



COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT APPROACHES IN SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT: A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Solid waste management has become one of the most pressing environmental and social challenges in Sri Lanka due to rapid urbanization, increased consumption, and limited infrastructure. This paper explores how community empowerment can strengthen sustainable waste management through a social work perspective. Adopting a desk-based qualitative research approach, the study synthesizes secondary data from national policy documents, research studies, and development reports. The analysis integrates Empowerment Theory, Systems Theory, and Environmental Social Work to examine how communities can be mobilized to participate effectively in waste management initiatives. Findings highlight that while national policies acknowledge community participation, implementation remains weak due to limited awareness, institutional fragmentation, and inadequate collaboration among stakeholders. Social work, through its participatory and empowerment-based practice, can play a vital role in building community capacity, promoting environmental awareness, and advocating for inclusive policies. Strengthening the interface between social work and environmental management is essential for achieving sustainable waste management and advancing social and ecological justice in Sri Lanka.

KEYWORDS: *Community empowerment, waste management, social work, environmental social work, Sri Lanka, sustainability, participation.*

1. Introduction

Solid waste management has emerged as a critical issue in Sri Lanka, with escalating environmental and public health implications. Rapid urbanization, population growth, and changes in consumption patterns have led to the accumulation of waste beyond the capacity of local authorities. According to the Central Environmental Authority (CEA, 2021), municipal solid waste generation in Sri Lanka has risen sharply, posing challenges to collection, recycling, and disposal. The National Policy on Solid Waste Management emphasizes community participation and sustainable approaches, yet in practice, public involvement remains minimal.

Community empowerment is increasingly recognized as a pathway to sustainable waste management. Empowered communities can mobilize resources, adopt environmentally responsible behaviors, and hold institutions accountable. Social work, with its focus on empowerment, participation, and social justice, provides a unique framework for understanding and addressing environmental issues. This paper explores how empowerment-based approaches can enhance community engagement in waste management through the lens of social work practice in Sri Lanka.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a desk-based qualitative research design, relying on secondary data from government policies, evaluation reports, and peer-reviewed publications. Sources include documents from the Central Environmental Authority, UNDP, World Bank, and academic studies related to waste management and community empowerment. Data were analyzed thematically, focusing on how empowerment concepts and social work principles are integrated within community-based waste management initiatives. The approach provides a conceptual understanding of existing practices and gaps within Sri Lanka's policy and community frameworks.

3. Theoretical Framework

The research draws upon Empowerment Theory, Systems Theory, and Environmental (Eco) Social Work as its conceptual foundation. Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995) underscores the process of enabling individuals and communities to gain control over the factors influencing their lives. In the context of waste management, empowerment involves enhancing community capacity to make informed decisions about waste segregation, recycling, and local policy advocacy.

Systems Theory (Payne, 2020) views society as an interrelated set of subsystems—individual, organizational, and ecological. Waste management requires collaboration among various actors, including local authorities, private contractors, and residents. Social workers can act as facilitators to bridge these systems and ensure that communication, responsibility, and accountability are shared across all levels.

Environmental or Eco-Social Work (Dominelli, 2012) expands the boundaries of social work practice by integrating ecological sustainability with social justice. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and environmental well-being and calls for professionals to advocate for environmental protection, especially for vulnerable groups disproportionately affected by waste mismanagement. These theoretical perspectives collectively justify the integration of empowerment-oriented social work practices within environmental management initiatives.

4. Policy Context of Waste Management in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's policy framework for solid waste management is guided by the National Policy on Solid Waste Management (CEA, 2021), which promotes the "3Rs"—Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle—alongside decentralized management through local authorities. The Pilisaru Programme, initiated in 2008, sought to develop integrated waste management systems with community involvement. Despite progress, many local authorities struggle to implement effective waste strategies due to limited financial and technical capacity (Gunawardena, 2018). The 2018 Meethotamulla tragedy further underscored the consequences of inadequate planning and weak enforcement.

Recent reforms have emphasized participatory approaches, with initiatives encouraging waste segregation at household levels and community-based composting programs. While such efforts have demonstrated success in selected areas (UNDP, 2020), gaps persist in coordination, awareness, and long-term behavioral change. The policy landscape highlights an urgent need to embed empowerment mechanisms and community engagement strategies at every stage of waste management planning and implementation.

5. Community Empowerment in Waste Management

Community empowerment refers to strengthening people's capacity to identify problems, make decisions, and take collective action to improve their environment (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). In waste management, empowerment enables communities to shift from passive beneficiaries to active contributors in promoting sustainability. Empowerment can manifest through leadership development, skill training, and participatory governance mechanisms. Successful examples in Sri Lanka include women-led recycling cooperatives and youth environmental clubs that mobilize collective responsibility for local cleanliness and recycling.

Social capital—trust, networks, and shared norms—plays a vital role in sustaining empowerment initiatives (Putnam, 2000). Social workers can nurture such capital by promoting collaboration between residents, local councils, and NGOs. Empowerment also enhances accountability and transparency in local governance. Evidence shows that where communities are empowered through participation and awareness, waste segregation rates and recycling efficiency significantly improve (UNDP, 2020).

6. The Role of Social Work in Community Waste Management

Social work contributes to community waste management by promoting social inclusion, participation, and empowerment. Social workers act as facilitators who connect individuals and groups with institutional support systems, ensuring equitable participation. They can organize awareness programs, mobilize local leadership, and build capacity for sustainable practices. Moreover, they advocate for vulnerable populations—such as informal waste collectors—whose livelihoods are often precarious but essential to the waste management system (Alston, 2013).

Social work education and practice in Sri Lanka can further integrate environmental perspectives into training curricula. Embedding eco-social work principles prepares practitioners to address the intersections between social and environmental issues. Through participatory rural appraisal and community-based approaches, social workers can foster ownership, promote behavioral change, and ensure that sustainability is understood as a collective social responsibility.

7. Challenges and Opportunities

Despite promising policy frameworks, several challenges hinder effective community empowerment in waste management. These include institutional fragmentation, weak enforcement, and insufficient funding for local initiatives. Public attitudes towards waste as a ‘dirty’ or low-status activity also limit participation, while gender dynamics often place disproportionate responsibility on women for waste handling (Bandara & Hettiarachchi, 2020). Additionally, many programs remain donor-driven, leading to short-term results rather than sustained community empowerment.

Nevertheless, there are significant opportunities. Sri Lanka’s commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals—particularly SDGs 11 and 12—provides a policy foundation for integrating empowerment-based approaches. Strengthening partnerships between social work institutions, local governments, and environmental NGOs could lead to innovative, community-driven solutions. Digital tools and youth-led campaigns can further mobilize participation. These opportunities highlight the need to recognize social work as a key actor in promoting sustainable waste management and environmental justice in Sri Lanka.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Community empowerment is fundamental to achieving sustainable waste management in Sri Lanka. While national policies emphasize participation, translating these principles into practice requires systematic integration of social work approaches that focus on empowerment, inclusion, and collective responsibility. Social workers possess the professional skills and ethical orientation to mobilize communities, advocate for policy change, and promote behavioral transformation towards sustainability.

Recommendations include: (1) mainstreaming community empowerment strategies in all local waste management plans; (2) integrating environmental social work modules into social work curricula; (3) enhancing coordination among state institutions, NGOs, and communities; (4) promoting participatory monitoring systems; and (5) ensuring that waste management aligns with the broader social justice and environmental sustainability agendas. By reinforcing the connection between social work and environmental governance, Sri Lanka can foster both ecological balance and community resilience.

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