

The political work of ‘waste picker integration’¹

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In my WIEGO Working Paper “Forging a new conceptualization of ‘the public’ in waste management” I drew together research by many WIEGO researchers and membership based organizations (with Sonia Dias, Lakshmi Narayan and Poornima Chikarmane foremost amongst them) to explore the broader political significance of collective mobilization by waste picker organizations to demand formal integration into municipal waste management systems. In the paper I argued that the approaches to integration in Pune, Bogota and Belo Horizonte that emerged from such struggles achieved more than simply improving waste pickers’ incomes and livelihoods. Waste picker integration in these cities expanded the public sector by creating a newly recognized municipal service provided by waste pickers. It also expanded the public sphere by enabling waste pickers to be recognized as members of the polity who have the right and ability to engage in formal political processes. This, I argued, contributed to forging a more inclusive, participatory and democratic state.

In retrospect, I have realized that, like most others writing about ‘waste picker integration’, I neither defined nor theorized the concept ‘waste picker integration’. Perhaps because ‘waste picker integration’ is primarily seen as a policy that must be implemented, most writing on the topic focuses narrowly on how to achieve it. Yet failure to clearly elaborate waste picker integration as a concept has profound effects on the development and implementation of these very policies.

I am currently working with a team of post-graduate students to conduct multi-disciplinary research on waste picker integration in two South African municipalities. Our primary finding is that because the municipalities have not articulated what integration is, different parts of the municipality, different parts of the waste management department, and waste pickers who are supposedly being integrated are all implicitly conceptualizing waste picker integration in completely different ways. As a result, they cannot agree on whether a project is about integration, let alone whether it is achieving this goal. As municipalities have not engaged waste pickers to find out what they think integration is, the programmes they developed have ironically created new forms of exclusion as waste pickers either choose not participate, or are not even aware that there is a programme in place to ‘integrate’ them.

Linked to the research, I am also designing and overseeing the national stakeholder process to develop National Guidelines for Waste Picker Integration for the South African Department of Environmental Affairs. The stakeholder working group includes waste pickers, municipalities, national government, industry, and NGOs. When the process started, they couldn’t even agree on what a map of the

¹ A number of the arguments in this presentation are drawn from my paper “Whose frontier is it anyways? Reclaimer ‘integration’ and the battle over expansion of the ‘waste-based commodity frontier’ in the city of Gold”.

sector looks like, let alone where and how waste pickers should be integrated into it. Facilitating the process has made me realize that conceptualizing integration is not just an abstract academic issue, but must be a central part of the policy process that assume it.

In the remainder of this short presentation I want to map out three different ways waste picker integration has been theorized and tease out the implicit understandings of 'the public' that underpin them. I then move on to problematizing the concept integration itself.

The first approach to waste picker integration focuses on integrating the work of individual waste pickers and/or their cooperatives into the municipality's waste management and recycling system. It is primarily concerned with the practical steps required to facilitate this kind of integration (for example, the provision of IDs, health and safety equipment, etc).

The second, related approach continues to frame integration as integration of labor for economic purposes. However, it adds a focus on the involvement of waste pickers in policy processes to ensure better policy outcomes. It can also include attention to the specific histories, politics etc of different places in order to identify the most relevant ways to integrate the work of waste pickers in a particular context.

The third approach, which Sonia Dias has played a key role in developing, starts from an understanding of waste that extends beyond the economic to also foreground waste and waste picking as social and political. Within this approach, the process of developing waste picker integration policies and programs is as important as the programs themselves. Sonia argues that waste picker integration entails improving the social status of waste pickers and consolidating and deepening their citizenship and position within the polity. In a different but related way, Poornima Chikarmane and Lakshmi Narayan also emphasize the political nature of integration by highlighting how in organizing around integration waste pickers transform their understanding of the world and their place within it. As noted above, my studies of integration have expanded the understanding of political integration to include transformation of the public sphere itself.

What these approaches have not done is problematize the term integration itself. In the first National Stakeholder Workshop, a waste picker representative named Steven Leeuw responded to municipal officials saying "WE aren't integrating into YOUR system, YOU are integrating into our system!" This simple statement captured a range of crucial insights into current dynamics around recycling in post-colonial cities. While the waste pickers' recycling system has been in place and succeeded in extracting significant amounts of recyclables out of the waste stream for decades, until recently, municipalities did not offer a municipal recycling service.

Elsewhere I have argued that the imposition of new municipal separation at source and recycling programs in places where waste pickers have existing salvaging systems is as a form of accumulation by dispossession. I have come to understand that focusing on the colonial assumptions underpinning these programs provides crucial insights into the political nature of the concept "integration".

Colonialists saw land in the colonies as wastelands that needed to be rescued and cultivated by the colonizers. Local inhabitants were rendered childlike and incapable of transforming the wastelands into productive territory as understood by the colonialists. Colonizers deployed these racist assumptions to justify seizing control of

the land and dispossessing the local inhabitants. I argue that the same processes are at work when municipalities state that waste pickers must integrate into new municipal recycling programmes. In doing so, the municipalities are refusing to acknowledge the recyclingscape produced by the waste pickers, and indeed see only a wastescape. They frame and engage waste pickers as human waste and deem themselves the best custodians of the space and midwives of the new recyclingscape. Waste pickers must therefore be thankful if and when the municipality offers to integrate them.

Steven's astute observation raises the question of who is being integrated into what. Are the waste pickers being integrated into the existing municipal system? Are they being integrated into a new system planned without them in mind and which they must slot into? Or a new system they have been part of envisioning? What political work does it do if we instead think of the municipality integrating itself into the waste pickers' system? Finally, what difference would it make if instead of focusing on waste picker integration, we focused on and struggled for a collective forging of a new conceptualization of waste pickers and recycling systems in post-colonial cities?

I tried to get the national working group to consider dropping the term integration, and to think more creatively and productively about what we are trying to do. Perhaps understandably, they are very wedded to the term, as in addition to being a global concept, developing guidelines on waste picker integration is the mandate given to DEA and the name of the policy process. I've therefore been using the questions I have just outlined to help me reconceptualize 'waste picker integration'. While I am still working on a fully fledged theorization, for the moment I am playing with a definition rooted in the understanding that both waste pickers and their recycling system must be integrated. As waste pickers are complex human beings (rather than human waste), I see waste picker integration as the social, political, and economic integration of waste pickers into a collectively developed municipal recycling system that is based on recognition, and understanding of the established waste picker recycling system in the city. Such integration is not limited to the recycling system, but entails integration into the economy, polity and society more general. Central to the realization of this vision will be the integration of waste pickers into a public sphere that they contribute to transforming and expanding.