Locating the role of urbanites in solid waste management in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Conventional wisdom views municipal solid waste management (MSWM) as the responsibility of government or city authorities in Ghana and many African countries with urbanites (i.e. urban residents) always calling on government to deliver them from the problem. Overwhelmed with the scale of the problem, city authorities frequently seek public-private partnerships with firms (both local and international) to address the problem. While city authorities’ efforts maybe praiseworthy, the problem seems intractable. Using a case study from Berekum municipality in Ghana, this paper demonstrates how a lack of attention to the role of urbanites in MSWM has contributed to poor state of solid waste management (SWM). It presents a situational analysis of MSWM, and perceptions and roles of urbanites in the MSWM. Using agency interviews and household surveys, findings indicate that the state of MSWM reflects the indescribable condition of filth across many African countries. Although household respondents expressed willingness to actively participate in MSWM (e.g., provision of logistics, supervision of SWM activities etc.), they are not involved by the government agencies who consider MSWM as government’s responsibility. Unfortunately, the political economy of awarding SWM contracts to political party supporters and financiers have contributed to poor SWM. As a consequence, some households are gradually becoming apathetic to MSWM issues due to their non-involvement. Policy recommendations to improve MSWM are proffered.

1. Introduction

According to the statistical data provided by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division (UNDESA/PD), the proportion of African population living in urban areas is expected to rise from 40% in 2010 to over 57% in 2050 (UNDESA/PD, 2012). This unparalleled rise in the level of African urbanisation in the first half of the 21st century has provoked various questions, anxieties, and uneasiness about what this may possibly mean for the quality of life of Africa’s population, and for environmental health as a whole (Cobbinah et al., 2015). It has undoubtedly encouraged an inclination to consider the 21st century as ushering in an epoch of predominantly urban civilisation where urbanism is rapidly dominating ruralism (Cobbinah and Aboagye, 2017). Yet, the challenge of sustainable transformation becomes ever more complex. Already, urban Africa is having to confront the phenomenon of hazardous development, uncontrolled urban sprawl, widespread poor municipal solid waste management (MSWM), slum development and unemployment (Cobbinah et al., 2015). The rate of these challenges is increasing rapidly, the remarkable fact being the indescribable poor state of MSWM that define urban civilisation in Africa (Oteng-Ababio et al., 2013; United Nation Environmental Programme (UNEP), 2000; World Bank, 2007). This paper however focuses on the issue of MSWM. This is because...
there are indications that many urban areas in Africa increasingly find it difficult to manage their solid waste (Addaney and Oppong, 2015; Hoornweg and Bhada-Tata, 2012). Some (Tacoli, 2012; Worrell and Vesilind, 2012; Yousif and Scott, 2007) have described the poor state of MSWM in Africa as creating urban squalors as urban authorities are overwhelmed with the magnitude of solid waste generation.

It has been well-established that effective MSWM in Africa can play an important role in urban development and environmental sustainability (Ayomoh et al., 2008; Cobbina et al., 2015; Oteng-Ababio et al., 2013; World Bank, 2007). Relatedly, the conditions under which urban Africa is able to successfully manage its solid waste have been a topic of much research (e.g., Addaney and Oppong, 2015; Hoornweg and Bhada-Tata, 2012; UNEP, 2006; WHO/UNICEF JMP, 2013). Within this work, a variety of conditions have been found to increase the likelihood of poor MSWM in urban Africa. Examples of such conditions include rapid and unguided urbanisation with its associated increased demand for goods and services by urbanites (i.e. urban residents) resulting in increase per capita waste generation, poor enforcement of sanitation legal regimes, and limited capacity of urban authorities to manage solid waste (Cobbina et al., 2015; Narayana, 2008; Oteng-Ababio et al., 2013; UNEP, 2000, 2005). Complicating matters further are the conditions of institutional, technical and financial difficulties in providing commensurate MSWM services at both the national and local levels of government (Oteng-Ababio et al., 2013; United Nations Human Settlement Programme [UN-Habitat], 2010).

Conventional wisdom amongst many urbanites in Africa, particularly Ghanaians, views governments (both national and local) as decidedly responsible for the entire process of MSWM, and often pursues governments to deliver them from unhygienic conditions (see Amoah and Kosoe, 2014). Meanwhile, some (Hazra and Goel, 2009; Wagner and Arnold, 2008) have argued that such conditions cannot be automatically tied to government as its sole responsibility as if one were following a recipe. This, of course, is not to argue that governments’ role in MSWM is unimportant or unnecessary. Actually, worldwide, government agencies have the primary responsibility of managing solid waste (Agamuthu et al., 2009; Yousif and Scott, 2007). However, in an African context in which governments are frequently faced with financial, logistical and personnel constraints (Oteng-Ababio et al., 2013; World Bank, 2000), overemphasising governments’ sole role in MSWM tend to hinder effective MSWM. In fact, much of the urban studies literature on MSWM has been criticised for supposedly overlooking, if not de-emphasising, the role of urbanites and their cultural setting within which MSWM policies and interventions are implemented (Bilitewski et al., 1994; World Bank, 2000). Urbanites positive attitudes towards MSWM, in terms of generation, sorting and collection, may augment government’s efforts towards effective MSWM. It is true that many African governments and city authorities continue to seek environmentally friendly and other expensive win-win technologies through public-private partnerships with both local and international firms to help manage solid waste (see Oteng-Ababio et al., 2013). However, with widespread perception amongst urbanites of governments’ sole responsibility in MSWM in many African countries amidst financial, logistical and personnel challenges without playing supporting role in MSWM, efforts towards effective MSWM could be crowed out or otherwise poorly implemented (Amoah and Kosoe, 2014; Addaney and Oppong, 2015; Agamuthu et al., 2009).

The far reaching implication of poor MSWM (e.g., environmental health, financial burden) abounds (see Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development [MLGRD], 2010; Narayana, 2008; Oteng-Ababio et al., 2013; World Bank, 2000), and it is what has provoked the growing exploration of alternative ways of managing solid waste in Africa (Addaney and Oppong, 2015; Fobil et al., 2010). Admittedly, MSWM involves a wide spectrum of activities: generation, onsite storage, collection, transfer and transport, disposal, processing and recovery of solid waste (Tchobanoglous, 1993). And it is true that practicing all the activities of MSWM is ideal and necessary for urban functionality and environmental health (Amoah and Kosoe, 2014). Yet, the process of actualising these activities remains a distant hope in most African countries. Fobil et al. (2010) argue that the lack of a well thought MSWM plan involving all the major stakeholders particularly urbanites remains the bane of inefficient MSWM. It is therefore unsurprising that despite African city authorities spending between 20% and 50% of their revenue on MSWM, less than a third of urbanites have access to effective solid waste management (SWM) services (Senkoro, 2003). In Ghana, for example, a baseline environmental sanitation survey conducted in 2007/2008 shows that close to 76% of Ghanaians are faced with poor waste management challenges, including the use of improper waste collection and disposal methods (MLGRD, 2010).

Urbanites’ role in MSWM, although often ignored, seems critical. Urbanites’ responsibility in MSWM, however defined, is thus the context within which urban residents and their local cultural conditions are duly considered in MSWM. Even for a country like Ghana which is being threatened with MSWM challenges in the unfolding urban realities, there is no escaping the fact that its development cannot avoid the vital role of urbanites in MSWM as they are the generators of solid waste (Amoah and Kosoe, 2014; Cobbina et al., 2015). Despite the plethora of research on MSWM in Ghana and elsewhere (e.g., Addaney and Oppong, 2015; Amoah and Kosoe, 2014; Oteng-Ababio, 2010a; Oteng-Ababio et al., 2013), they have mostly focused on government’s failure or what government should do to improve the collection and disposal of solid waste as well as private sector participation. Remarkably, little is known about the role and perceptions of urbanites in MSWM process.

It is against this background that one must evaluate what the future holds for MSWM in Africa: What is the MSWM situation in urbanising Africa? And what are the perceptions and roles of urbanites in MSWM in an increasingly pervasive urban civilisation in which filth is drowning societies? In this paper an attempt is made to confront the challenges of MSWM from a Ghanaian perspective, using Berekum municipality – a rapidly urbanising municipality – as case study area. This analysis consists of four parts. Section 2 provides an overview of MSWM in Ghana, and describes the research setting and methods. Section 3 presents the results of the research and discusses the policy implications. In Section 4, the article concludes with recommendations to promote and improve MSWM.
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