Livelihood Status of Itinerant Waste Buyers in Kathmandu

Ashish Khanal*

Masters in Environment Education and Sustainable Development, Kathmandu University, Lalitpur, Nepal
*Corresponding author: ashishkhanalk@yahoo.com

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Abstract The increasing population and urbanization have played major role in the increase of solid waste generation. As waste management is a complex task, there are various actors responsible for its proper management. Itinerant waste buyers (IWBs) purchase the dry recyclables from households and institutions. This study explored the livelihood status of IWBs working in Kathmandu, Nepal. I used ethnographic research design in doing this study. The discussion was done with IWBs working in Teku-Kalimati, Baudhha, Kalopool and Pepsi-cola areas. The study shows the involvement of people from the Terai region and neighbouring India working as the IWBs and their experiences regarding it. This paper has brought the livelihood status of IWBs, challenges faced and other alternatives works they might be interested in. Apart from this, this study has included the experiences and stories of the IWBs as the main information source to portray the livelihood status of the waste workers. Despite of their hard work and major role in making city clean, facing frequent misbehavior and humiliation, the roles of IWBs in their regular work have been neglected by the people. The obtained information has been discussed together with my personal experiences and field observation with supporting literatures.

Keywords: waste, scrap, IWBs, Kathmandu

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1. Introduction

The annual population growth rate of Nepal is 1.35 but the highest number of population resides in Kathmandu with an increase by 61.23 percent from 2001 as mentioned in the CBS report (2014) [1]. Nepal has one of the highest urban growth rates in South Asia [2]. The haphazard urbanization process is important to manage as it could bring different environmental, social or economic problems. Due to unplanned urbanization, it’s even difficult to fulfil the basic needs [3]. The waste management is a common problem in most of the developed and developing countries with poor collection, recycling, treatment and disposal techniques [4]. The result is wastes thrown nearby the road side or dumped along the river banks.

Waste management is a complex task and both public and private sectors have their responsibilities and have to play their role accordingly [5]. Municipality alone cannot handle the issues of SWM. There is tight municipal budget and fewer resources, which causes environmental, financial as well as social burden to the municipalities [6]. In scenario of Nepal, it is mainly seen that the major portion of solid waste management budget is expend in street sweeping of the valley.

Apart from municipalities which are formally responsible for waste management of the Nepal, there are informal sectors which have been working in this field. In municipal solid waste management (MSWM), the informal recycling sector refers to the activities which are carried out by scavengers and waste picker [7]. The informal sectors play the main role in SW recycling in low-income countries [8]. Scrap collection is undertaken by two groups, waste pickers and itinerant buyers [9]. Waste pickers collects dry wastes including paper, plastic, metal, glass etc from garbage bins, streets and dumps; Whereas, Itinerant buyers (IWBs) purchase specific scrap wastes (materials similar as waste pickers) from residential areas and commercial establishments.

Scrap wastes collected by IWBs are the segregated wastes which are sold to scrap centers (said Kabad in Nepal) which are further send for reusing and recycling facilities. In Nepal, IWBs are commonly called “Feriya” or “Kabadiwala”. Such activities are carried out by poor and marginalised social groups who resort to scavenging/waste picking for income generation and some even for everyday survival [10].

A baseline study conducted by Poverty Reduction of Informal Workers in Solid Waste (PRISM) project in 2012 recorded 8047 informal waste workers (IWWs) in Kathmandu valley. The study found that their roles and contributions aren’t recognized in the policy and they are harassed in many aspects. Thus, it’s important to know the livelihood status of IWBs of Nepal.
2. Relevant Literatures

Solid waste is the by-product of human activities which tends to increase with rapid urbanization, improved living standards and changing consumption patterns [11]. Kathmandu is also among the growing cities where the problem of solid waste has spiked in recent decades. I would like to relate this with Ferrari, Rimini & Gamberrini [12], who focused on urban solid waste management for minimizing potential negative impact on the environment as well as human health.

The common problems in Asian developing countries are: no separation at source, complicated collection processes, open dumped landfill, and no control of gas emissions and leachate in landfill [8]. As discussed by Babalola [13], for effective solid waste management, it is important to follow the waste management hierarchy.

The management of inorganic wastes is mainly handled by informal sector and by municipal system [6] in under developed and developing countries. Apart from that, there are large companies, microenterprises or small enterprises (MSEs) or community based organisations (CBOs) involved in this sector [14]. Either it may be developed, developing or under developed countries, the waste management is not easy job. There is huge monetary expenses and manpower requirement for removing garbage from city areas of residential, institutional and commercial locations [15]. Many developing and transitional country cities still have active informal sector and micro-enterprise recycling. I don’t experience the same situation of reuse and repair systems, driven entirely by the market value of the materials and discarded products [16] in Nepal.

2.1. Solid Waste Management Practices in Nepal

A SWM baseline survey conducted by Asian Development Bank (2012), found an average per capita household waste generation rate of 170 grams (g)/capita/day based on the average household solid wastes excluding that of institutional wastes. The analysis of household waste composition indicated that the highest waste category was organic waste with 66%, followed by plastics with 12%, and paper and paper products with 9%.

In Nepal, there are no provisions for handling hazardous wastes separately, and the country lacks worker protection system. Waste workers themselves are unaware and do not undertake protective measures [17]. Increasing waste generation created many problems including littering and dumping in and around outskirts of urban areas [18]. In this case, the private sector is helping the municipality in management of those solid wastes of Kathmandu valley.

The solid waste management practices in developing countries are not satisfactory. There is not currently an efficient system in place for the management, storage, collection, and transportation of solid waste. Kathmandu City, an important urban center of South Asia, is no exception [19]. The waste composition numbers suggest a greater potential for recovery of organic wastes via composting and there is an opportunity for recycling in Kathmandu valley [20]. Currently the system of waste collection isn’t in proper system. The government as well as private sectors has been collecting wastes of Kathmandu valley. Though the waste collecting organization helps in collecting the waste from households, the problem of waste management in Kathmandu hasn’t been solved yet [21]. After collection, the recyclables are sorted out manually and the remaining wastes are directly sent to the Sisdole landfill site located at Okharpauwa, Nuwakot.

2.2. Itinerant Waste Buyers (IWBs) in Nepal

Scrap collection is undertaken by two groups, waste pickers and itinerant waste buyers. The items purchased by itinerant buyers are of relatively better quality and market value than those collected by waste pickers [9]. The itinerant waste buyers mainly purchased the valuable items which can easily sold in the scrap markets like papers, plastics, metals, bottles etc. The daily earning is the only source of income of these people.

The people involved in the scrap collection work are from poor economic background. The income from such activities is a sort of survival strategy for a large number of poor people [22]. It shows that the earning of itinerant waste buyers varies according to the types of recyclables materials collected from the households. Itinerant waste buyers (IWBs) are the door-to-door waste collectors who are interested in buying specific type of recyclable waste [7]. These waste buyers collect waste from the household, business places and industries via door to door collection. IWBs sell the collected scrap wastes to dealers which is commonly called Kabaad in Nepal.

A participatory baseline study conducted by Poverty Reduction of Informal Workers in Solid Waste Management Sector (PRISM) project in 2012 [23] found nearly 90% of respondents reporting to have waste collection as their main source of household income and are contributing for livelihood enhancement. Around 48.2 % of the respondents expressed that they don’t like to continue the job while around a quarter (24.3%) respondents said that the same work can be continued by reducing the existing work load by 50%. It seems that half of the IWWs don’t like continuing their job, this is the main reason I choose the research topic regarding the IWBs. My third research question is based on the same theme. If the IWBs don’t like to continue this job, I was curious to know if there is any other alternative work they are seeking for their livelihood.

3. Materials and Methods

This research is qualitative in nature having interpretivism paradigm. This study was to explore the status of sustainable livelihood of IWBs, challenges faced during their work and alternatives livelihood strategies integrated by them. As an ethnographer I claim that I have collected detailed information from site observation, audio recording, photography and videography.

The study was conducted in different parts of Kathmandu including Teku-Kalimati, Kalopool, Boudha and Pepsicola where IWBs were more active and there
was easy availability of scrap centers. The respondents were identified by snowball sampling where IWBs suggested possible respondents and scrap centers in their area. I had opportunity to discuss about the theme with twenty two respondents including IWBs and stakeholders by which I was able to draw the social experience and the meaning [24].

The methods used in this study to gather information was interview, group discussions and observations in the study area. Interviews and discussions were also carried with the stakeholders. I used interview as the major tool of data collection. The research interview, one of the most important qualitative data collection methods, has been widely used in conducting field studies and ethnographic research [25]. The interview was taken with the Itinerant Waste Buyers (IWBs) of Teku-Kalimati, Chabahil-Boudha, Pepsicola areas of Kathmandu.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. IWB and Their Livelihood

I came to know that most of the IWBs are from Terai region of Nepal or neighbouring India having weak economic condition. Poverty is seen as the result of the interaction of economic, political and social processes in an unfavourable way to generate deprivation and reductions in people’s standard of living [26]. Majority of IWBs have weak economic condition showing a poor financial capital. Very few IWBs live with their family together in Kathmandu and rest send their regular income at their home town. The IWBs are more expressive when the matter is discussed in their local language as most of them hide their identity. People working as IWB’s get humiliated and mistreated in many ways. Though, the waste management and recycling are one of the most profitable business globally, the IWBs are still struggling alongside their families just to survive in Kathmandu.

4.2. Challenges faced by IWB

IWBs have to work very hard in order to earn little amount. Their earning is totally determined by the amount of hard work they put on it. Apart from that, the seasonal variation also affects their regular earning. The earning is comparatively lower in the rainy season. IWBs that are working for longer period of time want to continue their work whereas one that have recently entered in the system are not fully satisfied with this work. Apart from that IWBs have inferiority from their own co-workers as well. IWBs have to work very hard in order to earn little amount. Apart from that, the seasonal variation also affects their regular earning. The earning is comparatively lower in the rainy season. IWBs working for longer period of time want to continue their work whereas one that have recently entered in the system are not fully satisfied with this work. Apart from that IWBs have inferiority from their own co-workers as well.

4.3. Searching Alternative Work

It was found that most of the IWBs are in search for better options. IWBs that are working for longer period of time want to continue their work whereas one that have recently entered in the system are not fully satisfied with this work. The knowledge and skills that people gain from work enhances the capabilities of people, leading to their own welfare and society as well [28]. This is one of the important aspects of human capital of SLF which youngsters IWBs have been lacking causing less interest in this work. Apart from that IWBs have inferiority from their own co-workers. IWBs want to expand their business but couldn’t sustain due to informally bound in the chain.

5. Conclusion

It was found that IWBs are not socially accepted, are misbehaved and humiliated because of their language, colour and costumes. IWBs have to work very hard in order to earn little amount. Apart from that, the seasonal variation also affects their regular earning. The earning is comparatively lower in the rainy season. IWBs that are working for longer period of time want to continue their work whereas one that have recently entered in the system are not fully satisfied with this work. Apart from that IWBs have inferiority from their own co-workers as well.

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