Exploring decency of work among solid waste workers in Accra, Ghana

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Abstract

The literature on waste work often focuses on occupational health and safety issues with little attention paid to other dimensions of work such as nature of employment, remuneration, social security, workers' rights and social dialogue. This paper explores the decency of work in the waste sector in Accra, using the ILO's decent work agenda. A qualitative design was employed in which 22 participants were purposely selected for in-depth interviews. They included 2 waste management officials of Accra Metropolitan Assembly, 4 waste collection contractors, 9 leaders of informal waste worker groups, 2 trade union leaders and 5 waste workers. Three focus group discussions were held with female waste workers.

Keywords:

waste workers, decent work, informal waste workers, Accra, solid waste

We observed deficits on many fronts of the decent work agenda in the solid waste sector. Employment forms were casual in nature and insecure. Organisational consciousness to drive efforts at protecting workplace rights appeared weak among formal waste workers but remained high for informal waste workers. While private waste workers faced hostilities from their employers to unionise, the informal waste workers were self-organising to address work-related challenges. Waste workers' access to social protection was almost non-existent. The general decent work deficit in the sector calls for social partners, particularly the trades unions, to extend coverage to private and public waste pickers to help address the various facets of the decent work deficits facing them.

Introduction

Work plays an important role in people's lives. It provides a source of income for meeting basic needs and plays a critical role in building self-esteem, by making individuals feel useful, productive and treasured (Gorny, 2018). Work is also associated with health and wellness. The kind of work people take up affects the kinds of health hazards that they are exposed to (Rios & Nery, 2015). The level of well-being and health is contingent upon favourable working conditions. Rinehart (2004: 1) defines working and employment conditions as comprising "issues of occupational safety and health, maternity protection, work-family issues, homework, working time, wages and income, work organization, sexual harassment, violence at work, workload, worker's welfare facilities, housing, nutrition and environment of workers."

One sector where working conditions, in particular occupational health and safety issues, are topical is the waste sector. Waste workers contribute significantly to waste management by collecting, sorting, trading and sometimes even processing waste materials and disposing of unwanted waste. Through such tasks, they contribute to maintaining a healthy environment by recovering up to 20 percent of municipal wastes in a self-financing system and enhance resource efficiency (Gunsilius, 2010). Studies on waste management have largely focused on health and environmental outcomes (Ayee & Crook, 2003, Jerie, 2016; Gutberlet & Uddin, 2017). In Ghana, several studies have explored the health impact of unregulated waste management, with a number

concentrating on electronic waste (Amankwaa, Tsikudo & Bowman, 2017; Agyei-Mensah & Oteng-Ababio, 2012; Caravanos, Clark, Fuller & Lambertson, 2011; Bridgen, Labunska, Santillo & Johnston, 2008). Others have looked at the general challenge of waste management, highlighting the lack of a coordinated approach in the sector (Oteng-Ababio, 2014).

Such studies engaged only a dimension (*i.e.* Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) of waste work and remain silent on other dimensions of work. Pereira et al. (2019) observed a high volume of studies on decent work in advanced countries, with a dearth of empirical research on the subject in developing countries. Following from this, we employed the decent work framework in our analysis for its ability to provide a succinct and unified structure for analysing the major components of work (Ghai, 2002 & 2005). In the view of Pereira, Dos Santos & Pais (2019:2) "researching, each dimension per se is insufficient to take stock of labour because the interactions among the several dimensions will be missed and an accurate portrayal will be far from possible" (p. 2). Hitherto, the various elements of work - employment, remuneration, working conditions, social security, workers' rights, participation and collective bargaining - tended to be analysed in a self-contained manner (Ghai, 2002 & 2005).

The decent work framework in some quarters is regarded as aspirations for achieving a better life for millions of workers but these desires may deviate in many ways in the real world of work (Ghai, 2005). To many workers either in the formal or in the informal economy, their reality of work is survival rather than *decent* work. The major criticism against the decent work model is that it is fashioned on the traditional standard employment, social security and social dialogue analogous to modern advanced societies and, therefore, least applicable to developing economies and non-standard jobs. However, Ghai (2005) maintains that the concept lends itself more easily to diverse work situations and at the same time offers a universal appeal to the analysis of work. In this paper, we explored the decency of work among waste workers in Accra.

Literature Review: Dimensions of Decent Work

The notion of the International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s decent work agenda is founded on four pillars: nature of employment, social security or social protection, rights at work and social dialogue[1]. The primary goal of the decent work agenda, as it was contained in his 1999 Report to the International Labour Conference by the ILO Director-General (Juan Somavía), is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity (ILO, 1999). According to Ghai (2005), for work to qualify as decent, it must satisfy certain conditions. There should be adequate employment opportunities for all those who seek work. Work should yield a remuneration (in cash or kind) that meets

1 ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization adopted by the International Labour Conference at its Ninety-seventh Session, Geneva, 10 June 2008

the essential needs of the worker. Work should be freely chosen, and there should be no discrimination against any category of workers such as women, migrants and minorities. Workers should be protected against accidents, unhealthy and dangerous working conditions, and excessively long hours of work. These are considered sources of dignity, satisfaction and fulfilment to workers and underlay the four pillars of the decent work agenda.

The employment dimension of the decent framework emphasizes quality jobs that provide adequate remuneration to cover basic social needs of workers. It embraces all forms of work including full-time, part-time and casual work and work done by women, men and children. The rights at work dimension are about the rights of workers to negotiate with employers and authorities on matters affecting their work. These basic workers' rights include freedom of association, non-discrimination and the absence of forced labour (Frey & MacNaughton, 2016; Pereira et al.2019).

The social security dimension encapsulates safeguard against loss of income and the provision of adequate income and protection in situations of ill-health, retirement and other contingencies. Social protection and its manifold schemes such as social assistance, social insurance and labour market intervention come under the rubric of social security.

The dimension of social dialogue, which emphasises the collective organisation of workers for interest representation, has engaged the attention of a number of authors over the past decades for several reasons (Britwum, 2013; Brown & Lyons, 2010; Lindell, 2010; Boampong, 2010). Social dialogue:

> …requires participation and freedom of association and is therefore an end in itself. It is also a means of ensuring conflict resolution, social equity…it is the means by which rights are defended, employment promoted and work secured (ILO, 1999, cited in Ghai, 2002:2).

Unionisation provides voice and representation to workers and the means for them to defend their interests, to articulate their concerns and to engage in negotiations with other actors on issues that bear on their work. It serves to empower workers and enhance their bargaining power. Trade unions have traditionally pushed the principles and forms of organisation that have continued to influence work and working conditions. The heterogeneity of work and the associated complexity of interests, especially in the informal economy, however, make it difficult to apply the traditional and formal union structures to the organisation of informal workers. The way informal workers organize may be different from formal workers because much of informal work is non-waged and the immediate purposes of organization may vary. Carré (2013) showed that informal worker organizations could be in the form of a union, membership-based organization and cooperative with organizational motives ranging from collective bargaining to mutual self-help and collective economic action.

The four dimensions of decent work, according to Pereira et al. (2019), translate into four strategic objectives. These are the promotion of standards and rights at work and the protection of these rights within the existing laws, the promotion of employment creation and income opportunities that emphasise quality jobs, access to social protection schemes to minimize poverty and the promotion of social dialogue. These dimensions are regarded as aspirations that countries should strive to achieve. There is, however, a gap between the decent work aspirations as espoused by the ILO and the real world of work. According to Pereira et al. 2019), workers in reality do not benefit from the conditions of a decent work framework as propounded by the ILO.

There is the general tendency to question the universal applicability of decent work framework because it was modelled based on formal employer-employee standards of advanced industrialised nations (Ghai, 2002). However, Ghai (2002; 2005) argues that the objectives of the decent work framework remain universal while the content may vary according to local and national specificities. He maintains that all workers regardless of the sector they find themselves desire for wages sufficient to meet their basic needs, they wish to work in safe environment, and they seek the right to form associations to protect and promote their interest.

In developing countries, the majority of workers are found in non-standard jobs. The ILO (2002) estimates that about 80% of non-agricultural workers are in the informal sector and therefore, admits the inadequacy of applying the decent work agenda to informal work. The ILO (2002:4) rather suggests that "the most meaningful way of looking at the situation of those in the informal economy is in terms of decent work deficits" (p.4). The ILO (2002:4) rather suggests that "the most meaningful way of looking at the situation of those in the informal economy is in terms of decent work deficits"

> …expressed in the absence of sufficient employment opportunities, inadequate social protection, the denial of rights at work and shortcomings in social dialogue. It is a measure of the gap between the world that we work in and the hopes that people have for a better life. [2]

The absence of quality employment opportunities, inadequate social security protection, the denial of rights at work and weak social dialogue mechanisms for voice and representation amount to a decent work deficit (ILO, 2001). On the front of employment, this manifests in low quality jobs, low and insecure incomes to enable workers meet basic needs. It is also about the absence of written employment contracts and the existence of casual and temporary jobs that are highly insecure. Right to work deficits are basically about the denial of freedom of association and the incidence of

2 See the Report of the Director-General to the 89th Session, 'Reducing the decent work Deficit – a Global Challenge.' June 2001.

discrimination at the world of work (ILO, 2001). Representational gaps in the world of work results from non-existence or weak avenues for workers to voice their grievances (ILO, 2001). While formal waste workers may face hostilities from employers to form unions for the purpose of collective bargaining (Britwum, Boampong, Akorsu & Tachie, 2019), informal economy workers may possess weak representative organisations to help them articulate their work-related concerns for support (Boampong and Tachie, 2017). Access to social protection schemes by informal economy workers remains limited. The very nature of their characteristics as low and irregular income earners makes it difficult for them to subscribe to contributory schemes. In Ghana, findings from a survey on informal economy workers shows that only one third of employers made the mandatory social security contributions for their employees (Anuwa-Amarh, 2015). The decent work framework forms the basis of our analysis of waste work in Accra. The paper is organised into the following sections. The literature on decent work framework and the methodology section follow the introduction. Next is a brief description of key actors in the solid waste management system in Accra followed by the presentation of results and conclusion.

Methodology

The study employed qualitative design the goal of which was to gain in-depth understanding of the decency of waste work from the perspectives and experiences of the research participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Twenty-two participants were purposely selected from the waste management sector for interviews; this sampling procedure is consistent with the qualitative design since it emphasizes depth of the experiences of the participants who are knowledgeable about the sector of choice. The interviewees were made up of 2 AMA officials, 4 waste collection contractors, 9 leaders of informal waste worker groups, 2 trade union leaders and 5 waste workers. The research team organised 3 focus group discussions with women sweepers of AMA. Information was sought on the nature of jobs that are generated in the waste management sector, the nature of contracts between private companies, waste workers, labour standards, voice and representation. The data were collected in August, 2014 within the jurisdictional boundaries of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA). The total population of AMA according to the Ghana Population and Housing census of 2010 is about 1.7million representing 42% of the region's total population. It is one of the most urbanised geographical enclaves in Ghana. The AMA jurisdiction was chosen for the study because over the years waste workers, particularly informal waste workers, have played significant roles in solid waste management (Gugssa, 2012), yet their conditions of work have received little attention in the literature.

Actors in Accra's solid waste management system

In describing the AMA's waste management system, we are guided by the institutional location of various actors deriving from the level of recognition accorded. At the apex of the system is the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD), which is responsible for the coordination and formulation of environmental sanitation policies. Next in the institutional hierarchy is the AMA, which is in charge of general management of waste in the metropolis. The AMA is a decentralised statutory body established under the Local Government Act (Act 462) to inter alia regulate waste management services in Accra through its Waste Management Department. Its functions involve engaging service providers and setting the rules for waste collection. Next in line are the accredited private companies contracted by the AMA to collect, manage and dispose of waste. These companies are organised under the umbrella body, the Environmental Service Providers Association (ESPA). This sector-based organisation has a membership comprising predominantly large-scale private waste contractors.

The informal operators, the group of waste collectors who use motorised trucks or tricycles called the *borla-taxi,* come after the private companies. The *borla-taxi* group provides direct waste collection services to clients in low- and middle-income communities for a fee. They have carved a niche for themselves in the low-income and slum areas in Accra by offering house-to-house waste collection and disposal services. The *taxis* are motorised three-wheeled vehicles, also called *Motor Kings*. Owner-drivers of *borla-taxi*, as the name suggests, are drivers who own and operate the capital waste equipment and are therefore self-employed; they may work alone or have hired assistants. Worker-drivers are engaged on a 'work and pay' arrangement. This is a form of hire-purchase with vehicle owners. The driver-operator pays a fixed sum on a regular basis – daily, weekly or monthly, depending on the terms of the arrangement – over a period to defray the cost of the vehicle. Once the cost of the vehicle has been paid off, the operator becomes an owner-driver and is no longer obliged to render account to the original owner. There are also the worker-drivers who rent *borla-taxi* on daily fixed rates and finally janitors who work as apprentices to the borla-taxi operators.

At the base of the waste management system include municipal street sweepers, kaya-borla, waste pickers at landfill sites, caretakers of communal skip containers and scrap dealers. The location of the actors along the waste management chain has implications for how much value, for instance, waste workers can appropriate. While this is outside the scope of this paper, we are particularly interested in the decency of work of those who depend largely on their labour for survival in the waste management system.

Results and Discussion

In discussing the results of the study, we undertake first to categorise the work forms in the sector. In terms of the economic sector, waste workers covered in the study can be divided into two main groups: formal and informal economy-based workers. The formal waste workers, when distinguished by their employers' market position, can be further subdivided into public or private formal waste workers. The private employers are the waste contractors and the public employer is the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA). The informal waste collectors include self-employed waste collectors and their waged workers. The formal sector workforce is either permanent or casual, made up of skilled professional and unskilled manual workers. Skilled professional workers include Environmental Health Officers, Financial Administrators, Data Processors, and Chemical Engineers. Casual workers are made up of waste collectors and sanitation workers such as cleaners and sweepers.

Employment status and security of work

The factors which inform employment security for the various categories of workers outlined include employment status and nature of employment. These produce various degrees of security or lack thereof, with the ensuing levels of precarity. White collar workers had better employment security and nearly all, with the exception of revenue collectors, were in permanent employment. Blue collar workers were more likely to be temporary workers. A number were engaged as casual labour though they had been employed for a number of years. The levels of employment security were dependent on the employer. The formal sector-based temporary workers, working for the public entity, the AMA, were paid through the internally generated funds (IGF) of the assembly, a severely constrained purse. Such workers had no appointment letters. The informal economy-based workers, ranged from the self-employed with or without workers, and contract partners. They include the scrap dealers and their contract workers, who work for a commission as well as the *borla-taxi* operators and their employees. The next section explores the working conditions associated with the various work forms and their employment statuses.

Employment process of formal private waste workers

The interviews revealed differences in the recruitment processes for formal private waste workers. Two out of the four waste contractors reported employing their waste workers through formal processes of employment. The technical personnel like drivers and mechanics of private companies were more likely to have employment based on contract with access to various social security benefits like pensions and health insurance. The other two contractors did not have employment contracts with their waste workers; their workers were mainly temporary workers – a situation they sought to justify in several ways.

The first explanation had to do with their level of literacy and the high worker turnover in the sector. One contractor explained how he recruited workers:

> The people I work with cannot write letters for employment. They all walked in and jobs were offered. If you ask him to go and write a letter and submit, he will go and never come back. Everything is oral. Even sometimes, the workers on the truck recruit the people and recommend them to me that they are hardworking and so I should employ them.

The narration below by another contractor appears to suggest that the fluid nature of the waste employment accounts for casualization of the workforce*:*

> We do not have a formula or requirement for taking waste workers. Somebody comes in today and tomorrow he is no longer with the company. Some can even come to work this morning, go to the field and not return. So the recruitment thing in this business is not formal. It is very casual. You cannot say you have a permanent staff of 50 or more because you can work with a certain number and by the time the month ends the number has reduced meaning that you have to go out there and look for staff.

For this contractor, the employment in the sector is like a revolving door and as and when workers leave, they get replaced. This suggests a high turnover of workers. Based on this field data, it can be maintained that most waste collectors working for private waste contractors are in insecure employment. They work on a temporary basis, have no leave, and have no entitlement to social security benefits.

Working Hours

Working hours also vary depending on the employer in question. Some workers start work as early as 6:30 am and close at 6:00 pm and work seven days a week with no shift system. Some also work for either five or six days. Others determine their own working hours and length of time they work and therefore enjoy some flexibility.

Wages

All the waste contractors reported paying fixed monthly wages to the janitors ranging from US$63 to US$113. The lower end of this salary is just barely above the national monthly minimum wage of US$4 (daily). Even the higher range is inadequate considering the high cost of living in Accra. To some extent, these contractors are limited in what they

can pay the waste workers because the fee for household waste collection services is fixed by the assembly and not the waste contractors. Apart from their salaries, the workers have no additional entitlements or incentives. One exception is a contractor who pays his workers some bonuses in addition to the wages which he said may even be higher than the actual wages. The monthly wages of public sector waste workers, including female sweepers, however, were lower. Their earnings ranged from US$25 to US$63.

An additional dimension was occupational sex segregation and employment security. Women had fewer employment options in the sector and were more likely to be in areas of high employment insecurity, like street sweeping. The nature of employment available to women was characterised by lower wages especially sweepers engaged by AMA on its Internally Generated Fund. Women workers of AMA were aware of the low wages as workers of the assembly. But for them the power of the pay slip was something that allowed them to compensate for low wages as this enabled them to access credit from banks and other micro-finance institutions. This allowed them to raise capital for additional income earning activities like trading.

Employment relations of informal waste workers

There are three levels of working relations with regard to the borla-taxi workers. There are the owner-drivers, driver-operators working on hire purchase arrangements and the worker-drivers who pay a daily set fee to the owner of the vehicle. In the first arrangement, the owner-driver earns two incomes: from vehicle ownership and from daily earnings. In the second arrangement, the driver-owner because, his vehicle is on hire purchase, pays almost all the daily earnings to the owners in order to defray cost of the vehicle. This arrangement allows drivers to own vehicles making the duration of hire purchase an opportunity cost with most prepared to work at high payment rates in order to settle the cost in the shortest possible time. As a result, most driver-operators claimed they paid almost all their daily earnings to the vehicle owner leaving them with little to live on. All the three categories of borla-taxi operators have similar working conditions apart from differences in earnings described below.

Earnings

Informal waste workers' earnings were determined on the amount of service they were able to render in a day. Earning capacity was determined by the kind of capital equipment used as well as the nature of arrangements surrounding access to a particular equipment. Worker drivers paid daily fixed rates to their vehicle owners. The sum ranged from US$13 – US$20 for the low capacity tricycles and US$20 – US$33 for the high capacity tricycles. Any earnings in excess of the daily rates served as income earned. Generally, interviewees

indicated that their earnings ranged from US$13 to US$16 after other running costs like rental charges, fuel and meals had been taken care of. The daily earnings by these informal waste collectors were about three times the daily minimum wage (US$4) at the time of the data collection in Ghana.

The earnings of informal waste workers tend in some cases to be better than the formal waste workers. This, however, does not suggest better working conditions. Informal waste workers face a major problem. They do not have any area allocated to them by the metropolitan assembly. They only work with households in the areas the private contractors' vehicles cannot access. Therefore, if the private contractors decide to buy smaller vehicles to reach these areas they may be out of job. There are cases where the private contractors have confiscated the vehicles of the informal waste collectors working in their jurisdiction with the excuse that they have been collecting in unauthorised areas.

Access to social security

The work forms arising out of the various types of employment status identified presented diverse levels of precariousness, raising issues of decency of work as outlined in the ILO decent work agenda (ILO, 1999; Ghai, 2005). For most workers in this sector, there are huge deficits revolving around employment and social security. Most waged workers operated as casual labourers and had no access to pensions and health insurance. Formal sector white collar employees had a higher measure of employment security than their blue colour counterparts with higher incomes and benefits like pensions, health insurance and risk allowance. Written contracts were rare, and incomes earned at the end of the month even for workers of the public entity AMA, fell below the national minimum wage. In fact, even those with employment contracts had cause to complain. According to a woman sweeper, she had been employed without a contract since 1998. When she finally got her contract, it was made effective from 2006, meaning she had lost claim to all deductions since.

Social dialogue dimension in the waste management sector

We set out to explore evidence of collective action and voice, issues informing such actions, workers' organisational power sources and sustainability of their organisational forms. Also explored are the attitude of the various players to the organisational efforts of waste workers and how this supports or undermines workers power to secure their interests through organising.

Ghana's Labour Act, Act 651 of 2003 requires all employers to respect and uphold workers' rights to organise and represent in workplace decision making as well as to bargain

collectively. Its enforcement, however, lies with workers and their representative organs, trade unions. Trade unions who have encountered significant losses in membership have shown interest in expanding membership to previously unorganised and offer protection to those who fall within their established jurisdiction (Britwum, 2011). The severe decent work deficit we outlined in the previous section can be addressed by the workers themselves through organising. Reported incidents of organising in the traditional sense using trade unions were low. None of the private companies had trade unions operating in their workplaces. In fact, all the formal private operators covered in the study expressed outright hostility to trade unions, seeing them as a nuisance, irrelevant and dangerous. There was also the case of private contractors who had doubts about the capacity of workers to make independent and constructive decisions for the corporate good. The private contractor, Asadu Royal, believed that unions could be treacherous in the hands of waste workers. For this contractor:

> ...it depends on what the union is for, when workers become strong it is dangerous for the company and the moment one will wake up with a bad decision then the others will join. I don't believe in unions; can you imagine what happened last month when they were protesting for being sanctioned for cheating; can you imagine the consequence if they had a strong union? I cannot sanction them for cheating. I will only allow unions to operate on some conditions and will have to monitor them.

Unions were absent in the private sector among temporary workers. Hostilities to unions were also reported by trade union officers. Successful efforts at collective organizing were welfare directed. These comprised workers making monthly contributions into a fund. Contributing members were entitled to fixed amounts when they suffered bereavement, hospitalisation or got married. Focus group discussions among women sweepers of AMA revealed higher levels of awareness for such forms of organisation. The workers appeared more interested in welfare gains like payments for hospitalisation and bereavement.

Low unionisation was not only the result of private enterprise employer hostility, but it was also due to the attitude of the leader of the main union, Local Government Workers' Union (LGWU), which felt that the low wages of workers in the sector did not merit the investment in their unionisation. Even though they were members of LGWU, the union considered the gains from waste worker members' subscriptions unattractive. They had rather set their eyes on senior members who had higher wages and therefore stood to bring more income to the unions.

The lack of union consciousness and distance between union and members came up clearly during the FGDs with women sweepers of AMA. They were aware of welfare deductions but ignorant of monthly deductions from their salaries as union dues.

In fact, they had earlier said they belonged to no union and described how efforts to organise had fallen through in some cases leading to the dismissal of some members. An examination of pay slips revealed that they were being deducted union dues for being members of LGWU. They had no contact with union leaders, whether local, branch, district or national. Both the Gender Desk officer and the General Secretary admitted that a gap existed between LGWU and its members. They however cited the absence of national structures to receive concerns from the shop floor as the cause for this large gap between union and members. But it looks like the problem was one of leadership inertia (Boampong and Tachie, 2017) and disdain for low-income workers of the sector (Britwum et al. 2019).

Union utility and workers' organisational consciousness

A major asset of workers' organising is their level of union consciousness and the notion that unions serve a purpose. We have reported low levels of unionisation among waste workers of AMA. There appears some link between employment security and propensity to organise among waged workers. Few casual workers had union coverage. By dint of closed shop policy workers in this sector fall within the operational jurisdiction of the LGWU, a fact that had produced some complacency on the part of union leadership to seriously pursue organising workers. This closed shop also was being exploited on the part of the Civil and Local Government Staff Association of Ghana (CLOSAG), which had not directly engaged workers.

Within formal waged workers there were few moments of protests cited: one among workers of the private contractor, Asadu Royal; and the other among AMA workers. Protests by workers of Asadu Royal were over poor wages, wage deductions, and cheating. Protests by AMA workers were over arrears in payments. But all these fell through and did not, according to management's account, lead to the realisation of the demands of workers.

We explored independent attempts by workers at collective engagement over their conditions of work through evidence of protest. Within the informal economy, informal waste workers organizing into membership-based organizations (MBOs) were evident and motivating factors centred on their operational needs and regulation of their operations (Carré, 2013). This is also consistent with the observation by Britwum (2010 and 2011) that for informal workers, survival is of much importance and, therefore, organisation tends to revolve around creating confidence with their clients. Amongst the MBOs of the informal waste workers that we encountered, the most organised was the Kaneshie-Amaalataba. Their executive, during our interview sessions, explained that the issues that engaged members at meetings were access to equipment, dump site and areas of operation. Debt repayment was a challenge identified by the scrap dealers' group at Agbogbloshie. The Vice-Chairperson of the association explained:

> *When members try to outsmart or default in paying their debts to other members, the association comes in to resolve the problem. In instances where the association cannot handle the situation, it is transferred to the police. However, the police is the last resort. For instance, when debtors default the association asks them to pay back the debts and they still refuse…. we have no other choice than to report them to the police. The sanctions of the association include banning defaulters from coming to the scrap yard, suspension for a minimum of three months.*

Beyond group concern for credibility to safeguard their livelihoods, the informal operators relied on what we identify as their political capital to secure their needs. Thus, for the mainly ethnic based metal scrap dealers it was their connection to the Minister of Youth and Sports. This connection beyond gaining them access to the land on which to operate, also facilitated access to a lawyer to assist the association draft a constitution to meet the requirements for a certificate from the Registrar General's Department (see also Boampong and Tachie, 2017). Other reasons motivating informal workers to organise were the right to their own operational areas to manage waste, and access to vehicles for carting waste. Some associations also regulated entry by registering all motorised tricycles and bicycles used to cart waste. For informal workers the security of their employment accounted for the urge to organise. These informal membership-based associations are in the early stages of their formation and therefore lack organisational capacity and internal democratic practices for interest protection.

The formal private waste workers, except the white colour workers, had no employment contracts, engaged in casual jobs, worked long hours and earned poor wages that could barely meet their basic needs. Similarly, the public formal waste workers, mostly women sweepers, had fewer employment options, and occupied insecure jobs on the waste management chain with low wages. These defy the adequacy of remuneration, secure contract and absence of casual work as prescribed by the ILO's decent work framework. The only decent work gain by the women sweepers was incidental to their ability to secure bank credit using their payslips. The informal self-employed waste pickers (*i.e., borla-taxi workers*) earned incomes three times higher than the national minimum wage.

Most of the private waste pickers lacked the freedom to unionise and those who attempted to do so faced hostilities from their employers. The informal waste workers had challenges with the right of access to waste materials in certain jurisdictions that have been franchised to private waste contractors. Waste workers' access to social security or protection was almost non-existent.

Organisational consciousness to drive efforts at protecting workplace rights appeared weak among formal waste workers but remained high for informal waste workers. Workers' protests were rare among both public and private waste workers. Where public and private waste workers were collectively organised, it was welfare-directed to provide

support to members in times of contingencies such as death of a member's relative. For the informal waste workers, security of employment accounted for the urge to organise. Common among the informal waste pickers is the formation of membership-based organisations which were directed at meeting operational challenges such as access to collection sites and to self-regulate to ensure members do not engage in criminal activities.

Conclusion

This paper shifted from the often singular focus on occupational health and safety issues pervasive in the waste sector to a comprehensive examination of decency of work within the sector. We argue that a waste sector workforce that benefits from the dimensions of the decent work agenda is important for effective waste management. In this regard, this paper aligns with the United Nations (UN) sustainable development goal 8, which emphasizes decent work for all by 2030. The paper observes that there are pronounced decent work deficits in all the four dimensions of the decent work framework outlined by the ILO with rare instances of decent work gains among waste workers in Accra.

The decency of waste work in Accra should be understood in terms of its local specificities (Ghai, 2002 & 2005). The decent work deficits we identified, straddle the formal and informal continuum of waste workers: the deficits are neither limited to informal nor the formal spheres. The blue colour waste workers in the formal sphere experience pronounced decent work deficits comprising low wages, absence of employment contracts, long hours of work, low organisational consciousness and lack of freedom to unionize. The informal waste workers had relatively better earnings and have been able to constitute themselves into membership-based organisations for interest protection. These contradict the often held notion that formal workers tend to experience better decent work conditions than informal workers (ILO, 2002).

In as much as a comprehensive approach is required to address the decent work deficits in the waste sector,a stronger worker organisation (strong worker voice and representation) is singled out as pivotal to addressing employment insecurity, lack of work rights and lack of entitlement to social security (Webster, Britwum & Bhowmik 2017; Britwum et al. 2019). We, however, do not recommend an overarching and a singular organisational form for addressing the decent work deficits facing the various categories of waste workers in both the formal and informal realms. We concur with the view that diversity of work forms calls for diverse forms of organisation and a kind of social dialogue that accommodates the multiplicity of work forms and workers' interests (Ghai, 2005). All over the world, new forms of organization have emerged to cater to the specific interests of workers (see Lindell, 2010; Britwum, 2013; Boampong, 2010, Webster et al. 2017).

We recommend that social partners such as civil society organisations help to promote and strengthen internal structures of membership-based organisations as one possible pathway to helping to amplify the voices of informal waste workers for interest protection. Genuine extension of union coverage to the formal waste sector appears a plausible organisational strategy to protect the interests of private and public waste pickers.

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