

Improved recycling performance

Policy options for Nigerian cities

By Thaddeus Chidi Nzeadibe & Onyanta Adama

In Nigeria there is a glaring absence of formal recycling of municipal waste. As a result, the informal sector has taken up the role of “critical but unacknowledged gap filler” in the waste recycling system, achieving low but significant recycling rates.

This policy note deals with what can be done to improve recycling performance in Nigerian cities.

Recycling is widely regarded as a sustainable option on the solid waste management (SWM) hierarchy. Hence, cities around the world are adopting a range of policy measures to increase their recycling rates and “move up the hierarchy”.

In Nigeria, there is a glaring absence of formal recycling of municipal waste. As a result, the informal sector has taken up the role of ‘critical but unacknowledged gap filler’ in the waste recycling system, achieving in the process low but significant recycling rates. This is often done by default in the course of making a livelihood; a case of the ‘waste hierarchy from below’. This policy note asks what can be done to improve recycling performance in Nigerian urban areas.

Informal sector not recognized

Social participation of the informal sector in the solid waste governance process in Nigeria is constrained by the lack of an articulate and inclusive policy on solid waste management and recycling. Attempts by Nigerian government



A truck loaded with metal scraps on its way to Lagos.

Photo: Onyanta Adama

to implement such policy have so far been unsuccessful and the informal sector is not recognized in solid waste management policy, planning and practice.

Significant contributions

Although empirical studies have not been conducted to ascertain the level of knowledge or awareness of Nigerians about the development contributions of the informal waste sector, it cannot be argued too strongly that the sector is indeed making significant economic, social and environmental contributions.

Legislative reforms that incorporate inclusive policies and approaches to SWM and recycling involving the informal sector will create awareness and improve attitudes. The use of local language in

media and NGO programmes is yet another strategy for this end.

Role model countries

Countries such as Brazil, Colombia, India and Peru have laws that recognize the informal waste sector and a strong NGOs presence canvassing for greater social inclusion of the sector. Other international organizations argue strongly in favour of the inclusion of waste pickers for the promotion of green jobs. Such approaches are effective in changing perceptions and attitudes and also improve recycling performance and livelihood of the waste workers.

Capacity improvements

An increase in recycling rates in Nigeria is related to capacity improvement of the waste workers.

Waste pickers themselves, at a

group discussion with researchers, identified four broad policy issues; access to microcredit facilities, development of market for recyclables, recognition and social protection of informal waste workers, and empowerment through education and health care.

Waste pickers want a voice

They also requested support in the formation of cooperatives and to “give them a voice” in solid

waste policy. Moreover, the waste pickers want official recognition as stakeholders in the SWM process and contributors to the urban economy. Poverty reduction was also identified as imperative to achieving these objectives. Intervention to improve the lives of those involved may also create opportunities for decent work.

“We clean up Aba, we suffer serious health problems but government is not helping us. If they will

allow us to be sweeping the streets or to join in collecting refuse for a fee, then we will not be feeding from what other people have left”, said one waste picker to the researchers.

Globalisation of waste

In response to the growing demand for recyclables across the globe, the informal waste economy has grown into a global market with complex international networks.

The informal recycling sector in Nigeria is well connected with the domestic formal economy and international markets. Some local industries rely on the supplies of secondary raw materials from waste pickers and waste dealers. It has established linkages in trans-border trade with neighbouring countries and as far away as Asia and Europe. Therefore, the need for supportive public policy cannot be overstressed.

Informal waste recyclers themselves know this much when they remarked:

“Obasanjo’s government policy had major impact on scrap business. This led Aba recyclers to export processed scrap metals to Lagos and Ibadan for further processing in companies. Some Indians and White men come to Aba to buy scraps”, said one of the waste dealers.

Social inclusion fights poverty

In concluding this policy brief, we note that the federal, state and local governments as well as NGOs, international development agencies and donors have a role to play in bringing about the desired changes.

Governments should initiate policies to integrate waste workers into SWM. Social inclusion of



Waste pickers of Abuja start work early in the morning to search for valuable scraps. At the transfer station they sort out the waste in different piles.

Photo: Johan Sävström, NAI



Three times a month, waste pickers of Mabushi district in Abuja transport metal scraps to Lagos. Photo: Johan Sävström, NAI

waste workers can be a veritable tool for fighting poverty and generate employment in the informal waste sector.

There is need for empirical studies to ascertain the awareness level of Nigerians about the informal waste sector development contributions. Universities and researchers are well positioned to do this.

Creating green jobs

NGOs and environmental activists can be the agents of change to mobilize citizens and undertake advocacy initiatives to influence policy. Donors can support initiatives and projects aimed at empowering the waste workers as an avenue to reduce poverty and create green jobs.

It is also imperative to build and maintain an information system of informal waste workers in Nigeria and disseminate same through the social media, websites, blogs and mainstream media.

The need to have a local or national database on waste pickers' activities in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized.

Policy recommendations

Where recyclable materials are available, taxation of new products should be considered. This would encourage people to reuse or recycle instead of buying new items. To make recycled products more affordable by subsidization is another option.

Households, industries and other establishments need to reduce their environmental footprints through targets for recycling and use of recycled products. Legislative reforms should be initiated at the national, state and municipal levels to guide formal recycling activity.

Strengthening of regulatory and supervisory roles of agencies through competitive recruitment of management teams and use

of performance-based contracts should be adopted.

There is great amount of wealth in waste. Public-private partnership in SWM will encourage private sector investment which will ultimately rub off on recycling performance.

Buy-back schemes can go a long way in reducing the amount of waste for disposal.

Source separation is the starting point of recycling. Raising awareness and development of functional source separation schemes can also yield improved recycling outcome.

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Want to know more?

Contact the researchers!



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Suggested reading:

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Summary of the recommendations:

- Taxation of new products and subsidization of recycled products to encourage material reuse and recycling.
- Setting targets for recycling and use of recycled products.
- Introduction of buy-back schemes.
- Legislative reforms to initiate and guide formal recycling activity.
- Development of functional source separation schemes.
- Public-private partnership in Solid Waste Management.

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