

#11 INTRODUCING NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATES TO THE FORMAL AND INFORMAL SECTORS

by T.C. Nzeadibe¹ and C.K Ajaero²

Abstract

This paper reports on a study of the informal waste management sector in Nsukka sub-region of Nigeria that was conducted by final year geography undergraduates. The purposes of this exercise were to impart to the students a range of social science research skills and to expose them to the business opportunities provided by recycling. Both informal sector workers and government officials responsible for solid waste management were interviewed, and some commercial data on recycling operations were collected. This project greatly increased the students' interest in working in the informal sector to promote better solid waste management.

Keywords

Capacity development, informal sector, Nsukka, university

1 Introduction

In Nigeria in recent years urban waste management – especially the work of the informal sector – has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers and policy makers. Studies of waste management in Nigerian cities are paying more attention to the linkages between waste management and urban governance on the one hand (Onibokun and Kumuyi, 1999; Whiteman *et al*, 2006), and the economic, environmental, socio-political and spatial aspects of informal waste management on the other hand (Adeyemi *et al*, 2001; Agunwamba, 2003; Afon, 2007; Nzeadibe and Eziuzor, 2006; Nzeadibe and Iwuoha, 2008; Imam *et al*, 2008).

In all these investigations, however, the development of the capacity of the informal sector for improved solid waste management (SWM), and the need to support the activities of the sector have been largely ignored (Nzeadibe, 2008). Little thought has been given to encouraging graduates to make a career in the informal waste management sector in spite of the development contributions made by the sector.

This paper reports on a recent study of the informal recycling sector in the Nsukka sub-region of Nigeria. The study was initiated within the framework of a final year undergraduate course in Environmental Protection and Management in the Geography Department of the University of Nigeria. The key objectives of this initiative were to expose the students to the

¹ Waste Management & Recycling Research Unit, Department of Geography, University of Nigeria, 410001 Nsukka, Nigeria. e-mail: chidinzeadibe@yahoo.com Tel: +234-803-772-7927.

² Population Dynamics Research Unit, Department of Geography, (as above)

relevant research skills as well as to the opportunities for careers in informal waste management.

This project was an expression of the policy of the University to train entrepreneurial students to become small- and medium-scale business owners so that they create employment rather than just looking for employment for themselves (Ikeme, 2008). Other objectives were to identify the capacity needs of the formal and informal waste workers and to propose measures to enhance the waste and resource management capacity of the informal sector.

The official responsibility for solid waste management (i.e. collection and disposal) in this area rests with the Enugu State Waste Management Authority (ESWAMA), and services are provided by formal private sector enterprises, henceforth referred to as private sector service providers (PSSPs). The informal sector plays an important but unacknowledged role (Federal Ministry of Environment, 2000).

2 Methodology

Fifty students and two lecturers participated in this research project. Using a combination of methods, which included a questionnaire survey, ethnographic interviews and field observations, data were obtained on the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of waste pickers and waste dealers in Nsukka. The questionnaire surveys among the waste pickers and dealers were conducted orally in the Igbo language because experience from an earlier pilot survey indicated that the target groups became more cooperative when addressed in the Igbo language rather than in English. In addition, most of them were people with low literacy levels so that Igbo was their only means of communication. Ethnographic interviews and questionnaire surveys were used to elicit information on the capacity needs and problems of the informal sector.

Official perceptions and attitudes towards the informal sector, and capacity development needs of formal sector (ESWAMA) staff were investigated by means of key-informant interviews with two senior officials of the Authority.

An interesting aspect of the data collection exercise was the attitude shown by the Aku Road scrap metal dealers. When the research team initially approached them, they were willing to cooperate, probably thinking that the research team would bring business to them. However, when the purpose of the visit was made known to them, they became uncooperative, saying that they would not disclose their business secrets to strangers. Consequently, the research team was obliged to make a series of entreaties with their leader before they were granted an audience by the dealers. The scrap dealers prevented the team from taking any photographs of their activities.

Equally important is the observation that some students who initially showed little enthusiasm for the project participated fully when they realized that the project was to be considered in the continuous assessment (CA) for the course. (Their performance in this exercise would supplement whatever grade they would achieve in the written examination.) As a result, each group competed with the others to score the highest mark for the project.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Findings regarding the formal waste management system

3.1.1 Impact of governance reforms on ESWAMA

An on-going reform of governance in Enugu State has benefited the SWM sector, bringing with it a level of transparency and order in the running of the sector. The appointment of the management team was largely transparent. The number of staff on the payroll of the Authority was halved, eliminating less qualified and redundant personnel while also instituting fiscal discipline in the Authority. To sustain the gains of the reform, a staff re-training programme was also initiated for those that were retained. Some training programmes on clinical and hazardous waste management have recently been conducted for ESWAMA staff. The Authority is currently in the process of organizing a series of training workshops for its administrative and technical staff, on payment for waste management services, cost recovery and financial management.

So far, the training and other programmes of the Authority appear to have had some impact, for example, in raising awareness of the activities of ESWAMA. Some commercial banks in the Nsukka and Enugu urban areas have now been designated as authorised to receive payments of ESWAMA bills. The visibility of the Authority in the study area has also improved tremendously particularly as a result of the playing of jingles, the announcing of monthly sanitation exercises and the phone-in programmes on public radio stations (during which senior officials of ESWAMA answer questions and invite suggestions from the public).

3.1.2 Observed shortcomings

In spite of the reforms in the SWM sector, administrative and technical lapses still exist. Examples are in the issuance of demand notices for households to pay waste collection charges, when no waste collection service has actually been provided to those households; and the weak monitoring of PSSPs which often allows them to dump waste indiscriminately in and around disposal sites. The sub-regional office of ESWAMA at Nsukka is also poorly staffed and equipped. Irregular waste collection and fly tipping are still significant problems in the area.

3.1.3 Capacity development needs of ESWAMA staff

Capacity development needs of ESWAMA officials were identified in the areas of staffing and equipment, regulation, monitoring and evaluation. It is pertinent to note that the Authority, probably because of its inadequate monitoring, rarely sanctions uncontrolled dumping by PSSPs. Inadequate staffing and equipment appear to be a reason for the weak monitoring of PSSPs.

It was found that key members of ESWAMA staff were not certified by professional waste management bodies. Certification in this case would involve gaining admission into membership of professional waste and resource management bodies such as the International Solid Waste Association (ISWA) and the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (CIWM). Such professional affiliations provide opportunities for enhancing professional competence in waste and resource management.

Few of the municipal officials had attended international waste management conferences and workshops. As a result, they probably did not know about best practices in waste and resource management. (Although international conferences can be beneficial, they should not

be regarded as a sufficient means of training.) It was also noted that operations personnel – particularly waste collection crews – were also not adequately trained in the occupational and environmental health aspects of their work.

3.2 Findings relating to the informal sector

3.2.1 Economic and environmental impacts

The economic impact of the informal sector was found to be significant. For example, it was discovered that the average waste picker earned much more than the prevailing minimum wage in Enugu State, just as in adjacent urban areas (Nzeadibe, 2008). Table 1 shows the minimum wage in Enugu State compared with the incomes of Nsukka recyclers. In addition, the informal recycling sector diverts significant amounts of materials from disposal at the dumpsites.

Table 1: Minimum wage in Enugu State compared with Nsukka recyclers’ income

Recycler Group	Average monthly income (₦)	Monthly income (US\$)	Minimum wage (₦)
Waste pickers	18,000	154	6,500
Aku Road scrap dealers	96,000	820	6,500
NITEL junk shop	42,000	360	6,500
Ogige Market bone dealers	24,000	205	6,500

Note: Exchange rate used is US\$1 = ₦117

3.2.2 Public perception and attitude towards the informal sector

The main problem faced by the informal waste sector in Nsukka relates to negative public perception. Some individuals perceive waste pickers as criminals and so do not like to see them within their neighbourhoods or to associate with them.

Official perception of the informal sector is that it has no place in modern SWM policy and practice in Nsukka. This can be characterised as a policy of neglect - the authorities simply ignore them and their operations, leaving them alone, without persecuting or helping them.

3.2.3 Improving the lives and recycling capacity of informal sector

Improving public perception is considered to be an essential step towards improving the lives and capacities of the informal sector. A research unit, known as the Waste Management and Recycling Research Unit, has recently been set up in the University’s Department of Geography for advocacy on behalf of the informal sector and to coordinate research and publications in waste and resource management for the Department. Researchers from this Unit have recently published peer-reviewed articles and presented papers at local conferences on different aspects of informal waste management in Nigerian cities. Advocacy was the theme of a paper presented at the 50th Annual Conference of the Association of Nigerian Geographers (ANG) in August 2008, seeking to improve public perception of the informal sector while also creating awareness of the need to support their activities in Nsukka.

3.2.4 Support for the informal sector

Informal waste workers requested support for their activities, especially in the formation of cooperatives and to “give them a voice” in the area. Interventions to improve the living and working conditions and public perceptions of the informal recyclers that were proposed and canvassed include:

- Involvement of NGOs and development agencies in organizing the waste pickers into cooperatives. Examples of this abound in other parts of the world.
- Provision of grants, strategic advice and guidance to improve their operations.
- Development of markets for recyclables.
- Policy-level recognition of the informal recycling sector as stakeholders in the solid waste management process and contributors to the urban economy.
- Provision of regular vaccination, water and sanitation services and general support for the development of the sector.

Although these proposals for development interventions are not exhaustive, it is useful to consider them as a necessary first step in the process of enhancing the recycling capacity of the informal sector. It is believed that adopting these measures could lead to improvements in their lives, in public perceptions and attitudes, as well as in skills and knowledge. The sector could play a part in the fight against poverty in the area.

3.2.5 Making a career in the informal waste sector

A noteworthy outcome of this research was the increased interest and awareness of the students regarding opportunities for participating in projects that improve waste management and involve the informal sector in Nigerian cities. This finding, in particular, has implications beyond the study area (Nsukka), and is clearly significant, because such interest in informal waste management is unprecedented during the 47 years of existence of the Department of Geography.

There is currently a drive towards entrepreneurship in the University of Nigeria, as evidenced by the establishment of the Centre for Entrepreneurship and Development Research (CEDR) in 2005. One of the main aims of CEDR is to train and develop the capacity of students to become self-reliant graduates and employers of labour rather than job seekers. As a result, final year students of the university now receive entrepreneurial training to enable them to start and manage small-scale enterprises. In addition, the University Senate has approved two courses on entrepreneurship for penultimate and final year students of the University (Ikeme, 2008).

In the light of the above and given the findings about the incomes of waste dealers, some entrepreneurial students noted the potential of a career in the informal waste sector, indicating that they would consider setting up waste recycling micro- and small enterprises after graduation. Making a living from waste trading, they argued, could be sustainable because the profits the dealers make far outweigh the expenses incurred in their transactions. Career opportunities may also be sought with NGOs, development agencies and advocacy groups sympathetic to the cause of the informal waste management sector.

4 Key lessons learned from this project

- Do not be afraid to try out innovative ideas. The students eagerly embraced the new research skills in addition to the traditional geographic skills they already had. These

new skills could be important tools for tackling some of the development challenges of a country like Nigeria.

- Young minds, when motivated by inspirational leadership, can be agents of change. The students enthusiastically participated in the project, which formed part of their formal course, and were inspired by a dedicated research team.
- More interest will be shown in research into informal waste management if awareness is raised. Two students of the Department wrote their degree projects on waste recycling during the last session. In the current session, five students have just completed their research on various aspects of informal waste management in selected Nigerian cities. This trend, which is expected to be sustained, has its origins in the knowledge and skills acquired during this project on the informal recycling sector in the Nsukka sub-region.
- Some of the students have expressed an interest in pursuing postgraduate research and training in waste and resource management, particularly on informal sector waste management.

5 Conclusions

There is a clear need for advocacy on behalf of the informal waste management sector so that the work of waste pickers and scrap dealers is recognized for its benefits in reducing the quantities of waste sent for disposal and in generating employment and incomes. Sending university students to find out about the informal waste recycling business is a good way of drawing attention to this sector.

The University at Nsukka is well suited to involvement with the informal sector because of its policy of promoting entrepreneurship and job creation, and because of the interest in waste management – and particularly the informal sector – and the innovative approach to education of the Department of Geography. These two elements combined to make a strong bridge to the informal sector, and to create the prospect that some fresh graduates may soon be working in waste recycling and creating employment in this field.

The final year research project that is described here was effective in motivating students to cross social boundaries and see for themselves the benefits and needs of informal sector waste recycling.

The results of this data-gathering project also show that the attention of the formal SWM sector in Enugu State should now be directed towards addressing the capacity needs and problems of formal sector waste workers. Doing this will ensure sustainability and improvement in the gains already made with the recent reform of the SWM sector in the area.

In summary, this project resulted in significant changes in the ideas and attitudes of the students, a new enthusiasm for integrated waste management, the acquisition of new skills and an increased awareness of the opportunities for a career in the informal waste management sector. These impacts are all the more compelling and relevant in today's Nigeria, where thousands of graduates are turned out every year from about 93 universities and numerous other institutions of higher learning, with no guarantee of getting a job in the formal sector.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank all the final year students of the Department of Geography, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2007/2008 academic session, for their enthusiasm and participation in the research project on which this paper is based.

References

- Adeyemi A.S., Olorunfemi J.F & Adewoye T.O (2001). *Waste scavenging in Third World cities: A case study in Ilorin, Nigeria*; *The Environmentalist* , 21 (2), 93-96.
- Afon, A.O (2007). *Informal sector initiative in the primary sub-system of urban solid waste management in Lagos, Nigeria*. *Habitat International*, 31 (2), 193-204.
- Agunwamba, J.C. (2003). *Analysis of scavengers' activities and recycling in some cities of Nigeria*. *Environmental Management* ,32(1), 116-127.
- Federal Ministry of Environment. (2000). *Draft blueprint on municipal solid waste management in Nigeria*. Abuja: FMENV.
- Ikeme, A.I (2008). *Polyfunctional egg: how can it be replaced?* (Professorial inaugural Lecture, University of Nigeria, Nsukka).
- Imam, A., Mohammed, B., Wilson, D.C., & Cheeseman, C.R (2008). *Solid waste management in Abuja, Nigeria*. *Waste Management*, 28 , 468 –472.
- Nzeadibe, T.C. (2008). *Solid waste reforms and informal recycling in Enugu urban area, Nigeria*. *Habitat International* (Article in Press doi:10.1016/j.habitatint.2008.05.006).
- Nzeadibe, T.C & Iwuoha, H.C (2008). *Informal waste recycling in Lagos, Nigeria*. *Communications in Waste & Resource Management*, 9(1), 24-30.
- Nzeadibe, T. C. & Eziuzor, O.J. (2006). *Waste scavenging and recycling in Onitsha urban area, Nigeria*. *CIWM Scientific & Technical Review* 7 (1), 26-31.
- Onibokun, A. G & Kumuyi, A.J. (1999). *Governance and Waste Management in Africa*. In : *Managing the monster: Urban waste and governance in Africa*, edited by A.G Onibokun. Ottawa, Canada: International Development Research Centre (IDRC).
- Whiteman, A., Barratt, L., & Westlake, K.(2006) . *Solid waste management as a catalyst for governance reforms: micro-licensing for private sector participation in Nigeria*. In: *Solid waste, health and the Millennium Development Goals, CWG-WASH workshop 2006, 1 –5 February, Kolkata, India*.