

Informal waste management in Lagos is big business: policies need to support the trade

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The megacity of Lagos has an estimated [population of 24 million](#). And it's constantly growing, putting additional strain on a city that already has serious challenges. They include heavy traffic congestion, flooding, air pollution and solid waste generation.



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The [waste economy](#) in Lagos is huge. It is well connected with the domestic formal economy and has also established links into trans-border trade with neighbouring and distant countries.

But [managing the city's solid waste](#) remains an intractable problem. While there have been some improvements, for example in solid waste policies, investment and management practices, these have mainly benefited the formal waste system.

The changes have led to public-private joint investments in the purchase of 650 waste [collection trucks](#) and in a [waste-to-compost facility](#) which cost over \$20m. Another is the [daily conversion](#) capacity of about 850 metric tonnes of organic waste to 250 bags of organic fertiliser.

What's missing amid these positive changes is a role for the informal waste economy. This is not new. The role of players in the informal economy has always been ignored.

In [our paper](#) we set out to examine the informal waste sector in Lagos. We found that it is behind a burgeoning trade in recyclable material in the region. [This includes](#) a large volume of trade in recyclable materials between Nigerian cities and those in Ghana, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. This points to a strong informal e-waste economy in the [sub-region](#) with Lagos playing a critical role as a [regional hub](#). The trade also connects traders in Lagos with [distant places](#) such as Asia and Europe.

Recycling is a [local environmental activity](#) but the [globalisation](#) of demand for secondary raw materials has tended to drive and sustain ubiquitous waste recovery and recycling systems in cities.

In [our paper](#) we argue that the waste sector in West Africa is linked to challenges of poverty and climate change. We go on to argue that reclaiming value from solid waste management can advance inclusive development that can improve people's lives in a range of ways, including [socially and ecologically](#). Research shows that reclaiming value from solid waste [can help people](#) who lack resources and opportunities.

We argue that [informal waste management](#) represents an aspect of the new green economy in which economic growth is pursued alongside ensuring ecological sustainability.

Even though the informal economy in Lagos plays a crucial role in the [economy of waste](#) in the sub-region, it is excluded from the megacity's [waste reform agenda](#). And those involved in the trade are never consulted.

We argue that this calls for a [rethinking](#) of Lagos's waste policy to recognise and integrate the informal economy.

The market place

In Lagos, the [informal waste economy](#) draws from two main waste sources – municipal waste and e-waste. An estimated 13,000 metric tonnes of municipal waste is generated every day. The [Lagos state waste management authority](#) disposes of about 7,000 tonnes of solid waste a day in the four landfill sites across the state. [Recent research](#) on e-waste in Lagos reports the generation of several tonnes of e-waste monthly.

Lagos-based waste management expert [Gbenga Adebola](#) estimates that about 50% of materials recovered from the municipal solid waste stream serve as raw materials in the form of paper, aluminium, plastic and metal for industries in Lagos and in Nigeria. He says the remaining 50% is exported to other African countries such as Ghana, Togo, Cameroon, Mali, Republic of Niger and Sudan for both industrial and personal uses.

For its part, the e-waste economy in Lagos is organised around [seven clusters](#). The clusters are Westminster market, Alaba market, Lawanson market, Ikeja Computer Village, Ojota scrap market, Solous Dumpsite and Olusosun dumpsite. They represent main sources of obsolete electrical and electronic products. Although there are also attempts at formal recycling such as LAWMA's Recycling Village and Recycling Banks which are reported to [convert](#) about 1,200 metric tonnes of waste, the focus of this study is on the informal economy and its role in waste management in Lagos and the sub-region.

The informal waste economy of Lagos [comprises](#) over 5,000 cart pushers and also cart builders, waste pickers, resource merchants and recyclers. Thousands of waste workers reclaim enormous value from waste. At the Olusosun disposal site over a thousand waste pickers operate on the site but only about 500 are registered with the waste pickers' [association](#).

The waste workers have organised themselves at work as is evident in the [hierarchical structures](#) they have created based on economic, material supply and power relations. The fact that structures have been created opens the door to policymakers being able to engage with those involved in the sector.

We conclude from our research that there is a need to scale up the performance of the waste economy. But this requires the city of Lagos to step in the areas of legislative and policy reform.

Call to action for more tangible outcomes

One effort to improve the lives and livelihoods of waste workers is the [Waste Collection Workers Welfare Initiative](#). The founder, Adegboyega Adepitan, aims to cater for the welfare of waste pickers. He enables waste pickers to have a group voice in the liberalisation of the sale of their products.

The initiative also represents an avenue for meaningful engagement of waste pickers in urban policy. Many of them have been [displaced](#) from their sources of livelihood following the ban on their activities at state landfills during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lagos [policy makers](#) should note the positive role that informal waste pickers play. And they should factor this into the formulation of policies. The informal economy is not an [impediment](#) to the prosperity of Lagos. Rather it represents a huge asset base that should be harnessed for further development and sustainable solid waste management.

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