

The solid waste management as the product of a hybrid process: the formal and informal practices in the waste governance in México

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Introduction

In Mexico, as in many other countries of the Global South, it has been developed the scavenging or “pepena”, an informal activity, whose goal is the recovery of materials through the selection and segregation of some urban solid waste¹. This activity is carried out by people of a marginalized social group, who obtain their financial resources from the sale of such materials.

The “pepena” in Mexico represents an important activity. On the one hand, it is a small occupational area of the informal economy that provides self-employment to families who participate in it. On the other, it is an activity that enables system efficiency of waste management in the cities, because if it is true that this is an activity considered as informal, this has allowed the recovery of materials, has prolonged life of final disposal sites and has supported the development of other activities such as storage and transfer of waste, the operation of collection centers, etc. Namely, the “pepena” has been the starting point for the emergence of a formal production chain: the recycling of waste. In other words, rather than an informal activity, we suggest that scavenging be seen as an alternative management system for municipal solid waste in Mexican cities.

The objective of this article is give an account of the way in which the performance of the scavenging is combined with formal activities of solid waste management in the Mexican cities in order to structure and operate the urban sanitation systems. That is to say; our intention is to explore the governance of waste through the analysis of scavenging in México. We are interested in elucidating the ways in which this informal activity allows us to understand how the solid waste management systems operate in México.

1. The current situation of Solid Waste Management in Latin America and Mexico

Tchobanoglous *et al* (1993) defined solid waste management as “the control of generation, storage, collection, transfer and transport, processing and disposal of solid waste in manner that is in accord with the best principles of the public health, economics, engineering, conservation, esthetics and other

¹ Urban solid waste emerges from households, commerce and trade, small business, office buildings and institutioes (scholls, hospitals, goverment buildings).

environmental considerations, and that is also responsive to public attitudes. In sum, the waste management model sets up a series of actions from the moment in which a good is turned into waste until its final disposal.

Solid waste management still being a serious problem to many countries on Global South. Is one of the biggest challenges facing urban areas of any size and is one of the five main problems that authorities have to resolve, even is one of the themes of urban management that receives less attention despite that it consumes a significant proportion of the budget in a cities² (UN-Habitat, 2010).

As we known, solid waste management implies a process for diminishing the environmental and health nuisances caused by waste; unfortunately, for many Mexican municipalities this process is reduced to collection and disposal, because only 6.02% of them provide some type of treatment to wastes³.

In terms of service collection, Latin America is a region with a high coverage of waste collection, 93% of the urban population has the service (UN-Habitat, 2012). In Mexico this indicator is lower, in 2010, 83.85% of inhabited households had this service.

In terms of disposal, in Latin America wastes generated by 54% of urban population are deposited in a landfill ⁴, wastes of 18% of people ends in a controlled landfill, while open-pit landfills receive wastes from 25% inhabitants"(UN-Habitat, 2012) these numbers reflect a infrastructure deficit and lack of control in final disposal .Mexico shares this deficit condition. 77% of municipalities have a site for waste disposal, 13% of these places are landfills and remaining 87% are open dumps.⁵ In addition, only 66% waste collected in 2011 ended in a landfill.

In this context, informal sector contribution to solid waste management is potential. Scavenging encompasses activities in all the chain of management: separating and storing waste in households for further recycling processes; collecting of waste by informal actors –organized or not into structured groups-; separating and recovering in transfer station; and finally retrieving in opened dumps and local landfills.

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² It is estimated that urban cleaning consumes between 15 and 20% of municipal budgets in Latin America and the Caribbean (UN-Habitat, 2010b).

³ Calculations based on INEGI (2012) *National Survey of Municipal Governments and Delegation 2011* (CNGMD). Module 6: Solid Waste.

⁴ Landfill is considered as the first step in having a good waste management, is recognized as an essential element for a modern system of management. (UN-Habitat, 2010).

⁵ Own calculations base on INEGI (2012).