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Title: Building policy coherence in sustainable development: the regulatory environment governing waste in India



Waste figures subtly but persistently as a crosscutting theme in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While it appears most prominently in “good health and well-being,” “clean water and sanitation,” “sustainable cities and communities,” and “responsible production and consumption,” it is also implicated in the seemingly further removed goals of “no poverty” and “decent work and economic growth,” and “industry, innovation and infrastructure.” If the former set of goals is about mitigating the public health and environmental burdens posed by waste, then the latter signals the economic potential of waste management. “Policy coherence” provides a framework for implementing the underlying logic of SDGs—that the goals are interdependent and part of an indivisible whole. Yet, a precise understanding of how to achieve policy coherence remains distant. My study shows that reading these goals through the lens of waste can unmask the contradictions of sustainable development projects. In urban India, aspects of waste management services are provided by local governments, firms in the private sector contracted by local governments, and actors in the informal sector such as wastepickers who eke out a meager living while contributing crucially to the cities’ environmental and economic life by collecting and recycling waste materials. Yet, while some national-level policies have acknowledged the contributions of the informal sector by calling for their formal inclusion (e.g. Solid Waste Rules 2016), others such as the Swachh Bharat Mission are advocating for institutional (e.g. public-private partnerships) and technological (e.g. waste-to-energy) waste management solutions that threaten informal sector livelihoods. My study examines the regulatory environment—rules, policies and guidance issued by national, state and local governments—that governs waste and those who work with waste in contemporary urban India. Insights from this analysis open up possibilities for resolving conflicts between competing social, environmental and economic goals. In particular, I highlight the role that inter-sectoral alliances between civil society organizations have played and must continue to play as analysts and advocates of coherent policies. Beyond waste, the findings from this analysis will be useful for our search for institutional and policy coherence in sustainable development more broadly.