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Article

Public waste and private property. An enquiry into the economics of solid waste in Calcutta

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Abstract

Perceptions of solid waste management in India belong to a tradition of thought which dates back to the early nineteenth century. Solid waste is often thought of as a purely municipal problem. The paper examines how far informal systems of solid waste management are a response to a void in property rights. It analyses the variety of local operations in Calcutta, including the informal system. The assumptions that solid waste management is a public good that therefore needs to be municipalized and that in the absence of municipalization there would be greater costs are both questioned. It is hypothesized that there may be no measurable economies of scale in any part of the waste cycle. It may be more worthwhile to improve and expand the informal system of waste management than to collectivize further the traditional system of collection, transportation and disposal.

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