



CAG

Citizen consumer and civic Action Group

Human Rights Impacts of Waste

Concept note for public meeting

Human Rights Impacts of Waste

Solid Waste Management is one of the most challenging problems for developing countries like India. The fourth largest metropolitan city in India, Chennai has the highest per capita waste generator among cities in India at 700 gm per person per day. Chennai's waste generation has increased from 600 to 5400 metric tonnes in just over two decades. The current waste management system has Chennai Corporation collect and transport unsegregated waste from households, commercial entities, and institutions to two open dumpyards at Perungudi and Kodungaiyur, and several transfer stations across the city.

Despite the adverse impacts on the environment and health of the people living and working in the surrounding areas, Chennai Corporation continues to dispose of the waste in this manner. This has precipitated a crisis that will only worsen as the city grows in size and population, with serious implications for Chennai's sustainability and resilience. If we are to address this, we must transition from this linear system of **produce - consume - dispose** to a **circular system** that entails redesign of products, reduction of consumption, and recovery of discards. This would require us to go beyond superficial technocratic responses, such as incineration and bio-mining.

This system has the central premise of consumers being the primary generators of waste and so should be responsible for proper disposal of waste. In fact, most attempts to address the waste problem begin and end with a push to prevent littering. It is actually producers who, have primary responsibility for downstream impacts of their production and packaging practices. Businesses must be held accountable for the entire lifecycle of the product they produce, including but not only limited to the proper disposal of their products post-consumption.

Citizen consumer and civic Action Group (CAG), as part of the Initiative on waste, informal workers and Chennai's future, has been leading the inquiry on matters related to waste and its impact on public health, environment and economy in Chennai. Among other studies, CAG and Arunodaya are undertaking an exploratory study to empirically determine the impact of the current system of waste disposal in Kodungaiyur on human rights. The approach has been to carry out a human rights impact assessment (HRIA), which includes not only assessing impacts on humans but also the ecologies and physical environments that enable humans to enjoy human rights.

As part of the HRIA, we have collected samples of air, water, soil and leachate from around the Kodungaiyur dumpyard to test for contamination and extent of toxicity. We have also collected non-invasive health data (self-reported symptoms experienced and perceived) of people living and working around the dumpyard. The synoptic outcome of these exercises would be to establish the correlation between the toxic substances contaminating our physical environment and the potential effects they could have on human health.

The findings from both data collections exercises will be shared with local communities through meetings with the residents of Kodungaiyur, informal waste pickers, conservancy workers, and scrap shop workers. The discussions will address the problem of waste from the perspectives of social and environmental justice and will include conversations on:

1. Current waste disposal system, sound waste management principles, and transition to a decentralised system based on zero waste principles
2. Right of residents to a safe environment with clean air and water, free of noise
3. Right to livelihood of informal waste pickers, Right to dignity, health and safety at work

The intended outcome of this meeting will be predominantly to enhance the awareness of the human rights violations that have been caused to the people and to demand the restitution of these basic rights by challenging the status quo with regard to waste materials and disposal processes.

For a sustainable solution, efforts have to be participatory, contextually integrated, inclusive, and adaptive. Unfortunately, our current governance systems offer very little space for engagement, making it a highly vacuumised space and divorced from communities that are most vulnerable to exclusion. This vacuum can only be filled by informed communities and civil society organisations. These meetings and research outputs are intended to inform local communities and other decision makers.