

Interview: Desmond Alugnoa – Green Africa Youth Organization (April 22, 2019)

Rickie Cleere: GAYO's work with waste pickers in Ghana is centered around issues concerning working conditions and the rights of waste pickers to continue their work. I wanted to start out by asking whether you could speak more on these two particular aspects of the waste picker struggle in Ghana.

Desmond Alugnoa: Waste pickers in Ghana, like in most other parts of the developing world, are not organized in the informal sector. For the past few years what has been happening on the ground is that people who find space in the waste industry, by locating who needs what kind of waste, just jump into the streets or go from house to house or they go to the dumpsite and then they sort out the various different forms of waste that they need. The struggle has been occurring in three ways, with the community, the dumpsite, and also with the government. The community in the sense that, in Ghana, governments zone the various towns, dumps, and waste management organizations who have contracts to collect and dispose of solid waste spatially. What then happens is that some of these waste management organizations also want to extract some of the recyclables from the waste. So the waste pickers who go from household to household sorting out what they need, come into conflict with these formal organizations that have been assigned to these communities by the government. So you see many situations where there are conflicts involving waste pickers who go in first to collect plastic bottles in homes and the waste management company comes only to collect the residuals like what you cannot recycle, even though they are plastics as well. So there have been many conflicts in that area and apart from that the waste management companies themselves also get conflicts within their sector as well but that is not the problem here.

The other aspect that we've been following is on the dumpsite. We don't really have any engineered landfills in Ghana, so what we have are open dumpsites where a lot of waste pickers go and sort out what they want, leaving the rest. The government assemblies that are mandated to manage these sites find this activity to be illegal, since the waste pickers are not registered anywhere. But what we find interesting is the fact that they try to say that these people are not supposed to be on the site because the work is dangerous to their health and the only solution is to get them off. In 2017, we did work in Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly, which is a very dense district assembly. Ghana has ten regions and this particular district is located in the central region of Ghana and contains more than 8% of the region's population. We carried out a project there trying to understand the reality of these conflicts as well as waste pickers' living standards, their right to liberty, and other things. In this, we considered the district assembly, which is the government. We also interviewed the main waste management company in Ghana, which is called Zoomlion. We also interviewed WIEGO. We wanted to understand the perspective of different players and get their perception of waste picker activity. I interviewed the waste pickers, those who were in the community and those who work only in the dumpsite and they expressed the more obvious complaints that we hear from every other part of the country.

'Sometimes they come here to remove us, sometimes when they come to dump the waste they intentionally try to hurt us, and we are also facing a lot of risk because all different kinds of waste are combined and dumped here and we are here only to collect recyclables from solid

waste. Unfortunately, there is also liquid waste nearby, there is continuous planning by the assembly to make space. But other than that, we wouldn't be facing as much risk.'

But then there's no real formal relationship between them and district. The only relationship they have is seeing the waste pickers when they go to dump the waste and telling them that it's risky for their lives and that they have to go away. We interviewed the district assembly as well as the department of waste management, and I tried telling them that the waste pickers are doing a great job because they are reducing the amount of waste you have to bury and it influences the lifespan of your waste dump. And they said, 'Yeah that is true, but the thing is that they're not supposed to be there. The activity is dangerous and they do not have the right equipment to work with. I remember asking the question as to whether there are plans in place to protect these guys and make sure they have the right equipment to work with, to make sure they have freedom without constant seizures stopping them from the site. And the assembly said they don't have any such plans. We also asked, because there's so much a high unemployment rate in Ghana and many young people who've finished junior high school and high school among that ladies who are doing the waste picking at the site because there's nothing else they can do, there are no jobs for them, we think that the government should find a way to accommodate them. But then I remember a very straightforward answer: 'If you say there's no employment, does that justify that someone should steal?' And I was like how can I relate with this? 'No it is an illegal activity, they can't be there.' So that's the gist of something I did to try to understand between the waste pickers and the government, as well as Zoomlion, which is the waste management company. And their main concern was that waste pickers go into homes and scatter the waste that had been collected from the community in an attempt to extract what they need, and that is their main problem. Otherwise, if the waste pickers are at the dumpsite, they as a company don't have a problem with that.

So the next thing was to try and go speak with WIEGO, who is more international and is empowering these people, to see, since they are in a small part of Ghana, whether they have any programs for waste pickers. So we had to arrange an interview with WIEGO, and unfortunately they did not, as of late 2017 and early 2018, have any plans to expand their work beyond the community they are working in now. They expressed the concern that they wanted other groups to mobilize these different regions and make that they are already in groups before WIEGO steps in, but that is not what we are seeing in the country.

RC: To what extent have waste pickers organized and mobilized/protected around their grievances/demands? (what/where/when)

DA: In terms of being organized, no, it's really in its infancy. It's still in that stage where people just complain about their situation. The confidence to march forward and say enough is enough, we want freedom to do this activity is not there. The only situation where I have seen people openly advocating was with people who work for the waste management company or their areas and other things. But for the waste pickers who do it as a business, they have not. I have interacted with three different waste pickers, and what they do is form smaller groups which are normally for the purpose of credit unions. We have something called susu in Ghana which is a way of saving when you are not making money with a salary. So the waste pickers have grouped themselves, and then they have a leader who collects a certain amount from each person who

only pays the amount you think you can save on a daily or weekly basis. Then, at the end of the month, this person takes the money and at the end of the next month another person takes in the same way so that people are able to save. That's the only form of organization that exists in most waste pickers' camps. But I have not seen their ability to organize and speak with authorities in any part of the country.

WIEGO only in Accra

Global Alliance of Waste pickers

City: Central Region, Cape Coast. District: Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly

Waste Management Company name: Zoomlion Ghana