfills management methods contributes to both increased volumes of waste and higher levels of greenhouse gas emissions from landfills (UNEP, 2010). As technologies have improved, cost savings have been identified, and public support has increased, more and more cities and states are targeting organic waste recycling as a way to meet their broader sustainability and waste management goals. However, we know very little about the political and administrative strategies that underpin the introduction of organic waste recycling programs, and particularly curbside pickup of organic food waste (what is called source-separated recycling), which can take the form of collecting organic waste in a separate bin or in a separate bag in existing bins.

While waste reduction targets may be set by state or city governments, waste management services are very likely to be provided at the local level by private companies. A 2008 survey of over 700 cities and counties in the U.S. and Canada found that only 28.6% of cities have purely public waste collection services (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, 2009). The private sector has long played a central role in waste management in the U.S. Early ad-hoc scavenging groups of the late 19th century were largely organized by municipalities during the 1920s; during the inter-war years, while private collection was considered by cities to be a feasible solution to high transportation costs, cities with populations larger than 100,000 tended to use municipal (public) services (Melosi, 2008).

In the 1960s, renewed debate over the costs that waste collection imposed on municipalities meant that “the trend toward municipal collection began to shift back to private companies” (Melosi, 2008, p. 203). Rapid and sustained suburbanization throughout the 1970s and 1980s supported private service delivery, as new communities found it easier to contract directly with private providers than rely on expanded municipal services to these new areas (Melosi, 2008). Privatization was further bolstered by the ascendance of the New Public Management (NPM) philosophy in the 1980’s and 1990’s, which encouraged cities to privatize core services in order to streamline and promote cost efficiencies (Kjaer, 2009). Private waste management in the U.S. has historically been more common in smaller municipalities that may not have the capacity to deliver waste and recycling services themselves (Savas, 2000), but is now also common in larger cities.

Private sector partnerships in local service delivery are typically pursued as a means of realizing higher service quality, cost savings, and risk sharing between the city and the private sector (Bloomfield, 2006). Indeed, urban governance theory has tended to position the private sector as a collaborator rather than a source of conflict, viewing public-private partnerships through a lens of partnership, highlighting the administrative “blurring of public-private boundaries,” in decision-making and service delivery, the increase of networked governance arrangements, and a “greater inclusion of actors” in “pursuit of community goals” (Kjaer, 2009, p. 137). Alternative models of service delivery involving public-private partnerships are often deemed superior to those associated with traditional “Weberian” public administration approaches, which stress hierarchy, command and control, and separation between the public and private spheres (Pierre, 2011; Salamon & Elliott, 2002).

Differences in public private partnership models are particularly pronounced in the waste management sector. The majority of cities in the U.S. have private waste collection but it is structured in a variety of ways. According to a 2008 survey conducted by Skumatz Economic Research Associates of 700 municipalities in Canada and the U.S., only 29% of municipalities collect waste themselves (cited in MPCA, 2009). Around 43% have what is called an “organized” system of waste collection, which means that the city maintains a contractual relationship with either one or multiple haulers. In these systems, city governments sign contracts to private waste haulers to service specific geographic areas; these contracts outline the service expectations and criteria used to evaluate performance. In these systems municipalities have formal mechanisms with which to shape the behaviour and services that are provided by haulers by changing the terms of the contract. Residents in organized systems can choose whether to use a service like organic waste recycling (or “opt-in”), but all are typically required to pay a standardized fee.

The remaining cities – around 23% - have what is called an “open” system of waste collection. This means that the city maintains a licensing relationship with one or multiple haulers, and lacks formal mechanisms with which to set conditions for service delivery, such as requiring haulers offer organic waste recycling services. Here, city governments simply provide a company with a license to provide waste services and it is then up to the company to determine what services it will provide and to whom. Multiple haulers can service a given area, and residents...
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