Managing urbanisation and waste disposal in West Africa, Case study of Oblogo, Accra-Ghana

Article Feature

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The management of municipal solid waste worldwide is posing complicated challenges to city managers due to the high pressures of urbanization, dwindling land space for waste disposal and the emerging desire to conserve natural resources in spite of the numerous technological achievements gained.

For the first time in history, mankind is witnessing an unprecedented phenomenon in the development of places of habitat: the balance of human settlement patterns have shifted from more people inhabiting rural areas to more people living in cities. Whilst urbanization is not a new phenomenon in West Africa and Ghana for that matter, the current rate of uncontrolled and unplanned urbanization in the major cities and districts has given rise to huge amounts of liquid and solid wastes being generated, so much that, these wastes have long outstripped the capacity of city authorities to collect and dispose of them safely and efficiently.

This has resulted in an intensified search for safe and viable solutions for the effective and efficient management of both solid and liquid waste in urban areas encompassing planning and management systems, waste generation process and organising and most importantly, procedures and facilities for handling and disposing of waste.

For more than 20 years now, the management of local, commercial and industrial wastes in Ghana has been of serious concern to the Ghanaian society. Local Government Administrations and District Institutions and even foreign aid agencies have tried to assess the magnitude of the problem and to design appropriate strategies to alleviate the problem. However, despite promising steps, the proposals of various studies have not been followed in a way which could have finally led to a satisfactory handling of these wastes.

Ghana’s capital, Accra is a bustling area, with an estimated population of over 3,500,000 people as at 2005 and a floating population of around 300,000 generating nearly 1,500 tons of solid waste every day. The quantity of waste generated is increasing rapidly and may double by the next decade. The high population with its associated increase in urbanization and economic activities has made the impact of society’s waste very noticeable. The accumulation of uncollected refuse
and its subsequent systems of disposal remains the most obvious problem of waste management in Accra.

In spite of the strategies put in place for the collection of waste in Accra, all is not well for maximum waste collection. According to the Waste Management Department (WMD) of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA), only 45% to 55% of waste generated everyday is collected.

The seemingly unplanned nature of Accra has further heightened the current spontaneous management of solid waste. The AMA is faced with the problem of land acquisition for citing landfills and waste disposal sites in general. This is because residents often reject the sighting of such facilities: the ‘not in my back yard’ or ‘build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything attitude’. Furthermore, public approval is diminishing.

With the gradual exhaustion of previous landfilling/dumping sites at Mallam and Djanman, and the ever increasing generation of waste in the Accra metropolis, the AMA over the years desperately sought for the development of additional landfills to cater for the waste. These efforts finally led to the sighting of a landfill in the middle of a sprawling residential suburb, Oblogo in the late 2000 and recently, Kwabenya.

Urban planners/Development Managers are basically concerned with solving real life problems. Problems associated with utilities such as water, electricity and communication services are treated with a lot of importance so that society may have clean and adequate water, constant energy flow at homes and offices and constant communication for effective business. However, the problems associated with solid waste management have been marginalized.

Under the current Government’s Sanitation Policy (2002) regarding waste disposal/landfilling, authorities concerned are to ‘acquire sufficient land and secure title with payment of due compensation for the land for immediate and future use and protect such acquisition by proper demarcation, fencing etc’. The policy further states that, ‘any site acquired for waste disposal is to be located so as not to create safety hazards or aesthetic problems for the surrounding
communities”. However, it’s the exact opposite that the people of Oblogo and its immediate environs are faced with.

The AMA commenced disposal operations at Oblogo in 2000 after a lengthy tussle with the local traditional authorities which resolved upon the issuance of some development promises. The AMA promised to construct schools, tarred roads, hospitals, markets etc if the community allowed the sitting of the landfill in their community. But to date, none of these promises has been fully fulfilled. Oblogo was then a sprawling residential settlement. The landfill which is now an open dump was to provide disposal volume for some few months to years and was regarded as a temporal solution. This site became full within the spate of four and half years and the AMA then shifted to a new site located about 500 meters away. For the residents of Oblogo, there is the need to predict life threatening environmental degradation, because it’s part of their life. It must be reiterated that, both solid and liquid waste whether biodegradable or non biodegradable is deposited at the site.

*Plate 1 - The first abandoned landfill in Oblogo now turned into an open dump.*

In summarising the EPA’s view on the Oblogo, landfill, ‘assets such as land and houses around the dump sites have lost value as a result of the presence of the leachate odour, rodents and flies. It is not surprising therefore that the residents of the proposed new sanitary landfill site at Sampe near Oblogo are opposing the project with the fear of the same fortune befalling them*. 
In the construction of any landfill, particular attention must be given to groundwater, soil and air pollution through the control of leachate and gases. The landfills in Accra however have very poor engineering mechanisms and the fact that Oblogo is located within an earthquake zone is a sure recipe for disaster. The absence of an efficient integrated waste management plan has led to the current agitations by the residents of Oblogo and Mallam. The Daily Graphic of June 18, 2006 reports that“...the people of the community had for two weeks, refused to allow waste management contractors of the AMA to dump refuse at the dumping site, resulting in huge piles of garbage in many parts of the metropolis”.

The current waste management system in Accra and Ghana for that matter has not considered other solutions such as waste reduction and recycling strategies. Other effective and efficient alternatives of waste disposal including anaerobic digestion, composting, mechanical biological treatment, pyrolysis, incineration and gasification have also been ignored.

Plate 2 - Showing the flow of leachate through the community of Oblogo.

Countries such as Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, have all banned the disposal of untreated waste in landfills. Old landfills in these countries are used to generate electricity through the burning or flaring off the landfill gas using perforated pipes. Ironically, in spite of the exclusive reliance on landfills in Ghana, no attempts have been made to ensure its sustainability and efficiency. The AMA and other relevant stakeholders concerned are somewhat yet to come to
terms with this and are therefore resorting only to ‘hop-around’ methods. If the current hop around method of the AMA is to continue, there may be landfills/open dumps in every open space in Accra in the near future.

The impact that landfills on the environment as a method of waste disposal creates a necessity both to make these sites cleaner and to find alternatives. As a result, old laws must be reviewed so as to meet changing trends. In my view, traditional waste disposal methods such as landfill should only be established for those in industry and be made more environmentally friendly, while encouraging planning and development authorities to use cleaner methods of waste disposal such as composting and recycling for local residents.

I hope this feature will serve as a stimulus to critically assess the present disposal system and analyse the need to delineate a management framework that would be critical for the effective and efficient implementation for sustainable management of waste in Ghana and West Africa bearing in mind urban planning and urbanisation for that matter.

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