



Waste management challenges in Freetown's informal settlements



Waste banking for potential land reclamation in a coastal community.

SLURC/FHS

Waste management has been a challenge in the Freetown municipality of Sierra Leone for a long time, underpinned by the limited capacity of institutions responsible for waste collection and depositing. These challenges come with a huge cost to human health. The situation is even worse for people living in informal settlements within and on the fringes on the city. The lack of a well-planned and regulated waste management system in the informal settlements is a key driver of indiscriminate waste dumping. Waste dumping by communities, mostly in waterways, drainages and under footbridges, are invariably linked to health challenges for informal communities and built-up settlements located alongside those communities.

This issue brief therefore provides an insight into the current state of waste management challenges in informal settlements. The Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) in partnership with Future Health Systems (FHS) recently completed a study in four informal settlements in Freetown to understand how living conditions in informal settlements relate to key health concerns of communities. The study also looked at whether socio-economic conditions of people living in informal settlements affect their access to health service provision. Two of the communities, Moyiba and Dwarzark are located on the hill side, while the two others, Cockle Bay and Portee-Rokupa are coastal communities.

Priority actions

- 1 Establish, or empower community led actions for managing wastes through community by-laws and restrictions against unlawful disposal of waste
- 2 Undertake government-led training of community members on innovative use of waste through recycling and composting as means of employment and reduction of waste piles
- 3 Increase awareness in communities about the current state of waste disposal and effects on health problems like malaria which relates to frequent mosquito breeding
- 4 Enhance collaboration between communities and waste management companies to ensure that waste generated within communities are collected promptly for depositing at dumpsites; this could include discussions around pricing and schedules for collection
- 5 Promotion of community planning to ensure sustainable land use for purposes like proper waste management

Key findings

- 1 The lack of waste depositing sites encourages disposal of rubbish in drainages and waterways, causing blockage of drains and intermittent flooding
- 2 Coastal communities deposit rubbish by the waterfronts for banking and reclaim land for construction of temporary zinc houses known as “panbody”
- 3 Waste disposal is characterized by burning and depositing in drainages especially by communities on the hillside which is often the cause of respiratory conditions like cough, cold etc
- 4 Waste collection services are constrained by poor road access, topography of communities and capacity to pay for service by some residents. In addition to road access, some residents cannot afford to pay collectors to clear up their rubbish, while others are just not willing to pay for the service
- 5 Communities associate poor waste disposal to frequent mosquito breeding, and the high incidence of malaria in households and neighborhoods

Capacity of communities to manage their own waste

The four study communities are similar in a number of ways, one of which is poor living conditions, underpinned by poor housing conditions, limited access to water and sanitation services. They also differ by their geographical locations (coast and on the hillside), but they all lack capacity to adequately manage their own waste. Due to the lack of designated spaces for depositing waste, people deposit their rubbish at almost every open space. Community by-laws against illegal waste dumping are in place but are not well enforced because waste dumping happens mostly at night and there is no one to apprehend those who default.

If community by-laws against illegal waste depositing are to be addressed, community leaders should consider monitoring open areas where unauthorized persons deposit their rubbish. Communities should mobilize their resources and efforts to ensure that they designate specific areas for depositing rubbish. This possibly would prevent people from depositing in open spaces and will also limit health risks like malaria which is particularly related to breeding of mosquitoes around decomposed rubbish in waterways and drainages.

Implications

Health problems influenced by poor waste management are well documented by a number of other studies within informal settlements¹ and in Freetown generally. The lack of capacity to manage waste at community level has wide ranging implications for health. This worsens the already hazardous conditions in which informal settlement dwellers live in. Poor environmental sanitation within informal settlements are not only likely to deepen the already existing health problems, but also has implications for productivity. Earnings in informal settlements are mainly from informal livelihoods, and so people with frequent health problems are highly likely to lose income for family living. The result of this is that families will be plunged into poverty especially because of the limited social protection for people living in extreme poverty.

There is a need therefore to view waste management from a broad lens of health, poverty and vulnerability. Such integrated approach would help communities understand the wider implications of their actions and take collective responsibility and for policy planners to target waste management with a pro-poor approach.

CREDITS

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¹ Sankon, FP et al (2013), Frazer-Williams (2015), Gogra et al (2010)