

Info from the global world

INFORMAL RECYCLING IN VANCOUVER: BINNERS' CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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The Covid-19 pandemic, has emphasised the need to consider the interconnectedness of our planet, and the importance of highlighting new, and previously underrepresented perspectives on global waste management issues. The new corner, "Info from the global world" wants to collect thoughts and impressions from different parts of the world, with the aim of contributing to a more innovative and inclusive waste management studies discourse. The column will promote cultural intersections on issues affecting circular waste management, environmental protection and human health. We will highlight contributions from diverse expert authors who discuss, among a number of topics, how gender inequality and environmental racism can be combated through truly sustainable waste management and how the circular economy and Sustainable Developing Goals can contribute to combating poverty and mitigating waste inequalities.

The second issue of the Column features the work of Dare Sholanke and Jutta Gutberlet of the University of Victoria, Canada. Their discussion centres the lives and livelihoods of informal recyclers in Western Canada- a topic which has traditionally been contextualised within Global South settings. Sholanke and Gutberlet's reflection is both empirically interesting, as they provide a vivid snapshot of the quotidian vulnerabilities of this group, but also conceptually valuable, as the theoretical framework they utilise could be readily adapted for scholarly use within other contexts. Their conclusions challenge the inclusivity of local waste management systems for informal recyclers, and the further recommendations that continue to come out of this project should be of great international interest.

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Informal recycling is mostly studied in the context of global south cities. This article explores a North American perspective on the topic, demonstrating major shared challenges that these vulnerable populations encounter in the course of their daily endeavour – recovering recyclables or binning, as the activity is termed at the West Coast of Canada. We draw from Mitchell and Heynen's (2009) concept of "geographies of survival" to explore the lived experiences of bidders in Vancouver, B.C. Using a mixed methods approach (in-depth interviews, photovoice and survey), we investigate the struggles and pathways of survival that bidders in Vancouver, navigate daily. We also examined the roles of a grassroots innovation in enhancing bidders' livelihood strategies and concluded that grassroots innovations are integral in enhancing bidders survival in an arduous waste management landscape, thus, promoting an inclusive waste management system.

Introduction

In North America's seemingly organized waste management system, the informal sector – often referred to as bidders, canners or diverters at the Canadian West Coast, are generally excluded from both waste management (selective waste collection for recycling) and waste governance (decision-making processes). Meanwhile, recovery

of primarily beverage containers for refund deposit is a major livelihood strategy of these individuals, particularly those who do not receive government social assistance, and suffer from homelessness, addiction or mental health. The denial of the bidders' right to collect these materials through the enforcement of bylaws by city officers has continually impacted their ability to survive, leading to tensions between bidders and other stakeholders in the waste management system. To explore the many challenges of binning, we used Mitchell and Heynen's concept of geographies of survival, which they define as the "spaces and spatial relations that structure how people may live and whether they may live" (2009, p. 611). The concept was drawn from Lefebvre's notion of the 'right to the city', understood broadly as the right to urban life with a decent quality of life and specifically addressing the right to habitat and inhabit for the most dispossessed, the homeless, ethnic minorities and people in situation of poverty (1996). Both concepts are helpful in pointing out the inequalities and injustices inscribed in the urban by the capitalist system suggesting a necessary change towards more participatory, inclusive and community-based governance. The discussion on these notions is particularly relevant to addressing the pressing urban social and environmental challenges that demand more sustainable solutions. Social actors that have previously been excluded need to be invited into the



dialogues and decision-making processes, contributing with their experiences, social innovations and alternative forms of city-making.

Homelessness has evolved into a significant problem in most North American cities. According to Statistics Canada, in 2014, more than 235,000 Canadians experienced homelessness within the year and “approximately 2.3 million Canadians (representing 8% of the overall population aged 15 and over) reported that, at some point in their life, they had to temporarily live with family, friends, in their car, or anywhere else because they had nowhere else to live”. In part this situation is the results of the withdrawal, during the 1990s, of the federal government’s investment in affordable housing, the reduction in social benefit (pensions and social assistance) as well as declining wages (e.g. the minimum wage has not kept up with inflation in any jurisdiction in Canada). These developments have placed many Canadians at risk of homelessness. In 2017’s local homeless count, about 15% of the homeless in Vancouver responded that binning was their main income source (The Homelessness Services Association of BC, Urban Matters, and BC Non-Profit Housing Association, 2018). The majority of binners in Vancouver experiences the absence of the right to habitat (a place to reside that can be called home). As binners are often banned from using public spaces, the same could be said about the right to inhabit (to exist or be in a place with decent quality of life). Too often binners are still harassed, stigmatized or even fined for working with the recovery of recyclables. The deprivation of rights, such as the right to collect recyclable materials, has been a major nightmare for informal recyclers globally, including North America. Another fact not well known is the contribution of binners to the local community and to the environment. In Vancouver, the binners project alone, working with 168 binners, diverts about 7,000 kg of waste per month, a number which has been growing by 10% every year (The Binners’ project, 2020).

Informal Resource Recovery

In response to the many challenges involved in binning in the global North, we examined the roles of the Binners’ Project, a Vancouver-based social grassroots innovation, in empowering binners to navigate the treacherous terrain of the waste management system. We understand grassroots social innovations essentially as democratic, contextual and political processes whereby ideas, products, processes, alliances, public policies or methods are designed and developed, involving vulnerable and/or marginalized groups such as waste pickers and binners for the purpose of creating more inclusive recycling programs and opportunities for social change. The Binners’ Project, a community-based organization that exist primarily to assist less privileged individuals who lack access to the superior form of rights often through the development of novel ideas and innovations that challenge the neoliberal policy and urban inequalities through different forms and levels of empowerment (Arruda, 2008). In our study, we were seeking answers to the following two questions: what are the challenges for the binners in Vancouver and how has the

grassroots organization helped address these issues?

We adopted a community-based research (CBR) design to foster active involvement and collaboration with members of the binners community (the Binners’ Project and the United We Can Bottle Depot, both in Vancouver), who served as co-researchers. A mixed methods approach was applied, which included in-depth interviews, a survey and a photovoice engagement workshop. In-depth interviews were conducted with five stakeholders to identify the binners’ contributions to municipal waste management and/or governance, experiences and challenges encountered while working and how grassroots innovation could help to solve these problems. These stakeholders included two City Government Officials from the Engineering Department, one Manager of the United We Can bottle depot, one Manager of Encorp Pacific, and the Manager of the binners’ grassroots initiative (the Binners’ project). Interviews were recorded, transcribed and then manually analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify themes, sub-themes, and patterns that emerged from the text. The survey was applied by six binners who had previously been trained as co-researchers, to a total of 60 binners within the City of Vancouver. The survey included a wide range of questions which helped provide insights into the demographic and socio-economic situation of binners. In addition, a photovoice workshop was held with some of the binners. Photovoice is widely applied as a research method to promote democratic knowledge development where participants are actively involved in the research process particularly in terms of collecting data relevant to their lived experiences. Participants were compensated with an honorarium for the time involved with training and taking the pictures. An iPad was provided for the participants to take five to ten photos. Once we had all photos, a focus group was held to discuss the content of the photos. We created large posters from the photos which were then exhibited at a community recycling event, the ‘Coffee Cup Revolution’ – an annual event where binners recover disposable coffee cups within the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. This is an important annual event organized by the binners’ Project to create more awareness about disposability and recycling.

The Challenges of Binning

Drawing from our data we explored the geographies of survival of binners in two distinct facets, which included the challenges binners are facing and the roles the Binners’ Project has played in empowering them to navigate through these challenges. One of the major challenges mentioned by binners is the reduced access to recyclables. This problem started already in June 2005 after the city of Vancouver made a proposition for the enforcement to lock larger dumpsters (at least one cubic yard in size) (City of Vancouver, 2018). Not only has the locking of dumpsters limited binners’ right to access recyclable materials, but also has it threatened their right to survival. The survey revealed that about 60 percent of the binners were unemployed and 34 percent did not receive any government social assistance. Among this population, over 60 percent of the them earned less than \$20/day, which would barely suffice to purchase

two meals, not to mention other daily expenses. Reducing the access to refundable beverage containers limits their access to a fundamental resource that supports their livelihoods.

Occupational health hazards pose another challenge for binners. Highlights from the survey revealed that most binners frequently experience cuts (over 50 percent) and physical soreness (about 50 percent) during their work. This result was reiterated by several other studies that showed that binning exposes these individuals to several occupational hazards, which include headaches, soreness, cuts, infections and musculoskeletal problems among others (Tremblay, 2007; Uddin & Gutberlet, 2018).

Tension between binners and government officials or private company workers, essentially due to the bylaw that prohibits the collection of recyclable materials from the curbside, was reported as a major problem. The curbside is still a contested space of ownership with regards to the recovery of recyclable materials, as most governments contract out waste collection, thus transferring ownership of these materials to private companies which then results in the exclusion of informal collection and the criminalization through the bylaw enforcement. While the municipal government and the private sector consider waste an objects to be managed or governed, binners consider waste as a common pool resource with market value (Moore, 2012) to sustain their livelihoods. These variations in rationale over ownership claims are a significant source of tension for these individuals, as demonstrates the quote from some binners: The city union has pretty much screwed that up to saying no, this is ours to do. This is all our job and you guys stay out of it (M. binner). They (private companies) laugh at us... they don't even want to talk to us. We're they're their biggest pain in the ass because we are a competition. They don't give a shit about anything... But they cut into their bottom line and they make more money by giving people fines for fucking it up (M. & J. binners). For long waste picker collectives in the global South have argued for waste to be recognized as an urban common pool resource. Waste pickers contributing significantly, yet hidden, to waste man-

agement, to the generation of jobs and income among the poor and to reducing carbon footprints of cities, defending their right to produce, use, and appropriate waste (Zapata & Zapata Campos, 2014). While these issues are widely discussed for the context of the global south these very similar questions are hardly addressed in the global North.

In response to these challenges in Vancouver, the Binners' Project was established in 2014 by Ken Lyotier – a former binner and the founder of United We Can bottle depot – to create economic opportunities, destigmatize binning, and promote social cohesion among binners. Strategically located in the heart of the Downtown East Side (DTES) of Vancouver, the Binners' Project is a grassroots organization led by a core group of binners and supported by a steering committee, staff, special advisors and volunteers, all working collaboratively in making decisions on the direction of the project and developing initiatives to enhance binners' survival.

Based on our findings, the organization has developed several strategies to empowering binners. These include professionalization – playing the role of an advocacy between the binners and the government and also by providing a means of identification such as identity cards and uniforms with their logo crested thereon, similar to what waste picker organizations in the global South are already doing (Gutberlet, 2008). One of the government officials noted that: "...professionalizing binning is the easiest route to overcoming the negative perceptions that binning has among some residents" (SF). The Binners' Project seeks to empower binners by destigmatizing their work through public campaigns/engagement and waste recycling education at events such as the Coffee Cup Revolution. This has helped distinguishing binners as professional informal recyclers and part of a formal organization. Training and skill development is also offered by the organization to build binners' capacity to contribute and perform optimally in the formal waste management setting, leading to an increased engagement and interest from the city government as well as other private companies and also increasing the access to recyclable materials. As one of the government



FIGURE 1: Littering resulting from locked bins.



FIGURE 2: The abode of the homeless.



FIGURE 3: The Binners' Project Team.

officials noted: So, really, the challenge is if there isn't a binners project, it's very difficult for us to work directly with the community (S.F).

Moving forward

The concept of the geographies of survival (Mitchell and Heynen, 2009) has served as a lens to examine the challenges informal recyclers are facing in the global North, based on a case study conducted in Vancouver. Grassroots social innovations play a key role in improving binners' survival strategies. We presented several challenges which mostly include reduced access to recyclable ma-

terials through locked bins (Figure 1), occupational health hazards, stigma and tensions with other stakeholders (Figure 2). We highlighted the strategic approach by the Binners' Project in resolving these challenges (Figure 3). Our finding strongly supports the notion of inclusive and participatory waste management. Grassroots organizations are critical in promoting positive change in the lives of informal recyclers across the globe, as well as benefitting the environment by diverting recyclables into the circular economy. Further research is necessary to expand these findings. Another example where binners have organizing is Montreal, Canada. Here the initiative started out as *Projet Consigne*, created in 2004 by two volunteers (Marina and Marica). This project offered free collection points for refundable containers within businesses of downtown Montreal, and gradually expanded to rise to the cooperative, called *Les Valoristes*, in 2012. Very recently another initiative was created in Victoria, called the *Diverters Foundation*, reflecting the distinguished local name diverter for binner. All these projects draw the public attention to the social benefits associated with improved deposit-refund systems, among other benefits. We highly recommend that similar organizations be established in other cities and regions where informal recyclers are still largely unrecognized and stigmatized.

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