The Social Life of Rubbish: An Ethnography in Lagos, Nigeria

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**Research Aim**

Previous research has tended to treat waste disposal as the final stage of consumption. The problem with this approach is that it fails to capture the social processes involved in wasting.

My research investigates these processes. Specifically, it aims to explore and understand the social, cultural, political and economic practices and meanings surrounding the organisation of rubbish in Lagos, Nigeria.

In this way, I hope to uncover how millions of the world's poorest make a living by organising, collecting, sorting and recycling rubbish in cities like Lagos.

**What is Rubbish?**

The term ‘rubbish’ is loosely defined and has been interchanged with several terminologies across various literatures (i.e. ‘dirt’, ‘filth’, ‘garbage’, ‘junk’, ‘litter’, ‘scrap’, ‘trash’ and ‘waste’).

However, I used the term ‘rubbish’ as an umbrella term to embrace the other terminologies, which is defined as an “inorganic waste”, and something that has been deemed worthless and destined for bin/tip/landfill.

**Methods**

I spent 6 months participating, observing and interviewing key stakeholders in slums and dumpsites across Lagos.

For example, interviews and observations with members of the informal economy (i.e. scavengers) reveal how they depend on the rubbish recovered from the dumpsites to sustain their livelihood.

For this community, rubbishing or waste disposal is not the final stage of disposal; instead it represents the next stage of value capturing as they extract value from recovered materials.

**Impact**

The current crisis of waste in Nigeria brought about by poor waste management policies and infrastructures makes this research timely.

The findings are beneficial to local Nigerian communities and stakeholders within waste management circles in terms of alerting them to the possibilities for creating value through rethinking our perception of ‘rubbish’.

Not only that, findings uncover the potential for rubbish to serve as a bedrock which can support economic growth and development in Nigeria especially as the global fall of oil prices has crippled the economy.

“Rethinking our notion of rubbish can ultimately help us experience a world without rubbish”

**Findings**

Findings shed light on the various forms of labour that are produced when household rubbish are produced, disposed and potentially recycled. Also, waste disposal follows a recursive process where as a category of empty value can return as a valuable material.

More so, rubbish creates jobs, provides capital as well as develop a platform that supports entrepreneurship opportunities for informal workers.

Not only that, findings show how informal workers contributes to local production processes when materials recovered (plastic, aluminium, irons, brass, etc.) are used to manufacture other commodities.