

The (dis)Possession of Waste at the Mbeubeuss Dump in Dakar*

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Introduction:

Urban dumps in the African continent are under scrutiny by many international and transnational actors. With the increasing prices of raw materials, whether governments (national or local), transnational corporation, academics, non-governmental organisations or local grassroots movements are all showing a growing interest in waste management in urban centres in Africa. Dumps are being privatised under the hegemonic discourse of social-environmental policies. However it often relates to the growing needs of developing African countries and transnational corporations for cheap raw materials.

The case of Mbeubeuss in Dakar (Senegal) is particularly interesting as it is a prime example of this growing attention. Not only is Mbeubeuss one of the largest urban dumps in that part of the world, but it is also the dump receiving the most media attention in West Africa. This article focuses on the mechanisms at stake in the privatisation of Mbeubeuss, and moreover the reactions in opposition to the dispossession of the inhabitants of Mbeubeuss. This article draws upon individual field research in Mbeubeuss in February 2011, in the context of the Dakar World Social Forum, as well as the literature on local waste management.

I visited the Mbeubeuss dump in February 2011 in a 'tour' organised by the NGO ENDA Ecopole while I was in Dakar for the World Social Forum doing research on social movements and waste management. This was a very intense experience, as I had never been confronted by such abject sights, smell, poverty and insalubrities. This paper is the product of that experience and subsequent research on waste privatisation.

I first present the Mbeubeuss dump, its history, geographies, populations and social organizations. I then explore the mechanisms at stake in the privatizations processes of the dump, looking at the implication of external actors, the reactions of local pickers, and the competing discourses under play. I further analyse the concept of dispossession of waste by reviewing the dichotomies between formal and informal economies, grass roots solutions and the life cycles of waste in the globalised economy and ecology.

Presentation of the Mbeubeuss Dump

History

The Mbeubeuss dump in Dakar follows a tradition of African management of waste (Cisse 2012). While throughout Europe in the 19th century, waste was increasingly associated with contamination and health issues. Waste and dumps are 'bad objects' that need to be removed from the public space. Thus waste has become marginalized and banned (Ibid.). Bertolini explains that waste must be in the dump, just like the deranged needs to be in the asylum, the elderly in the hospice and the delinquent in jail (Bertolini 2000). The dump thus becomes the space where the objects of contamination and disgust are hidden, compacted, buried and distanced (Cisse 2012).

From the 1970s onwards, waste in Dakar was dealt with the process of what Jennifer Clapp calls distancing of waste (Clapp 2002). This implies the disposal of urban waste as far as possible from the centre of the city. Waste is considered as something that needs to be removed out of the livelihoods of the urban societies, and belongs in remote places. Clapp's (2002) argument is that waste and dumps have been situated in the poorer spaces of urban geography. She asserts that by removing waste from the socially and economically richer spaces, we are distanced from the waste that stems from our consumption patterns. Thus as a former French colony, Senegal, and in this case Dakar, has followed this mechanism of distancing of waste (Pierrat 2011). What the urban centre of Dakar must not see is transported to the edges of the city. The public policy under the colonial rule in West Africa was to pile up waste just after the final habitats and set fire to the pile once in a while (Cisse 2012). This also implies that the

populations that live close to, or in, the dump, are already socially and economically remote from the urban centre. Thus Mbeubeuss is situated in the Pikine district of Dakar, the poorest suburb of the West-African metropolis (Ibid.).

Mbeubeuss was created in 1968 by the local government of Dakar, and has functioned as the city's unique dump since (Ibid.). It has expanded in size and population rather dramatically throughout the last 40 years, due to the galloping urbanization of Senegal in the recent decades (Ibid.).

Environmental Geography

The Mbeubeuss dump is situated 20 kilometers North-East of the city centre of Dakar. Its size is around 60 000 squares meters and it is in the sandy remains of the dry lake of Mbeubeuss. It is separated from the sea by sand dunes. Mbeubeuss is surrounded by three populated areas, Malika, Yeumbeul and Keur Massar. According to Oumar Cisse's study on the topography of Mbeubeuss, successive disposal of waste have elevated the dump by about 5 meters (Cisse 2012). The dump is accessible via a dirt track, approximately 15 meters wide, that reaches from the new highway all the way to the active section of the dump, the platform. The dump is highly floodable during the rain season as it is situated below the sea level in the dry lake's bed.

According to a study from 2009, the amount of waste in the dump could be over 10 million tons (SOGREAH 2009). Mbeubeuss is not a controlled dump per say, it is merely compacted. Thus its potential for expansion is very high as it does not bear clear boundaries (Cisse 2012). Mbeubeuss is situated in a geographical space and climate where agricultural activities such as horticulture and aviculture are favorable. However the pollution levels, as well as the very shallow level of underground water sources hinder these activities. The very poor and inefficient waste collection system in Dakar implies that waste is disposed off rather informally, and is transported to the dump by an array of different actors in insalubrious conditions (Ibid.). This implies that non-industrial waste arrives in the dump without any sanitary confinement such as plastic bags or closed containers.

Populations

The population of the Mbeubeuss dump is rather difficult to quantify due to the presence of seasonal and nomad pickers (Diallo et al. 2012). There are around 1600 inhabitants in Mbeubeuss. But over 2000 people enter the site every day (Ibid.). Around 10% of the workers are children (under 13), 25% are women, and 65% are men (Ibid.). The consequences of pollution and working conditions are very present in the ever-changing population of Mbeubeuss. Infections, respiratory and reproductive problems, accidents and deaths are frequent in the dump (Cisse 2012). Most pickers live in the surrounding localities of Malika, Yeumbeul and Keur Massar, but a small proportion of workers live on-site. They represent the poorest households of the working population. A very small number of pickers have access to formal property in the area of Gouye gui.

Social Geographies

This section is based on the topographical and social research undertaken by Cisse (2012) as well as the interviews that I carried out with Pape N'Diaye, the chief of the pickers association of Mbeubeuss during my visit of the dump. The Mbeubeuss dump is constituted of four poles of activity: Gouye gui, Baol, the platform and the compost recuperation area.

Gouye gui is located at the entry of the dump, and its population of around 100 pickers recycle industrial waste such as plastic and glass bottles, tarps, plastic shoes, wood, bags, non ferrous metals, electronic waste and scrap metal. The pickers are organized in around 30 sections called packs, separated by reused tarps and diverse material. This smaller group of pickers is very involved in the dump's pickers' organization, Bok Diom (see below). Gouye gui is also the home of the Pickers associative and medical centre, the only concrete structure of the dump.

Baol is further down the dirt road on the right and is mainly inhabited by migrant workers from the rural parts of Senegal that share their year between the dump in the summer and their villages of origin in the winter. It is also inhabited by a small number of families who live on-site full-time. The pickers of Baol are representatives of most of the activities in the dump, recycling scrap metal, sheets, blankets, bottles, plastic shoes, and fabric. The space is separated into packs divided by sheets and tarps. There is also a small religious shrine to the local Byfall (traditional Senegalese religious leader).

The platform is at the end of the road and is by far the most repulsive and insalubrious space in the dump. It is the place where trucks empty their loads of household waste. Around 100 pickers work on the platform throughout the day and sometimes the night. They are relatively young (10 to 30 years old) and pick the garbage with wire hooks and fabric bags. Their work conditions are the worst in the dump, as they are exposed to animal waste, vegetal waste, rot and toxic fumes.

The compost recuperation area is on the opposite side of the road from Baol. It is situated on the flank of the platform (that reaches up to 15 metres high). The pickers here are goat herders and look for the deeper layers of soil where older waste has mineralized to create fertile soil. They collect the soil and sell it to retailers in Dakar. They have to change areas frequently as the mineralized layers of soil run out fast.

There is thus a rather well organized social division of labor in the dump that demonstrates the complexity of the activities carried out on the dump.

Organizations and Partnerships

The pickers of Mbeubeuss have created a formal organization named Bok Diom when the inhabitants of the dump were being removed by the Senegalese Police in the late 1970s. They, very proudly, obtained the formal recognition of the Senegalese government. This organization is led by Pape N'Diaye, the eldest picker of the dump who lives in Gouye gui and who specializes in glass bottles. While there are approximately 1600 pickers working at Mbeubeuss, the organization has around 1000 members (the exact number could not be obtained). Through

this structure, the pickers have obtained financial and structural assistance from various institutions.

Their main partner is Amadou Diallo, the head of the ENDA Graff organization that focuses on environmental and social development in Africa. Amadou Diallo has been very implicated in the fate of Mbeubeuss over the years. According to Pape N'Diaye, he has been in charge of putting the pickers association in contact with assistance partners. The first project that came about was with various European development agencies such as the French Agence Francaise du Developpement, the Luxembourg Agency for Development and the Belgian Ministry for Cooperation. With their financial help, the pickers bought some land in Gouye gui and started building a school for the children of the dump.

ENDA Graff and Bok Diom then contacted the United Nations Development Program to obtain funds to expand the school to build a medical centre and train young pickers to become medical assistants. While the project was funded, the training received by the new medical assistants in a nearby state owned medical facility was not sufficient. They later on turned to a former Army major who had been trained as an army doctor. He is now running the medical centre. The International Labor Organization then funded a training program for the dump's youth. This program has trained over 120 children to other professions such as baker, mechanic and carpenter.

Thus Mbeubeuss is not only a complex working environment, but it also involves an array of different international and national actors, from both the public and non-for profit sectors. The relationship between pickers and international assistance organization had so far been rather functional and cordial, as through the norm entrepreneurship of a particular individual, Amadou Diallo, the pickers were integrated to all projects.

Privatizations and Dispossessions

The Story of the World Bank Deal

The story of the privatization of the dump deserves some attention as it is rather symptomatic of the power relations at stake between local grass roots organizations from the global South, and international development agencies. I first heard this story from Amadou Diallo himself, while visiting Mbeubeuss. When the group of journalists, development partners and academics in which I was, arrived at the dump that day, we were introduced to the leader of the picker association, Pape N'Diaye. He explained that we could take pictures wherever we wanted except for the platform area. When someone asked why, Amadou Diallo took over and explained the following story:

In 2009, the Senegalese government started a huge highway project between Dakar city centre and Pikine. When the project was underway, several groups of people had to be displaced as they were in the way. The government promised to re-house the displaced in a modern complex, the displaced accepted and the project went underway. The Senegalese government then turned to the World Bank to seek funding to build the new housing complex. A delegation

visited the proposed site (1 kilometer away from Mbeubeuss) and came back to the government with a report stating that they would fund the project only if the dump was closed, and waste management was formalized into a recycling facility. The government had to look for foreign investors to carry out the projects. The argument was that the World Bank could not fund a project that did not respect their human, social and environmental clauses. The site next to Mbeubeuss was too polluted for the project to be funded. Thus the government started the procedure to close the dump and advertised internationally for foreign investors for the new recycling centre.

The rest of the story will be told below. It is however essential to look at the processes at stake here: a sovereign government in a dependency relationship with the World Bank had to privatize an entire block of land that was almost exclusively publicly owned, displace and threaten the livelihoods of the dump's population. Hence, international development policies were undertaken from a top-down approach, without any consultation with the local populations and organizations in the name of *their* development and the improvement of *their* living conditions.

Reactions from Pickers

The reaction from the workers of Mbeubeuss was very strong. They used the formal pickers' association to start a consultation process with the Senegalese government. The government had consulted some of the pickers as they needed around 300 workers for the new recycling facility. The pickers association refused this process as they claimed that the government had only consulted the number of workers that they needed for the new facility, thus excluding the majority of pickers. The 300 pickers consulted accepted the new positions offered. The rest of the organization refused the deal.

The organization then consulted the picker community and found that three quarters of them wanted to work in the new facility. Thus in the organization's point of view, the government was offering neither enough jobs, nor an adequate solution for the ones that did not want to work at the recycling centre. During the time of my visit, both parties had met previously and the discussions had stalled. A report from Radio France International states that the discussions are still on-going today (RFI 2012).

The other argument put forward by the pickers was that even if all the workers were offered jobs at the facility, they would lose their freedom of self-employment and they would earn less from their work. According to Pape N'Diaye, the average income of an informal picker is 5 000 CFA a day. The work patterns are usually 24 hours of work, with 2 days of rest. If the workers are employed, they will work under regulations: they will only be able to work a certain amount of hours a day and will lose the possession of their work. In the words of Pape N'Diaye, if you find a gold watch, it is yours to sell and keep the money from the sale, if you are employed, it belongs to the corporation and you will get the same salary as every other day.

They also argued that although their working and living conditions would be better, they would still have their hands in other people's waste, and the benefits did not outweigh the losses.

Also, the pickers association is advocating for the re-employment in other sectors by the government of the families who wish to leave the dump if it closes. They are currently looking at creating their own business entity and strike a deal with the government to be a sub-contractor to the overall project.

Competing Discourses

This section now turns to the competing discourses between the different actors involved in the changes occurring at the Mbeubeuss dump. The voice of the pickers association is Pape N'Diaye. I have assisted to, and recorded, two of his public speeches on the matter (at a workshop at the world social forum on electronic waste recycling, and during the visit of the dump). Pape N'Diaye is a very outgoing man, and is the leader in the fight against the privatization of the dump.

During his speech at the world social forum, he used the platform provided by ENDA to carry out his message even if it had little to do with the subject of the workshop. He started by stating that the Mbeubeuss pickers were very well organized and recognized as an organization. He claimed that he was invited to all the important meetings and training sessions on waste management, he then explained all the different partnerships that they have with 'respectable' international actors. He further explained that the pickers are being trained to sanitary and environmental measures, that children are at school most of the day, and that pickers are respectable, hard-working and honest Senegalese born families that work for the good of the country.

By his discourse he sought to legitimize the informality of his profession. By asserting values such as family, honesty, patriotism, education, political recognition and hard work, Pape N'Diaye was positioning himself as the representative of respectable citizens being abused by his government and the World Bank. He then moved to the idea of property and dispossession by arguing that his profession was independent and worked for the public good. In his view the motives of personal wealth ensured that work would be done without disturbing anyone, rather than the possibility of corrupt malfunctioning corporate enterprises. He was thus advocating for prolonging the status quo.

In his speech for the visit of the dump, he reasserted these ideas, emphasizing the importance of welcoming visitors so that they could witness the good work being done in the dump. He then explained that we could go where we wanted during the visit, and interview whomever we wanted, as long as we did not take pictures of the platform. We could take pictures of everything else, but the platform, as he was afraid of government spies looking for evidence to convince the media. During the actual 'tour' of the dump, we were not given such freedom, we had to follow his exact steps, talk only to the pickers that he introduced, and take very few pictures.

While the tour was organized by ENDA, many different participants were present: members of ENDA Colombia, international aid partners from Canada, Croatian television journalists, a BBC Africa reporter, and 2 academics including myself. The purpose of the tour became clear after

the welcoming speech, we were all here to carry out his message, and he was going to keep a tight grip on the information that we gathered. It appeared quite clearly that Amadou Diallo from ENDA was present to keep a small lid on the picker's discourse. ENDA was organizing an aid deal with the private Canadian fund and did not want the controversy to appear too strongly. The Canadian representative was very curious about the deal with the World Bank and clearly in favor of closing the dump for sanitary and environmental reasons. Hence, Amadou Diallo was on the one hand a life-long partner of the pickers association, and on the other he needed the financial and structural support of international donors for his organization. Similarly, at the world social forum workshop, Diallo argued in favor of the formalization of recycling practices, while still allowing the pickers' representative to give a speech.

This example demonstrates the ambiguity in which many grass roots development organizations find themselves: on one side they need the support of international donors who prioritize regulation and development models, on the other they are the main partners of the people concerned on the ground.

The Dispossession of Waste

This section now turns to the broader conclusions that can be drawn from this case study. First and foremost, the relationship between informal and formal cycles of resource extraction from waste needs to be reviewed. While the case of Mbeubeuss demonstrates the tension between on the one hand, local informal practices of waste disposal and recycling, and on the other, the global push towards the formalization of waste management by international development agencies. While global resources are becoming scarce under the weight of industrial production, waste has gained a renewed interest in terms of resource extraction. Transnational corporations and national governments are turning to the formalization of recycling practices to reintegrate the raw materials extracted in the global production systems. I have written elsewhere on the new markets of illegal recycling of electronic waste in China and Ghana (Judell 2011), and exposed this cycle of waste recuperation. Under the agenda of socially and environmentally sound development practices, governments and international development agencies are pushing for the formalization of the recycling of waste to foster profit. As such, the concept seems harmless and rather progressive, however the consequences on the ground for local populations can be socially disruptive. Pape N'Diaye incarnates this disruption by advocating that losing his profession and his independence would resemble losing his purpose. While he acknowledges that better sanitary and environmental practices would be of great benefit, he refuses to be dispossessed of his life style, profession, and the fruits of his picking. Thus it is important to look at the issue of sanitizing dumps in the developing world from all perspectives, and to integrate the local claims and social values attached to informal recycling.

Second, the possibility for grass roots solutions to sanitary problems and environmental degradation linked to informal picking have not been assessed thoroughly in this case. The pickers' association is trying to demonstrate the changes that they have initiated in terms of ameliorating their life styles, through training of youths, the creation of a medical centre, partnerships with local and international development organizations, and the self-organization of workers from the dump. A local solution to the problems of contamination of humans and

ecosystems could be reached if the state-led development programs and partnerships with lending agencies were basing their analysis and projects on the pickers' perspective. The soft and hard power imposed by the World Bank on both the Senegalese government and the pickers of Mbeubeuss, in forcing a private and external, ending to local practices of waste management demonstrate the imperialist relationship that the Bank promotes. Under the hegemonic discourses of socio-environmental development, the World Bank is contributing to the global tendency of privatization of waste and consequently the dispossession of informal workers.

Finally, from an ontological perspective, there needs to be a shift in the way waste is considered. The privatization of waste management implies the re-introduction of the extracted raw materials into the global industrial production system. Although this may seem ecologically sound, from an eco-systemic approach (Eckersley 1992), it further distances the relationship between consumption patterns and environmental sustainability. Clapp (2002) argues that change in consumption and pollution patterns can only arise when consumers are made aware of the amount of pollution that stems from their actions. By creating a formalized, distanced, waste management facility, the problem of the production of waste is not dealt with at the source. The focus from institutions such as the World Bank, or international development programs, on waste management post-consumption shifts the focus on the causal link between consumption practices and pollution, thus further contributing to the expanding cycles of global production.

Conclusion

This paper has told the story of the Mbeubeuss dump in Dakar. Through this case study, I have sought to shed light on the processes at stake when hegemonic development and aid institutions seek to implement their policies on the ground in developing countries. I have demonstrated that the case of waste management is relevant to look at recycling practices not only through the lenses of the power structures in international development networks, but also as a broader sign of the push for the expansion of global production systems. On the one hand, top-down approaches to local governance by institutions such as the World Bank and national governments have led to a political conflict and the stall of the consultation process. On the other hand, the informal local approach to waste management may be flawed in terms of human and environmental health, but it shows the potential for change through bottom-up processes of decision making and consultation.

**NOTE: This paper is based on field work carry out in Senegal in February 2011 at the World Social Forum, and at the Mbeubeuss dump. The sources come from recordings of speeches and conversations with the main two actors under discussion, Pape N'Diaye and Amadou Diallo. They had both formally agreed to be audio recorded before they started to talk. Due to the lack of research on this issue, very few academic sources are available to reference this paper. However, the un-referenced facts have been used with caution and are based on the assumption that primary resources gathered on the field are essential to research in the Social Sciences.*

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