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Wasting Away

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A professor of Oxford University recently stated in an English daily that almost 60 percent of waste remains uncollected in Dhaka. On the contrary, officials of Dhaka City Corporations said in interviews that the rate of daily uncollected wastes might be about 20 percent. Differences in estimation of uncollected wastes could have occurred because of coordination failures between the arrival of vans with domestic waste at container sites, and that of compactors/trucks to clear waste from containers. A recent study by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) reveals that while van men collect wastes during the day, the corporation starts clearing wastes from 10 pm, meaning piles of waste remain in container sites for a long time. This creates a negative perception among citizens regarding waste clearance from the city.

Likewise, in case of sweeping the streets, there is a disparity in the timing of disposal of commercial wastes and the time of sweeping by the cleaners. It has been evident that wastes from roadside shops are disposed after the roads are swept by cleaners in the morning. Such practices have generated a negative perception about the cleanliness of the city mainly undertaken by the cleaners of the city corporations. Currently, the corporations can issue a notice or file a case for illegal dumping of waste. However, due to the lengthy process of settling of cases, including physical appearance before the court, officials are less willing to file cases. Hence, they aspire for legal empowerment to impose fines on the spot for breaching waste management related directives of city corporations. Such empowerment is critical to control waste disposal made by mobile population and roadside vendors, since it is difficult to track these people while filing cases or issuing notices.

Another way of controlling random disposal of waste is to make city dwellers conscious by distributing leaflets, organising rallies, ward meetings, street dramas, verbal announcements, advertisements through radios and televisions, and social networking to ingrain values on waste management among public. With support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the corporation tried to develop a ward-based approach for awareness building of the community. In this approach, a monthly ward meeting used to be held between the corporations' officials with local stakeholders. Because of their campaign, roadside shop owners in an area of old Dhaka have stopped dumping commercial waste on the road. Instead, they stored waste in polythene, to be collected by corporation cleaners. However, in absence of a ward office and a lack of funding, ward meetings cannot be organised regularly. Awareness building activities in collaboration with national and international non-government organisations need to be continued. The contract given out for mid-islands of roads to various private companies or agencies for beautification in

exchange of allowing them a free advertisement has been a successful collaboration of the City Corporations.

Further worries of the city corporations are to deal with heterogeneity in composition of waste and non-conventional waste in various wards. For example, leaves or tree branches contribute to significant amounts per day in one of the wards under the Dhaka North City Corporation. Remnants of clothes and papers are found everywhere in the wards of old Dhaka thanks to the largest wholesale markets of the country, present in that area. Apart from conventional waste, a significant portion of street waste is contributed by sand and other construction materials. There have been no clear guidelines to take care of this non-conventional waste. Cleaners find sand most problematic while sweeping, and while piling up and transporting sand and construction materials to containers. It also causes the blockade of drains. Construction work induced problems cannot be checked without bringing any change in transportation of construction materials. Further, introducing proper cleanliness guidelines in construction sites and making estate owners responsible for cleaning up the residuals of construction work might improve waste collection in Dhaka.

It must be borne in mind that waste collection and waste storage should go hand in hand. However, waste storage capacity in Dhaka is quite limited. Lack of suitable places is the greatest challenge for city corporations in placing the containers in appropriate sites. Such sites have not been earmarked in urban land use planning, and in the absence of a plan, city corporations place containers besides markets or parks most of the time. The corporations plan to set up at least one secondary transfer station (STS) at each ward to hide waste from public sight; however, its implementation remains a challenge.

Finally, the heterogeneity across various wards in terms of waste types, control over use of resources for waste management and other ward specific problems create impediments against the application of any uniformed policy across the wards under the city corporations. Even though some improvements have been reported through the deputation of the cleaners to the ward level and through organising citizens' awareness programmes at the ward level, hardly any step has been undertaken so far to adopt a comprehensive decentralised form of governance for solid waste management in Dhaka.

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