

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Waste Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wasman

Waste picker livelihoods and inclusive neoliberal municipal solid waste management policies: The case of the La Chureca garbage dump site in Managua, Nicaragua

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 February 2017

Revised 23 September 2017

Accepted 7 October 2017

Available online xxxxx

Keywords:

Waste pickers

Municipal solid waste management

Modernity

Sustainable development

Justice

Managua

Nicaragua

ABSTRACT

The modernization (i.e. mechanization, formalization, and capital intensification) and enclosure of municipal solid waste management (MSWM) systems threaten waste picker livelihoods. From 2009 to 2013, a major development project, embodying traditional neoliberal policies with inclusive social policies, transformed the Managua, Nicaragua, municipal solid waste site from an open-air dump where as many as 2,000 informal waste pickers toiled to a sanitary landfill. To investigate waste pickers' social and economic condition, including labor characteristics, household income, and poverty incidence, after the project's completion, 146 semi-structured survey questionnaires were administered to four communities adjacent to the landfill and 45 semi-structured interviews were completed with key stakeholders. Findings indicate that hundreds of waste pickers were displaced by the project, employment benefits from the project were unevenly distributed by neighborhood, and informal waste picking endures due to persistent impoverishment, thereby contributing to continued social and economic marginalization and environmental degradation. The findings highlight the limitations of inclusive neoliberal development efforts to transform MSWM in a low-income country.

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1. Introduction

In low- and middle-income countries, where resources and infrastructure to collect, transfer, and dispose of garbage are often scarce and inadequate (Guerrero, Maas, and Hogland, 2013; Medina, 2007), garbage is an urban commons, or public resource, and an important livelihood source for informal waste pickers (i.e. garbage recyclers) (Ezeah, Fazakerley, and Roberts, 2013; Zapata and Campos, 2015). Increasingly, garbage is viewed by municipal governments, development agencies, and private entities as an urban resource to be enclosed. This transformation is the result of several often-interrelated objectives, including generating profit for municipalities or private corporations, ensuring public health, and promoting sustainable development. As garbage is enclosed (i.e. public access to it is limited or non-existent), waste picker livelihoods are profoundly affected.

This paper aims to understand the social and economic conditions of waste pickers after the enclosure and modernization of a

municipal solid waste site (i.e. garbage dump). To do so, it examines how neoliberal discourses and practices, specifically influenced by “modernization” and “sustainable development,” simultaneously improve and marginalize waste picker livelihoods, thereby producing new forms of social marginalization and environmental degradation.

The paper analyzes the case of La Chureca, the lone municipal solid waste site (i.e. garbage dump) in Managua, Nicaragua, and the Barrio Acahualinca Integrated Development Project (*Proyecto de Desarrollo Integral del Barrio de Acahualinca* and hereafter Acahualinca development project), funded by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID by its acronym in Spanish). The US\$45 million Acahualinca development project, which was carried out in cooperation with the City of Managua and completed in early 2013, converted the open-air and unregulated municipal solid waste site to a modern sanitary landfill. The Acahualinca development project relocated 258 families that lived in the solid waste site to a new housing settlement, sealed and covered the toxic site, and erected a materials recycling facility capable of processing 140 tons of garbage per hour (AECID, 2013). The recycling plant employs approximately 580 people—far fewer than the 1,500–2,000 people who earned their livelihood picking

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over garbage in the site daily prior to its overhaul (Hartmann, 2012).

This study contends that neoliberalism, advanced by the ideals of modernity and sustainable development, plays an integral role in shaping urban governance. Specifically, the study builds on a burgeoning area of research that examines the impacts of neoliberal MSWM systems on waste pickers. To achieve this aim, the study provides an overview of MSWM in Managua and details the Acahualinca development project before proceeding to consider the social and economic conditions of waste pickers and non-waste pickers after the modernization and enclosure of La Chureca. Empirical evidence is drawn from lay perceptions of the Acahualinca development project, historical and contemporary labor characteristics among residents of four neighborhoods adjacent to the landfill, the prevalence of informal waste recovery at the landfill—an activity considered illegal—in the contemporary period, and calculations of household income to estimate poverty incidence. The findings highlight the limitations of neoliberal development efforts to transform MSWM in a low-income country.

2. Neoliberalism, modernization, and sustainable development

In the last four decades, the neoliberal development agenda has transformed urban governance globally. Broadly, as a political economic philosophy neoliberalism encourages minimal government intervention and inextricably links social and economic decision-making to market value and economic efficiency (Harvey, 2006). Emblematic of neoliberal policies, governments increasingly seek to maximize revenue generation and efficient procurement of services like MSWM and encourage new and formal capitalist enterprises by enclosing and commodifying common resources (often through privatization, or the sale of contracts to private corporations) (Sandhu et al., 2017). Since the late 1990s, neoliberal development initiatives have sought to be more “inclusive,” “participatory,” and “comprehensive” in an attempt to lessen adverse social and economic impacts on aid recipients while still adhering to the overarching goals of economic growth and integration into global capitalism (Craig and Porter, 2006).

In recent years, the ideals of modernity and sustainable development have fostered the neoliberalization of urban environments. As a “planning and programmatic vision,” modernity is a set of centuries-old, Western-borne governance strategies aimed at social, economic, and environmental change and progress (Kaika, 2005). The promulgation of modernity comprises the spread of capitalist relations (Kaika, 2005) as well as the regularization of and control over everyday life (Foucault, 2003). In particular, modernity seeks to regulate urban social-environment relations as populations grapple with anthropogenic environmental problems. Society believes that to be “modern” a city must be “clean, rationally ordered, and armed with modern technology” (Moore, 2009, p. 428). To meet expectations of modernity—in order to spur economic development and promote social well-being—some cities across the Global South are adopting MSWM systems developed by and for cities in the Global North (Medina, 2007; Oteng-Ababio et al., 2013). Modern MSWM systems typically are centralized, mechanized, capital-intensive, and disposal oriented; importantly, MSWM systems in the Global North often exclude waste pickers, a group that (erroneously) is viewed as a threat to urban health and an aberration of the modern urban landscape (Medina, 2007). As a result, waste pickers, who historically have been marginalized socially, economically, and politically by society, are further erased from the urban landscape (Medina, 2007; Sternberg, 2013; Wilson et al., 2006).

Like modernity, “sustainable development” discourses and practices drive urban social and environmental change in the

neoliberal era. The Brundtland Report defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” and that which seeks a balance among economic growth, environmental quality, and social equity (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 41). MSWM plays a key role in meeting the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals concerning livelihoods, poverty, public health, and environmental protection in low- and middle-income countries (Mbah and Nzeadibe, 2017; Myers, 2005; United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2010). Sustainable development programs, also referred to as “green neoliberalism,” have been shaped by and extend the reach of neoliberal market-oriented policies (Obeng-Odoom, 2014). For example, according to global development agencies like the World Bank, achieving sustainable development requires the privatization and decentralization of the solid waste sector (World Bank, 2011). Additionally, while sustainable development discourses have increased environmental awareness (Adams, 2009, p. 23), in practice sustainable development has yet to address increasing social inequities and continued unequal power relations (Kumi et al., 2014).

3. Waste pickers in neoliberal and inclusive neoliberal MSWM systems

Buoyed by ideals of modernity and sustainable development, among others, neoliberal policies have profound implications for urban landscapes and social-environmental relations, as evidenced by the changing roles of waste pickers vis-à-vis new MSWM strategies in the Global South. Historically and through to the present day, waste pickers often are marginalized, vulnerable, and impoverished. This is due to a variety of factors, including increased exposure to chemical hazards, infections and illness, and mechanical trauma (e.g., traffic accidents) (Binion and Gutberlet, 2012); experiencing social stigma and lack of access to basic services (Binion and Gutberlet, 2012); limited or no access to financial resources to create cooperatives (Gutberlet, 2008); and economic exploitation by intermediaries and officials, high susceptibility to international oscillations in the recycling market, and political oppression and neglect (Medina, 2007; Wilson et al., 2006). A review of the websites of Global Alliance of Waste Pickers (global-rec.org) and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (wiego.org) reveals the extent of efforts across Asia, Africa, and Latin America to enclose—and sometimes privatize—MSWM. According to Sandhu, Burton, and Dedekorcut-Howes (2017:554), “under the current macro-economic circumstances it seems that privatization of municipal solid waste is going to be inevitable.” Thus, due to waste pickers’ marginalization and the pervasiveness of efforts to alter their livelihood, it is critical to examine the impact of the neoliberalization of urban governance on waste picker livelihoods.

In general, the enclosure of MSWM systems marginalizes waste pickers by denying them control of material resources and erasing their contributions as knowledge generators in recognizing the value of waste (Samson, 2015a). In Cairo, for example, the privatization of the city’s MSWM system—led by international development agencies and corporations—has further marginalized socially and economically tens of thousands Zabaleen waste pickers. To date, research finds that modernization and privatization of MSWM systems has forced the relocation of Zabaleen housing settlements and recycling activities, thereby reducing their economic sustainability (Fahmi, 2005; Fahmi and Sutton, 2006; Fahmi and Sutton, 2010). And in Delhi, India, waste pickers were gradually displaced by the sale of MSWM contracts to private corporations, which did not hire waste pickers and led to the monop-

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