

Chapter 12

Integrating the Informal Sector for Improved Waste Management in Rural Communities

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ABSTRACT

The chapter dwells on the theoretical and practical aspects of the informal sector involvement in the system of waste management in rural communities. First, the author discusses peculiar properties of the informal sector involvement such as social, economic, and environmental peculiarities. Second, organizing the informal sector in rural areas is considered. Such issues as the role of community members, organizational structures of community-based organizations, problems of community-based waste management, and directions of its solutions are covered. Third, the author provides summary of experience and policy recommendations for the integration of the informal sector in the waste management system in rural areas. The author concludes that policies facilitating the integration of the informal sector result in increasing recyclable recovery rates and reduction of total waste-management costs. Partnership with the informal recycling sector improves resource efficiency in rural areas and contributes to poverty reduction and environmental improvements.

INTRODUCTION

In many developing countries the informal sector plays an important role in managing waste. The official waste management system in urban, urbanized and rural areas could not be managed without waste pickers, scrap collectors, traders and recyclers. Although not officially recognized, they often perform a significant percentage of waste collection services, in many cases at no cost to local authorities, central governments or residents. By its nature, the activity of the informal sector is market-driven, leading to highly adaptable and flexible demand-driven informal waste collection forces. Thus, the informal sector

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7158-2.ch012

waste workers are defined as individuals or small and micro-enterprises that intervene in waste management without being registered and without being formally charged with providing waste management services. The informal recovery of recyclables from the solid waste reduces the use of precious landfill space, helps to achieve recycling objectives and reduces overall solid waste management cost. In remote and rural areas the role of community members is essential. In particular, they provide primary collection of solid waste, sell recyclables, offer composting activities. Thereby, community members provide solid waste services, contribute into the clean neighborhood and earn incomes.

The objective of the research is to analyze experiences from the informal sector and community-based solid waste management projects, to focus on social, economic and management problems and ways to solve them. There is a purpose to inform policymaking related to upgrading and modernizing solid waste systems in rural areas in low- and middle-income countries.

In the first section the author will consider the importance of the informal sector in terms of provision of social, economic and environmental benefits. Since the attitudes of local governments towards the informal sector differ from place to place (hostility, indifference, appreciation), it is also useful to discuss issues related to mobilizing and formalizing the informal sector.

A solid waste management system is in fact a continuous maintenance system, which always requires community participation. In the second section the role of community-based solid waste management is highlighted. The author analyzes different organizational structures of community-based organizations, point out social, financial and management problems and possible ways of its solution.

Summary of experience and policy recommendations will be given in the third section. Generally, policies that facilitate the integration of the informal sector in the overall waste management system result in an increase in the rate of material recovery. Consequently, rates of waste disposal drop, allowing for savings in transportation and landfill operations. Thus, the integrating the informal sector for improved waste management in rural communities serves sustainable developments goals.

BACKGROUND

The issue of sustainable development was discussed for the first time during the Earth Summit in Rio-de-Janeiro in 1992. Decision-makers agreed that sustainable solid waste management is the key issue. In 2000 the world's governments committed themselves to achieving the Millennium Development Goals¹, and waste services were widely acknowledged as the principal means through which these goals could be achieved (Kessler & Alexander, 2005). Although there are no direct references to solid waste in the specific targets, the Millennium Development Goals call for appropriate environmental considerations as well as social awareness of the problems of waste pickers and other poor people (Dorvil, 2007).

In different studies it has been indicated that the term “waste pickers” is used in referring to persons who literally live on waste and are completely dependent on it for their food and clothing. The application of the term “waste pickers” greatly varies: scavengers, collectors, recyclers, rag-pickers, intermediaries, small industries, neighborhood groups and cooperatives (Ojeda-Benitez, Armijo-de-Vega & Ramirez-Barreto, 2002). Blight and Mbande (1996) identified three categories of waste pickers, namely: scavenging for self-consumption², recovery of materials for sale to consumers³, recovery of materials for sale to industry⁴. In some countries, the waste pickers are mainly men organized or grouped in bands or trade unions. In other cultures, the waste pickers are women or entire families of men, women and children.

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