

## **“Re-Opening the Bin” Conference Highlights on Waste Governance**

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### **Introduction**

The 2017 Opening the Bin workshop hosted at Lund University gave social science and humanities academics the opportunity to deliberate about waste, culture and society. While still an emerging area of study, waste research needs more of these connective settings to engage in conversations about the economy, livelihoods, life-styles, consumption patterns, natures, and infrastructures that are molded by how waste is approached.

The need for more of these discussions was the catalyst behind organizing the most recent “Re-Opening the Bin” conference held in June of 2021. Social scientists and humanistic scholars interrogating waste were asked to submit their literature, which was then presented in an online conference format. The research covers waste from various lenses and disciplines like gender and cultural studies, geography, sociology, and urban studies to name a few.

The goal of the conference was to bring together researchers and experiences from the Global South and the Global North to critically discuss waste and its meanings and trajectories in culture, economy and society. Waste governance was a major topic of discussion at the conference, and conveying the research on waste governance and the conference outcomes to the non-academic audiences remains a crucial part of generating meaningful change among all stakeholders – especially the general public. The critical takeaways from the conference were to connect and include the waste stakeholders in the decision making process, use input to actually adjust policy, and generate solutions that address issues before they arise instead of as they arise. Moving forward, using these key takeaways in waste governance is a strategy to elicit feasible and socially productive models for handling waste.

### **What is Waste Governance?**

Waste governance involves shifting our view of waste from disposability and out-of-sight-out-of-mind thinking to one of value. Good waste governance requires a transition to perceiving waste as a resource to create low-barrier jobs and as a resource that can be re-inserted into the circular economy. Including a wide variety of stakeholders in the decision-making process for waste management is a catalyst for change. This way, the on-the-ground knowledge of key players like waste pickers and other small scale entrepreneurs is

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taken into account, and negative social and environmental repercussions can be minimized (CRBL, 2021; Honkonen & Khan, 2017).

Good waste governance means adjusting policy to include the concerns of the people involved and realizing that waste production and management is tied to other social issues. Poverty reduction, building community resilience and improving environmental sustainability are byproducts of creating inclusive waste governance (CRBL, 2021). Therefore, making the shift to good waste governance plays a key role in promoting social cohesion. Azevedo and Gutberlet take a bottom-up approach in the discussion of waste governance, by looking at the Brazilian National Policy on Solid Waste, through the eyes of waste picker organizations (Azevedo & Gutberlet, 2021). One of the preliminary findings points towards the importance of waste pickers being able to further develop their skills through educational opportunities, allowing them to become better prepared in taking up leading roles in waste management geared towards resource recovery and the circular economy. Importantly, waste governance approaches connect communities and also tackle the UN Sustainable Development Goals, aimed at bolstering positive environmental and social realities that make an equitable future not just a pipe dream, but a sure thing (Gutberlet, 2021). In light of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including stakeholders in the decisions that impact them helps to lessen the environmental and social impact of waste by allowing meaningful and context specific standards to be set (Honkonen & Khan, 2017). This way, decisions regarding waste management can be made proactively instead of reactively (Rindzeviciute, 2021).

### **Connecting the Stakeholders & Recognizing Waste's Social Benefits**

A major theme throughout the conference was shifting the view that waste management is simply an environmental concern. Instead, scholars assert that good waste governance addresses social issues as well (Tovar, 2021). Including all parties that are involved in waste management interrupts a system of top-down decision making that has traditionally suppressed voices and knowledge that is valuable. Good waste governance creates an environment where everyone involved is able to express their connection to the issue, and this way, more equitable and socially relevant changes can be made.

#### ***Waste Management in Tandem with Community Networks***

For instance, Luisa Fernanda Tovar Cortés from the University of Colombia argues that waste-pickers (individuals who both formally and informally sort through waste to recover and sell recyclable materials to support themselves) perform important work that helps the environment, yet the social benefits of their efforts cannot be dismissed (Tovar, 2021). Waste-picking “boosts community networks” in ways that address social issues and improve the quality of life of communities, particularly those with lower incomes and of historically marginalized peoples (Tovar, 2021). Tovar Cortés highlights an example that children living in

Bogota, Colombia are able to participate in a soccer school by paying with recyclable waste they collect (Tovar, 2021). In this way, the community is able to improve its environment, and importantly, the youth get to take part in organized sport that fosters connection and a sense of belonging (Tovar, 2021). Evidently, waste governance has social benefits. For these benefits to realize their full potential, decision making on how waste is handled must include grassroots organizations and small scale initiatives in order to tackle social concerns while mitigating the issue of waste management.

### ***Our Current Systems are by No Means Perfect; Inclusion Brings us Closer to our Goals***

The social benefit of waste picking is also evident in Ayushi Dhawan's investigation into shipbreaking in Alang, in northwest India (Dhawan, 2021). Countries in the Global North have historically sent their older ships to the Global South to be dismantled, as it saves northern nations the cost of shipbreaking and the environmental havoc of disposing of the hazardous material embedded in the foundation of ships (Dhawan, 2021). This unequal exchange is illegal under the Basel Convention and undoubtedly this pattern perpetuates global power structures stemming from colonialism, where countries in the Global North exploit cheap labor in the Global South while averting environmental destruction out-of-sight (Dhawan, 2021). Still, this waste network exists because there is a social benefit for citizens of the Global South (Dhawan, 2021). Shipbreakers in Alang especially, remove the recoverable materials from old ships and sell those materials in local markets for affordable prices (Dhawan, 2021). While this process exposes workers to hazardous materials and precarious working conditions, shipbreaking provides markets in India with valuable goods at prices that are reasonable. This way, locals can have access to materials needed to stimulate their economy (Dhawan, 2021). Dhawan's case study indicates that there is a social benefit to shipbreaking and recovering reusable materials. To take this social benefit further, waste management systems in Alang should include shipbreakers in the decision making process so that they can be better supported health-wise through more rigorous industry standards that all parties are held to. In other contexts, grassroots participants and environmental stewards like waste-pickers have on-the-ground knowledge of environmental concerns, positioning them as important contributors to equitable and meaningful solutions (Cirelli & Melé, 2021). This contextualizes why their voices matter and need to be included.

### ***Making Public Concerns Public***

Silvia Bruzzone and Anette Hallin detail in their paper from the conference a success story about good waste governance and community investment in waste management in Sweden (Bruzzone & Hallin, 2021). They assert that in order for waste to become a public issue, it must be made public (Bruzzone & Hallin, 2021). In Sweden, a community was included in a biofuel campaign through communication to the public of how household organic waste would be collected to make biofuel (Bruzzone & Hallin, 2021). Containers for the organic waste were sent out to the community and the collected waste was transported to the facility to be turned into biofuel. The biofuel was in turn used to power taxis, public buses, and the company transportation vehicles

(Bruzzone & Hallin, 2021). Communicating the strategy with the public made it so that citizens were informed and involved in the community's waste management system, and having households collect their waste for the greater good boosted personal investment in emission reductions (Bruzzone & Hallin, 2021). Also, in order to make the initiative more public, the CEO of the biofuel company decided to relocate the facility to the town center. That way, people could see what was happening and feel more included in the process (Bruzzone & Hallin, 2021). The success of this case study is rooted in education, inclusion and transparency, principles positioning this example as a model of good waste governance.

### **Adjusting Policy**

While listening to the knowledge of various stakeholders involved in the issue of waste is important, real change comes out of actually adjusting policy to mobilize that knowledge. As discussed at the conference, a barrier to actualizing change is varying views on public participation depending on which political party is in power (Brittas & Ganesan, 2021). An example of this is in Kerala, India, where the state has moved back and forth between a centralized and decentralized waste management system depending on the party in elected office at the time (Brittas & Ganesan, 2021). This constant shifting demands energy and effort that could be spent working towards solutions that make waste management more widespread and a tool to promote social cohesion.

### ***It is all Connected: The Social and Environmental Domino Effect***

Sarah Surak of Salisbury University draws the necessary connection between the social issues that facilitate waste creation (Surak, 2021). Surak's contribution to the conference points to the Green New Deal (GND) in the United States that embeds into policy the "intersection of green infrastructure, economic opportunity, public services, and social justice" (Surak, 2021). The Green New Deal is so monumental, as Surak describes, because it acknowledges the intersecting factors that make certain populations more vulnerable to the climate crisis, and uses this knowledge to lessen the inequities while mitigating the root issue (Surak, 2021). The GND does not focus on technocratic details of how a green future will be achieved, but instead it brings to light the relationship between "environmental damage and human activity by acknowledging the intersection of class, gender, race, and environment" and what the future of the United States could look like if these issues are tackled knowing that they will have a domino effect (Surak, 2021). The GND links environmental mitigation with "wages, healthy food, health care, housing, transportation, and education" in a way that reimagines infrastructural systems and accounts for social issues (Surak, 2021). Only by acknowledging the issues that exacerbate waste creation can environmental policy generate the meaningful change it intends to.

### ***Targeting Programs to the Stakeholders***

Andrea Bortolotti of the Université Libre de Bruxelles uses his time at the conference to

highlight a waste management case study from a neighborhood in Brussels, where management strategies could be far more effective if they targeted the population, they are intended to help (Bortolotti, 2021). The neighborhood from the study is home to a transitioning community, made up of new immigrants and a commercially vibrant center (Bortolotti, 2021). Newcomers not being familiar with the waste management system, smaller homes with less storage space, and the prevalence of vacant land has led to dumping of waste into the streets (Bortolotti, 2021). Bortolotti explains that the quality of life would improve in the neighborhood if the waste management was brought under control, as stigma prevents people from having access to services that provide employment opportunities and quality education (Bortolotti, 2021). There is a waste collection process in place, but it is ineffective because it does not target the audience it works with. People who live in this neighborhood are often new immigrants, and thus may not speak the language needed to familiarize themselves with the neighborhood systems (Bortolotti, 2021). The takeaway from Bortolotti's work is that integrating better social supports that make waste management tangible for a specific population is the key to getting their waste management under control.

### **Transitioning from Residual Governance**

A change-making intervention strategy, as was discussed by Egle Rindzeviciute from the Kingston University in London, UK, is moving from residual governance to preventative governance (Rindzeviciute, 2021). Rindzeviciute hones in on nuclear waste and how looking at the cultural heritage of nuclear power, meaning the social and cultural impacts of nuclear history, can lead to measures that make the fallout of malfunctions more equitable (Rindzeviciute, 2021). From a broader scope, Rindzeviciute captures where current waste governance consistently falls short. Too often the waste itself is separated from the people who are involved in the process. Industries view waste stakeholders as external from the main goal, which to them is "invention and production" (Rindzeviciute, 2021). Currently, economic growth is prioritized, and whatever environmental or social ramifications occur are seen as something to be dealt with 'as needed' (Rindzeviciute, 2021). Shifting from the current governance system will require industries to factor in how their production will impact surrounding communities and ecosystems ahead of time. Further, changing governance to a more preventative approach will protect communities from having to 'clean up after industries' and instead put more of the onus for protection on the industries themselves (Rindzeviciute, 2021). Importantly, shifting to preventative governance will demand industries to reflect on the industrial economy that produces pollution and subsequent social issues and will require a re-prioritization of values (Rindzeviciute, 2021). Including the communities at stake in the decision making process is vital to ensuring community needs are met at all levels and equitable change is brought about.

### **Conclusion**

The Re-Opening the Bin conference was a valuable exchange between academics on how the disconnect between waste-creating industries, decision makers, communities and ecosystems can

be addressed. The takeaways from the expert presenters and literature indicates that waste management cannot be tackled as simply an environmental issue, but also as a social one. Inclusive waste governance, where all stakeholders have a say, has the potential to empower communities and bolster social cohesion. Citizens, whether in the Global North or Global South, have on-the-ground knowledge and lived experience with waste. Listening and incorporating this knowledge into the decision-making process will generate more feasible and equitable strategies for environmental protection and social innovation. Actually, adjusting policy to the needs of the people involved is key to making meaningful change. Furthermore, including stakeholders, whether they be waste-pickers, recycling plant employees or individuals who care about their community, fosters an environment where challenges can be foreseen before they arise and strategies for prevention are embedded into policy *and* operation.

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