REFORMING THE WASTE DUMP IN BISHKEK WITH THE INTERVENTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AID

Aikokul Arzieva

(Source: http://kloop.kg/blog/kloop_galleries/biznes-na-bishkekskoj-svalke/)

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Supervisors: Professors Andreas Dafinger and Dan Rabinowitz

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Abstract

According to some estimates more than 15 million people worldwide depend on retrieving recyclable materials from the waste stream (Medina 2010; Wilson, Velis and Cheesman 2006; Samson 2009). Recent works on waste pickers have largely been produced by the "consultant view" in development sphere. These works mainly argue (i) that waste pickers are poor and vulnerable (Rankokwane and Gwebu 2006; Samson 2009). (ii) that empowerment through formalization, normalization will lead to improved income and recognition (Samson 2009; Medina 2010, Dias 2010, Iskandar 2010). (iii) that support to and integration of manual waste picking is means towards sustainable development in developing countries (Medina 2010; Samson 2009; Rankokwane and Gwebu 2006; Wilson, Velis and Cheesman 2006). Recently, the waste dump in Bishkek also fell into the dynamics of "reforming"; it caught the attention of international development for environmental reasons but the environmental hazard is just one side of the issue. It had become a working and living place for internal migrants who were struggling to adapt to changing economic conditions after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The results of my ethnographic research conducted from December through March of 2013 show that discursive realities created within the development discourse do not fully correspond with the lived realities of waste pickers in Bishkek. Study shows that the picture is much more complicated: (i) that waste pickers make us question what is "poor" and "vulnerable' may mean in certain context; (ii) they are not supportive of formalization and normalization solutions that are believed to "empower" them; (iii) they question "development work". In the context of waste picking at an unsanitary waste dump, talking about sustainable development seems like not sharing common meaning and understanding of things between various stakeholders.

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Introduction

Located some 10 km north of the city, the municipal waste dump in Bishkek, capital city of Kyrgyzstan is supposed to treat all of the capital's municipal waste. "Tazalyk" is the municipal company in charge of solid waste management services (Sim 2011). Opened in early 1970s by the Soviets with an expected lifespan of 10 years, the site is still in use (UNDP 2010), currently covering some 3 sq. km. (30 ha) and growing (Rickleton 2010). The site exudes smoke and gas even in deep winter.

A relatively well-paved main road passes about a kilometer from the dump site, from which a dirt road in poor condition leads to the entrance. A number of houses big and small line the road approaching the site; some consisting only of foundations and walls. Many are built mainly of clay and have no fences. Some have signs in front saying: "Cardboard, bottles, plastics and metals of various types accepted." A large fenced area is often visited by large Chinese trucks. A cement factory also produces considerable smoke, and provides electricity to nearby residents as compensation. About 300-400 meters from the site, there is a cemetery.

There is a large scale at the entrance of the site that weighs the waste brought in by trucks with a booth beside it in which a staff person records the amounts of arriving waste. On the right side of the road, Tazalyk has a bigger territory that is used for fixing the site machinery, with a small building beside it consisting of two rooms that is used by its 22 formal site workers as an eating and resting place. From the site entrance, the main road extends another 2 km inwards. There are some 30 houses on the left side of the road facing the dump, only 7-10 meters from the trash. Some nearby residents work for middlemen and use their homes as storage areas for recyclables. Middlemen come daily to the site with their scales at closing time, between 5 and 6 PM, paying cash on spot for the recyclables they buy.

The sea of garbage contains various things: rotten food, metals, cardboard, pieces of fabric from textile factories, animal intestines, dishes... Many birds fly and sit comfortably as

if this was the nest in which they were born. A few dogs roam the site looking for a food. While small groups of people can be seen working in various parts of the site, the majority work at the main tipping face, which is located at the far end. The site is said to be divided into three main parts (although by whom and according to what criteria is not clear). Trucks arrive periodically, leaving a growing mountain of waste behind them. The deposited waste is then quickly picked through by the people, mainly in search of reusable items, such as plastic and glass bottles, metals and cardboard. After they take the recyclables, the leftovers are consolidated and straightened by a yellow bulldozer operated by formal Tazalyk site staff. It is sometimes possible to observe the waste pickers burning larger items, such as electronic goods and televisions to separate out the metal. There are also trenches of up to 8-10 meters deep dug into the site to allow certain pickers to extract valuable materials deposited during the Soviet period. From a distance, they look like archeologists.

Recognized as an environmental hazard long ago (KGinform 2012), dump site's closure has been on the agenda since 1996, but with no significant result. The dump receives household waste, commercial waste, green waste, animal carcasses, medical waste, and most likely hazardous waste as well (Sim 2011:44). It is often covered in a layer of toxic smoke, due to the common practice of open burning (UNDP 2010). Recently the site caught an attention of international development aid and its closure is under discussion for environmental reasons. A project was initiated by the City with support from international development agents, to improve the solid waste management system of Bishkek. Specifically, the project targeted: i) closure and rehabilitation of the existing open dump site; ii) development of a new waste management system, including collection, treatment and disposal. However, environmental hazard is just one side of the issue. The site had become a source of income for some 150 internal migrants who work there permanently and hundreds more who come and go according to need. These "waste pickers" would be affected by the

closure of the site, through the loss access to the recyclable materials that constituted their source of income and livelihood. However, proceeding from donor's "safeguard" policies, the project addresses how their lost incomes could be restored as the project defined waste pickers as project affected; it intends to build the livelihoods of waste pickers by formally integrating some of them into a new solid waste management system and identifying other livelihood restoration options for the rest.

To prepare Livelihood Restoration Plan (LRP), the project seeks to identify "Project Affected Peoples" (PAPs) via census and socio-economic survey at the dump site. I joined the project as a local consultant and my role in the project was to assist international consultants in supporting the City in developing a LRP to restore the livelihoods of waste pickers affected by the project. With these best intentions one winter morning me, one official from Tazalyk, international consultant and 10 surveyors arrived at the dump site to conduct census and socio-economic survey. The city official began to gather the waste pickers to come and hear us, explaining that the City was starting a project with the support of " Development Sustainable[1]", and that anyone interested should come closer. It was clear that people knew him and that he had influence.

Before too long, some thirty people circled us and more were coming. I began to introduce the project, using the notes the consultant and me had prepared in advance. My listeners were clearly agitated. They were talking amongst themselves and asking questions all at the same time and my voice could not reach them all. Naturally, their main concern was what would be their fate once the dump closed. And our answers were obviously not clear enough. I kept trying to explain, but felt I was losing control over the situation. The City official left quickly and I heard him telling some people not to beat us up. They were getting louder. At one point, just as I began to tell them about the survey and how important it is for

[1] "Development Sustainable" is a pseudo name used for the international development organization

the project, one man came forward.

He was a tall man in his 40s. Working at the site had left signs on his hands, his face was partly covered in the black smoke, and his eyes were a bit red. I could already feel that he was full of anger when he first tried to come up front. Without listening to what was being said he started: "Why are you lying to the people here saying you want to do good for us and so we have to fill out your papers… None of you here think about us people… Those days are gone… Why don't you just admit that you were paid to come here to get your papers filled out… Why not do something real? Why are you spending money at all on those papers that do nothing for anyone… You think we're crazy, but come on – we live in the 21st century and we know about your dirty business!" The people were getting louder and I started to lose myself again when the international consultant stepped out, raised his hand and asked the people to give him a chance to speak. People started asking Star 3[2] to calm down and listen to the gray haired foreigner who probably came "uuuuuuu" from far away and might have something to say.

After some time, we reached a reasonable level of silence. The international consultant introduced himself and offered more context. He explained that the closure of the waste dump was being considered by the City for environmental reasons, but that was not certain yet. The site might close, and it might not, but if it closed, they would lose their work and so the project was looking at how their lost incomes and livelihoods could be restored. He explained that only those who registered and filled out the survey form would be eligible for any benefits that might come under the project and that it was their choice whether to do so or not. He said the site was harmful for their health and that if the new site were built, some people could be integrated there as formal workers in better conditions.

While some people were listening to him with some hope, Star 3 would not listen. I

[2] "Star" is a name used for respondents

was translating and asking him with my fingers to wait a minute and let the international consultant finish his speech. He still said: "Stop this dirty business." The international consultant asked me to translate what he had said. A bit reluctantly, I translated word for word. He misunderstood me and started to say: "No, waste is not a dirty business, it is practiced in many parts of the world and my job is to help create better and safer conditions for people who do this work. I clarified: "He's telling that what we are doing is a dirty business, not what he is doing…" The consultant looked a bit shocked and said: "Oh, that's what he's saying…"

There are three main stakeholder groups in this project: i) waste pickers; ii) municipal representatives; iii) external development agents. In spite of best intensions as it can be seen from a given episode above building a dialogue among stakeholders has been difficult. While the City defined the waste pickers at the site as informal citizens and illegal workers, "Development Sustainable" defined them as PAPs who have rights under their "safeguard" policies and waste pickers distrusted intervention from both stakeholders (the City and "Development Sustainable"). They did not seem to share common meaning and understanding of things. Using the case of Bishkek as a prism, this thesis explores the limitations of waste-dump redevelopment schemes in developing countries.

The "consultant view" (which mainly refers to the works of academics, researchers and practitioners who works as a consultants for various development organizations that involve waste pickers and generally seek to reform dominant views on their activities in developing countries) mainly frames waste picking in terms of "before" and "after" the anticipated reform, tending to focus on "success stories," this study seeks to present an ethnographic approach to with the viewpoints of various stakeholders in a single development project (i.e., waste pickers, municipal workers, and external development agents) and to examine the ways in which these various groups communicate with one another. In this way,

this study aims to contribute to the anthropological literature on the limitations of development projects in helping improve the lives of waste pickers.

With a population of 5.4 million (Jeenbaeva 2011), Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked Central Asian country bordering Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. The new economic order that began with the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the loss of many formal sector jobs throughout the country, obliging many people to seek new strategies for survival (Olcott 2005; Sanghera 2010). Today formal employment in many parts of rural Kyrgyzstan is limited to schools, small medical centers, and village municipalities, thus many people turned back to the nomadic lifestyle and manual agriculture. According to the 2007 World Bank Poverty Assessment Report, the agricultural sector increased from 39% of the national economy in 1993 to 53% in 2003 and 48% in 2005. The lack of formal employment opportunities also forced the rural population into both external and internal migration, making labor migration a central part of the Kyrgyz socioeconomic reality. By various estimates, nearly a million Kyrgyz citizens (20% of the population) are currently working abroad (Nasritdinov 2011). While remittances comprised only 3% of the country's GDP in 2002, by 2008 they represented 29%, making Kyrgyzstan the world's fourth most remittance dependent economy (Rubinov 2011). In many cases, Bishkek serves as a transit point for rural migrants to earn enough money to allow them to migration abroad.

Over the past 20 years, the population of Bishkek has grown rapidly, exceeding one million people, one quarter of whom live in informal settlements (*jangikonush*in Kyrgyz; *novostroika* in Russian) on the outskirts of the city. According to Sanghera (2010), Bishkek has become a dumping ground for internal labor migrants from the countryside. While unemployment is high, most poor people nevertheless do some kind of work, for the simple reason that they live too close to the subsistence line to be able to refuse any income activity that is available (The World Bank 2007). Many people have been driven into informal sector,

which became ‘normalized’, if not ‘naturalized’. Citing data from the World Bank (2007), Sim (2011) estimates that 45% of employed people in Bishkek work in informal sector. While the lucky few were able to find jobs in government, the private sector, NGO and international development sectors, many teachers, doctors, lawyers and formal factory workers were absorbed into the bazaars, informal construction, taxi driving and textiles. Others were simply unable to adapt, as their skills did not match the demand of the existing labor market.

In the face of these socio-economic structural challenges, the number of people who earn income through the informal recovery of secondary materials (“waste picking”) is steadily increasing. Although this study is focused specifically on people working informally at the Bishkek municipal dumpsite, it is estimated that some 8800 waste pickers operate throughout the city (Sim 2011). As this thesis builds on my previous research, focused on the meanings that waste pickers attached to their lives and work at the site in the context of “transition” in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, further I provide brief background on waste pickers.

The qualitative field research conducted with the waste pickers at the site suggested that these people were mainly internal migrants from various parts of Kyrgyzstan who had come to Bishkek in search of better work opportunities following the breakup of the Soviet Union and had ended up working “illegally” at the dump site. The waste pickers at the site included both women and men of various ages: from 10 to more than 60. Children interviewed did not believe that education led to better work opportunities, and respondents in their 30s and above said that the dump was the best work opportunity they had found. Among them were people who had held secure and well-paid jobs during the Soviet period (e.g., factory workers, truck drivers, etc.) and had lost them with the closure of the Soviet-era factories. Many also claimed to have done other types of informal sector work (e.g., construction, textiles, selling in bazaars, work in bakeries, agriculture…).

Despite their awareness of the health risks at the site, the waste pickers spoke

positively of the "freedom" to decide when and how to work; "security," as the site was large and there was plenty of work for everyone, and one could always leave and return again when they needed to; the fact that at the site there was no cheating and no bankruptcy, and they were paid daily based on the materials they had collected; and even their "happiness" when they earned well and were able to buy what they wanted without worrying about the next day.

Recent literature on waste picking may be divided into two distinct types: an "anthropological view" and "consultant view". The anthropological view mainly examines aspects of (social construction) "dirty", stigma, informal sector, labor, class and capitalism. The "consultant view" refers mainly to the works of academics, researchers and practitioners who work as consultants for development donor agencies, NGOs, and private firms involved in project that involve waste pickers and generally seek to reform dominant views on their activities. In this study, I use the term "reform" to refer to advocacy approach of consultants providing technical support to projects that work with waste pickers that is often aimed at changing government attitudes and policies so as to allow waste pickers greater recognition and rights through incorporation into formal systems. Among many, I focus mainly on works of Martin Medina, Sonia Dias, Laila Iskandar, Lucia Fernandez and Melanie Samson and in this study I refer to them as "reformers". They are linked to the new concepts of waste management developed by Collective Working Group (CWG) on Solid Waste Management in Middle and Low Income Countries.

Current works on waste pickers have largely been produced mainly by reformers: "the World of Scavengers: Salvaging for Sustainable Consumption and Production, 2007"; "Refusing to be a Cast Aside: Waste Pickers Organizing around the World, 2009"; "On the Road to Zero Waste: Successes and Lessons from around the World 2012"; "First Global Strategic Workshop on Waste Pickers: Inclusive Solid Waste Management 2012" etc. As the titles suggest these works mainly argue: i) waste pickers are poor and vulnerable and

excluded; ii) empowerment through formalization, normalization and organization will lead to better access to income, public recognition and improved self-esteem iii) considering poverty, unemployment and environmental issues in developing countries, support to and integration of manual waste picking could be means for sustainable development, reformers claim.

As this study is concerned with some limitations of development aid as it pertains to waste pickers, I will focus on the consultant view and specifically, on how successfully discourses created in the development sphere may be applied to the context of waste picking in Bishkek. The results of my ethnographic research conducted from December through March of 2013 show that discursive realities created within the wider development discourse do not fully correspond with the lived realities of waste pickers in Bishkek. I will seek to show that the picture is in fact more complicated and, specifically: (i) that waste pickers make us question what is poor and vulnerable in the current context of Bishkek; (ii) they are not supportive of "formalization" and "normalization" solutions that are believed to empower them; (iii) that that they tend to be critical of "development work." In the context of waste picking at an open dump site, talk of "sustainable development" does not seem to share common meanings and understandings among different actors. While the "consultant" view mainly frames waste picking in terms of "before" and "after" reform has taken place, and tends to focus on "success stories," this study seeks to present an ethnographic approach to with the viewpoints of various stakeholders in a single development project and to examine the ways in which these various groups communicate with one another. In this way, this study aims to contribute to the anthropological literature on the limitations of development projects in helping improve the lives of waste pickers.

This thesis is organized as follows: Chapter 1: Literature Review provides background to the main discursive realities produced by the "consultant view": 1.1 discusses images of waste pickers; 1.2 empowerment tool/techniques; 1.3 ways of looking at a waste picking as a

means of sustainable development. Chapter 2 discusses the methodological approach used in this study. Chapter 3 provides a series of episodes from my ethnographic field work with various stakeholders in the project (waste pickers, municipal representatives and development agents). Chapter 4 presents the Discussion and Conclusion.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

As this study is concerned with advantages and limitations of development aid as it pertains to waste pickers and specifically how successfully discourses created in the development sphere can be applied to the context of waste pickers in Bishkek, the literature reviews the consultant view. The chapter consists of three subchapters based on main arguments of reformers: i) waste pickers are poor and vulnerable; ii) empowerment through formalization, normalization and organization will lead to better access to income, public recognition and benefits iii) considering poverty, unemployment and environmental issues in developing countries integrating "manual waste picking" into the formal solid waste management system could be means for sustainable development.

1.1 Images of Waste Pickers

According to reformers, informal recovery of waste represents an important survival strategy for disadvantaged populations throughout the world (Medina 2008; Samson 2009; Dias 2010; Rankokwane and Gwebu 2006). More than 15 million people are estimated to sustain themselves and their families by retrieving reusable and recyclable materials from streets, open spaces, waste bins and unsanitary waste dumps (Medina 2010). While for many countries waste picking is a relatively novel occupation (Acar 2006; Rankokwane and Gwebu 2006), in some countries it has been practiced by the second if not the third generation (Medina 2010; Millar 2008, Samson 2009). The emergence of this specific activity is

explained through the integration into the capitalist system, neoliberal structural adjustment policies which produced poverty, unemployment, lack of social security for those who could not integrate into the promises of the new world order (Acar 2006; Millar 2008; Medina 2010; Iskander 2010). Considering the prevailing socio-economic conditions faced in those countries and the growing industry of recycling, Wilson, Velis and Cheesmanforecast that the number of waste pickers is likely to increase (2006).

Rankokwane and Gwebu argue that waste picking, which acted as a response to widespread poverty, unemployment and lack of social security should be viewed as representing a survival response by the urban poor, to lack of employment opportunities; a strategy that is preferred to begging in the street or stealing (2006). Similarly, Medina and Acar et al, state that in many cases, waste picking became a strategy preferred to starving (2010; 2006). However, Medina emphasizes that even though waste pickers are not always the poorest of the poor, the occupation is generally ascribed to the lowest status in society and that historically outcasts and marginal groups such as slaves, gypsies and migrants have performed waste collection and recycling activities in developing countries (2006:10). Samson adds to the points stated above and tells us that waste pickers' earnings are not big; large numbers of waste pickers retrieve recyclables mainly to meet their basic needs such as food, housing, clothing, water and electricity (2009).

Reformers tell us that across the different parts of the world waste pickers share common aspects: often they survive in a hostile social environment; are subject to social stigma and continue to receive negative media coverage; have little formal education; are excluded or marginal to mainstream economy and society; in many cases they are subject to exploitation and discrimination by middlemen; harassment by authorities and police (Medina 2005, 2008, 2010; Samson 2009; Rankokwane and Gwebu 2006; Dias 2010). Moreover, Medina informs us that waste pickers belong to vulnerable groups being: women, children,

elderly and disabled who are often rejected by society (2010:3).

In addition to that, reformers inform us that waste picking in open dumps is considered to be most detrimental to health: waste pickers expose themselves to sudden fire outbreaks and injuries while being in direct contact with waste including hazardous and medical waste (Medina 2005, 2008, 2010; Samson 2009; Rankokwane and Gwebu 2006; Wilson, Velis and Cheesman 2006).

> We often suffer from bruises and injuries from broken glass, sharp metals and needles from medical waste that are dumped here. I usually suffer from persistent coughs from the effects of smoke and the dust that I inhale. *(Quote from Samson's book 2009:5)*

According to Medina in Mexico City dumpsite scavengers were reported to have a life expectancy of 39 years, while that of the general population was 67 years (2005).In spite of such indicators, Rankokwane and Gwebu inform us that the relevant literature on health and accidents are almost non-existent and studies often suffer from methodological flows (2006).

1.2 Empowerment of waste pickers

> The young people in Manshiet Nasser show us the material with which they want to build their future. Trash recycled as musical instruments. Self-confidence and optimism – that, more than anything, is what Laila Iskandar has given them.
> (http://www.dw.de/laila-iskandar-consultant-from-egypt/a-2283818)

According to Joshua, within the growing industry of recycling, the politics of waste value as well as waste pickers has been gaining new significance and meanings (Joshua 2009). Wilson, Velis and Cheesmanemphasize that, especially over the last 20 years, there has been a growing recognition of the economic, social and environmental benefits of the informal sector in waste management (2006). Medina argues that though waste pickers perform an essential service and are an integral part of the waste management systems in the cities where they work and it is often unacknowledged (2010). In spite of growing recognition of waste pickers' contribution towards the global environment, often local authorities consider them as a problem to be eliminated (Medina 2005). Similarly, Samson states that waste picking has been overlooked within legislation and often it has been explicitly or implicitly prohibited

(2009).

The activities towards recognizing the waste pickers' contribution to economies, to public health and safety, and to environmental sustainability are supported mainly by external professionals, NGOs, religious organizations, international donors such as the World Bank and other Development Organizations (Medina 2008; Samson 2009, Iskander 2010; Dias 2010). Medina argues that these institutions play a critical role in the normalization and formalization of this "informal", "unregulated" and "unregistered" activity (2010). NGOs and Development Institutions assist and support the empowerment of waste pickers to achieve social and political recognition; to advocate for supportive laws, regulations and policies. This has led to considerable activity in many countries in developing more supportive policies, to stimulate and improve working conditions of the informal sector (Wilson, Velis and Cheesman 2006; Dias 2010, Samson 2009; Iskander 2010). The World Bank has also reported that negative impacts of scavenging have been reduced in certain metropolitan centres by formalizing their work (Rankokwane and Gwebu 2006).

Allen et al. gives a successful case example waste picker unions in India, which are: KKPKP and SWaCH (2012). According to Allen et al. over 20 years of organizing members of KKPKP and SWaCh have achieved remarkable accomplishments: waste pickers incomes have risen from 1.12 USD to 2.8USD per day and one of the most marginalised and vulnerable populations has become integrated into society (2012:16). Moreover, they launched "a zero waste program" which requires a system of safe and efficient recovery materials so that discards that are produced return to nature and manufacturing (Allen et al. 2012). Allen et al. claims that inclusive "zero waste systems" make sure that resource recovery programs include and respect the community and social aspects actors involved in resource conservation, especially informal recyclers whose livelihoods depend on discarded materials (2012:8).

According to Medina, International Development Organizations are working to support the formalization and organization of waste pickers in various regions (2010). He gives an example of how with the the financial support of the Austrian government, the IFC-International Finance Cooperation is implementing a program to support recycling businesses in Albania, Bosnia, Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. He emphasizes that most are Roma populations facing high rates of poverty and illiteracy (Medina 2010).

Reformers introduce a number of cases where waste pickers have successfully established cooperatives in Columbia, Brazil, South Africa, Egypt, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Philippines, India, Uruguay etc. where the members of the cooperatives benefited from increased incomes, cases when cooperatives provide welfare services and scholarship for education opportunities, insurance and protective clothing (Median 2010; Samson 2009; Dias 2010; Iskander 2010). Medina adds that waste pickers are organizing in many ways: cooperatives, associations, companies, unions and micro-enterprises (2010). Samson states that in some cases women waste pickers consciously choose to form women only co-operatives such as Coopcarmo in Brazil, in order to build women's confidence, provide women with greater opportunities, challenge gender stereotypes and demonstrate that women can do the same work as men (2009:85). His claim is validated with the quote below:

> We want to show we can do things as independent women that we can carry bundles of materials and also be in charge of burning copper. We want to show we can recycle. (*Quote from Samson's book 2009: 24)*

Moreover waste pickers were helped to develop a formal structure, consisting of director, president, administrator, finance or audit committees and being affiliated with these professional terms is believed to make them worthy and their work more meaningful (Medina 2010; Samson 2009). Often, reformers argue that waste pickers lose significant amounts of profits to middlemen who sell the recyclables to industry and that by establishing

cooperatives, waste pickers canbypass the middlemen and break the "vicious circle of poverty" in which most of the scavengers find themselves (Medina 2010; Dias 2010; Samson 2009).

Medina informs us that in 2005, using funds provided by the Ford Foundation, Community Organization Support Center (CORC) facilitated exchanges that involved waste pickers from Egypt, Kenya and South Africa visiting each other. In March 2008 waste pickers from more than thirty countries gathered in Bogotá, Colombia for the First World Conference of Waste Pickers and the Third Latin American Conference of Waste Picker with the support of Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)(Samson 2009). The conference was organized to facilitate networking amongst organized groups of waste pickers across the world. This was an event where waste pickers and their allies shared experiences, identified key challenges and discussed ways of strengthening regional and global networks. It is claimed that as a result of the conference the waste pickers felt less isolated and were proud to be considered as advanced and having useful information to share with other waste pickers. Claims are supported with the voices of grassroots- waste pickers.

> We must all be linked to the same support chain, where, if an organization suffers any setback, it can be somehow supported by the other linked movements, so that everyone is regarded as skillful businessmen instead of the helpless poor. *(Quote Samson's book 2009)*

Moreover Samson informs us that through their participation in the network, waste pickers' leaders have improved their internet capacities and enhanced their knowledge of web-based network strategies (2009). Samson tells that now leaders are able to connect to each other by internet to coordinate actions and meetings, share their experiences, information and engage in collective planning (2009).

Currently WIEGO and its partner organizations are exploring issues related to how waste pickers fit into the global recycling market, how they are renegotiating their position within it (Samson 2009). In December, 2010 and again in 2011, the Global Alliance of Waste

Pickers and Allies, which WIEGO supports, spoke at the United Nations Climate Change conferences to draw international attention to the value of their work and the need for global policies that respect, rather than hinder their work (Samson 2009). Reformers claim that when waste pickers are supported they are organizing around the world to demand the contributions they make to the environment and economy; official recognition of their service (Dias 2010; Median 2010, Samson 2009; Iskander 2010; Fernandez 2011).

1.3 Waste pickers as a means of sustainable development

Medina claims that the value of waste pickers is increasingly important to global environmental efforts and development of cities. Proceeding from this, reformers argue that, when waste picking is supported it represents a perfect illustration of sustainable development that can be achieved in the Third World: jobs are created, poverty is reduced, raw material costs for industry are lowered, resources are conserved, pollution is reduced, and the environment is protected (Dias 2010, Iskander 2010; Medina 2010; Samson 2010; Fernandez 2011).

Medina argues that many developing countries cannot afford sanitary landfills. A lower cost alternative may be so called "manual waste picking", since many Third World cities have a dynamic informal sector that includes informal waste pickers. He supports his argument by the following logic: industrialized countries enjoy a relative abundance of capital and have high labor costs, while developing countries have an abundance of unskilled and inexpensive labor, and scarcity of capital. Medina claims that it makes economic sense for the former to devise solid waste management (SWM) systems intensive in capital that saves labor costs, but it often does not make sense for the latter to follow the same approach (2005). The Third World needs affordable SWM solutions that create income opportunities for unskilled workers, particularly the poor (2010:4). This logic is supported by the other reformers as well.

Samson informs us that in developing countries solid waste management systems are poorly run and operate to low standards; developing country cities collect only between 50-80% of waste generated, with open dumping the only disposal method available (2009). Dias adds to it by stating that according to UN Habitat's Solid Waste Management in the Third World's Cities 2010, waste pickers perform between 50-100 percent of ongoing waste collection in most cities in developing countries at no cost to municipal budget (2012).

Talking about benefits, the reformers inform us that waste picking is easily learned and does not require literacy (Median 2008; Samson 2009). Rankokwane and Gwebu inform us that recovery rates as high as 80 percent are achieved by waste pickers in Cairo due to intensive manual sorting and their expertise at extracting waste with value; they are highly skilled in identifying waste with potential (2006). According to Medina, in Bangkok, Jakarta, Kanpur, Karachi and Manila, scavenging saves each city at least 23 USD million a year in lower imports of raw materials, and reduced need for collection, transport, disposable equipment, personnel and facilities (2010). He also informs us that Columbian scavengers recover and sell over 300 000 tons of recyclables each year, mostly paper, glass, scrap metals, plastic and organics (2010). Iskandar adds by stating that 60,000 inhabitants of five Cairo neighbourhoods are employed in the waste collection business (2010). She believes that they could easily recycle half of the megacity's rubbish and she supports her logic by stating that poverty in the country is between 17 and 20 percent and the poor live below two dollars a day; there it is you have the workforce that needs the work (Iskandar 2010:2).

According to Samson, there is clear global trend towards the privatization of municipal waste management systems (2009). He explains that privatization often changes the legal status of waste itself: prior to privatization, waste is usually seen as a common property resource through which waste pickers can earn their livelihoods (Samson 2009).Further Samson explains us that privatization displaces waste pickers and undermines their ability to

generate income; even if the activities of waste pickers are not explicitly included in the privatization contract, shifts in the formal municipal waste management system change the context within which waste pickers function and the terms on which they relate to the broader waste management system (2009:75)

Millar gives us an example from her ethnographic work how waste pickers resisted for the closure of the Jardin das Flores waste dump when it was decided to be closed and replaced by a sanitary waste dump for environmental reasons (2008). She describes that waste pickers were concerned that they would not have an access to garbage anymore; they wanted solutions that would allow them to pursue their jobs (Millar 2008). According to Millar one of the waste pickers wrote in a newsletter to others: "The dump might not lead anyone to Heaven, but its absence is the worst of all hells"; moreover they called the waste dump "Mother Slope" as it provided for their livelihoods (2008:31). Proceeding from these realities, Rankokwane and Gwebu claim that from two possible scenarios that could emerge from the closure of the landfill: i) the best scenario would involve scavengers organizing themselves into and registering themselves as a cooperative and get support both from a city and NGOs; ii)) the worst case if they respond to the closure as individuals; there are limited alternatives for waste pickers (2006).

Wilson, Velis and Cheesman state with the focus of the Millennium Development Goals on poverty reduction and of waste strategies on improving recycling rates, one of the major challenges in Solid Waste Management (SWM) in developing countries is how best to work with this informal sector to improve their livelihoods, working conditions and efficiency in recycling (2006). Similarly, reformers claim that the preferred option is to integrate the informal sector into waste management planning; building on their practices and experiences, while working to improve efficiency and the living and working conditions of those involved (Medina 2010; Samson 2009; Fernandez 2009; Iskandar 2010; Dias 2010).

According to Rankokwane and Gwebu within the context of sustainable management, waste picking promotes social equity by ensuring that those who engage in it are enabled to access a source of income to sustain their livelihoods, waste picking therefore facilitates income redistribution; their waste recycling, reuse and reduction activities ensure ecological sustainability; they also expedite economic efficiency through their resource utilization practices (2006:154).

Chapter 2: Methodology

Ethnographic research for this thesis was conducted via participant observation with three main stakeholder groups in the preparation of the development project for the Bishkek solid waste dump: (i) waste pickers; (ii) municipal representatives; and (iii) external development agents. As joined the project as a local consultant, I was in direct contact with all three groups of stakeholders. My consultancy lasted from December to April 2013 and my research was thus conducted during that period.

While some actors were aware my dual role as researcher and development consultant, others only knew the latter. Although my role as a contracted consultant for the project imposed certain limitations on the disclosure of the information I gathered during my work, without such involvement, it would have been impossible for me to observe the mutual interactions among these groups, such as closed meetings with the donor and City authorities and thus absorb all of the complexities that I was able to.

During my previous research, I was often warned to be careful of people who might not appreciate my presence at the site. I also knew that most waste pickers were unwilling to provide information about themselves. When taking a consultancy position that involved the conducting of a census and socio-economic survey, I was well aware of the challenges

involved. Moreover, during my earlier research, many waste pickers would say things such as: “You probably work for a foreign magazine and are going to sell the information you get from us. Pay us $100 and we’ll tell you our stories from the beginning to the end, until you cry!” (I later learned that journalists had indeed visited the site and usual methods used for data gathering are photography or couple of interviews often done by the means of money). Taking into consideration the sensitivity of the place, I had to provide incorrect information during my previous research.

I went to American University of Central Asia in Bishkek and there is an assumption that only rich kids study there as it is not a cheap place to study (but it has scholarship opportunities) and sometimes just being affiliated with something that has to do with American or European makes people assume that you are making great fortune of money. Proceeding from this, I had to say that I go to one of the local University which is considered to be affordable place to go. And now I was going to visit the place representing the development aid with international consultants.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union there are more than 7000 NGO and people working there earn relatively much better. If average government salary is about 170-200 USD, many NGO workers earn up to USD 600 a month. There is a local way of teasing people lucky enough to get to these “creamy” jobs: “So now you’re in international development aid eating sushi and drinking cappuccino!”Proceeding from this I had to think how I should position myself.

Gaining the waste pickers’ some degree of trust and acceptance was not easy. I visited the site regularly and was asked several times by waste pickers not to return. One of the effective ways of gaining at least a certain degree of initial acceptance was to treat the smoke, odor and gas at the site as normal and show no reaction to it; dressing as simply as possible was also important. I could see how waste pickers appreciated my walking the site as if it

were a park, but it took me some time to be able to do this. Though it is often stated that: "participant observation involves getting close to people and making them feel comfortable enough with your presence so that you can observe and record information about their lives" (Bernard 1995:136), I could gain only some level of "trust" and "acceptance". I never took notes at the site, in order to allow the conversations to flow naturally, but rather wrote up as soon as possible afterwards. I was often dependent on my waste picker respondents and on their perception of both the site and me.

In spite of my anthropologist's desire to "go native," I had certain limits. There were situations in which I had to refuse a food that was offered me or say no when asked for my cell phone number. With all of these and other dynamics, the field was constantly changing and I had to adjust my behavior accordingly. Each time I introduced myself; I would observe the reaction and response of my respondent and pursue the conversation accordingly. While some people asked me not to waste their time, others would talk for hours. Although they clearly made sense of their lives at the dump, generated "positive" meanings, and had a certain sense of community, there were cases in which they some would suddenly start to cry when the conversation got deeper.

Chapter 3: Findings

This chapter provides episodes created from the ethnographic study that was conducted from December through March 2013 with various stakeholders in development aid: waste pickers, the city representatives and "Development Sustainable" agents and how they communicate with each other. Through the description of some episodes from my ethnographic study I am attempting to illustrate some limitations of international development constructions of waste pickers.

3.1 "Consultant" or "Spy"

This time it took me much longer to get to the dump from the main road, because the road was extremely muddy. My boots were covered in mud and I could feel that my socks were wet. I reached the entrance to the site and for some time just kept walking, greeted people on my way. There were not many people that day. The snow was melting and yellow water was leaking from the dump onto the main road. In spite of winter days, the site was still exuding smoke and fumes. During the summer, the waste looks more colorful, but now it looked mainly brown with plastic bags coming from all sides. Even the strange sounds coming from the enormous number of big birds seemed disturbing. Some were flying; others sitting and resting. There were a few dogs looking for food next to their owners.

To avoid the muddy road, I decided to walk through the garbage heap. From the heap I could see more people. Because the weather was cold, some people were burning plastic to warm up. I saw a family sitting around the fire with two kids about 10 or 12 years old and I asked them whether I could talk to them for 10 or 15 minutes. Seeing that I had some papers with me, immediately said I can come to warm up, but that they were not going to give any information about themselves. I nodded and sat next to them. They seemed completely uninterested in me. None of them asked me anything. Their attention seemed to be focused on the fire; the plastic that was burning and producing black smoke… In a way, I was glad we were all silent… This moment of silence itself was telling me a lot about these people's lives… I thanked them for letting me warm up and, with many thoughts in my head, decided to go home.

When I was just leaving the dump and reached the exit, I was stopped by a tall man-Star 1. He asked me what I was doing at the site and whether I was looking for someone… I was happy that finally at least one person was willing to talk to me. I started to explain that I

was studying Social Anthropology and that my thesis is on people working at the site. I told him the closure of the dump was being considered by the City and that, as a result, the waste pickers would lose their source of income and that I worked for the "Development Sustainable" that was considering how to help the waste pickers find other job opportunities. When I finished he said: "you say you're a sociologist, but you seem to be a bit of a stupid sociologist… or maybe it's because you are a woman… You should learn to use the brain God gave you to think with… If your organization really wants to help people, go and tell them to help pensioners, homeless people and others who really need help. We need help here less than those people woman-sociologist… Listening to you, it sounds like you work for a company called "Justice for Poor" and want to save us, but we have a simpler name for you that reflects the nature of your work better: you are a spy for your company…When he finished, the only thing that I could say was… "Wow, what a perspective!" And I could not stop laughing… He continued: "You seem to like my version of your story." "Yes I do," I answered. "I'm busy today," he said: "Come back another day and I'll teach you to think" … I said "I certainly will…"

3.2 "Illegal" or "Project Affected"

The story takes place at a roundtable discussion between the "Development Sustainable" Company and representatives of the City of Bishkek. I was representing "Development Sustainable". Our team consisted of 10 people. The meeting was quite formal; each person introduced themselves, gave their background and exchanged business cards. The meeting began and more people kept arriving. All were in suits and ties with watches. Clearly City officials had little problem surviving on government salaries of approximately USD 200. The international consultants started their presentations, explaining the policies and rules of "Justice for the Poor" and showing successful and unsuccessful cases from various parts of

the world. People from the City side were talking a bit and some were answering their phones. Thinking about how many problems this country was facing, I thought that this should be something important. The person in the main position was already falling asleep at the beginning of the meeting and at some point, even the translation went a bit wrong.

One of the international consultants asked me to print the Russian version of the presentation for City people. I took the memory stick and went to one of the offices in the building hoping to find a printing machine. I knocked on the nearest office and saw a man who was at the meeting, although I had not seen him leave. I smiled at him and, without introducing myself, quickly said I was from the meeting and needed help. He looked at me as if he did not understand what I wanted. I then introduced myself as a representative of "Development Sustainable" and asked whether he could kindly print something for me. He said: "What… you are making a fortune on the pretext of solving this country's problems, spending all this money on endless experts that are supposed to know our problems much better than we do, who stay in expensive hotels, and in the end send us suggestions… We would have already built two recycling plants, while you are still studying, assessing and evaluating… and on top of all of this, you're now asking me to print something for you? Pay me for it!" There was a moment of silence and the person who was sitting next to him stopped working on her computer and looked at him. He looked back at her and continued: "Yes, yes, it's true, it's just that you don't know the salaries they are giving themselves for studying us and our problems." She did not answer and he appeared to calm down. I replied that I had been asked to have this printed and forgotten, that I really needed his help and that after the meeting I would pay for printing." He said nothing and took the stick card and printed the document. Then I asked "How much I owe you?" and he answered: "There's no need to pay." I thanked him and left to return to the meeting.

The first presentation was still in progress. It was a bit noisy in the room. The City

officials looked tired. The consultants were explaining that as a result of the Project there would be two types of resettlement: economic and physical; economic being mainly for the waste pickers, as the old dump where they earned their incomes would be closed, and physical-being for the people who lived next to the site, as some houses within the Buffer Zone would probably have to be moved during the rehabilitation of the old dump site and construction of the new landfill. They emphasized that under the "Development Sustainable" policy, these were PAPs with the right to certain benefits. They further explained that the City, as a "client" or "borrower," had to follow certain rules. These included: (1) conducting a census to identify all persons who will be displaced by the Project and a survey to gather socio-economic baseline data and assess Project's socio-economic impact on the incomes and living standards of the PAPs; (2) carrying out meaningful consultations with PAPs; (3) promptly compensating economically displaced persons (regardless of whether or not they are physically displaced). (4) ensure that no physical or economical displacement would occur until compensation at full replacement cost had been paid to each affected person; (5) establishing a grievance mechanism to receive and seek to resolve of affected people's concerns and grievances regarding the Project.

When these rules were stated, that City representatives started to express their discontent. The main representative of the City stated: "As we discussed earlier, there are more than 300,000 informal migrants living in Bishkek and many of them have occupied lands illegally and built their houses in new settlements. The people living next to the site are illegal settlers and the people working at the dump are illegal as well. Under the Kyrgyz law, we can only use force to chase them away and police is ready to do that. They have broken the law and now it is impossible for the City to talk about improving their livelihoods. If we do this for them, the other 300,000 informal citizens will come tomorrow to claim benefits. That is our position."

After the stating of the City's position, the consultants softened their language a bit. "We're aware that working and living next to the site is considered illegal and informal," they explained: "but under the "Development Sustainable" policy, no force can be used, no police is needed, meaningful consultations should be carried out with the PAPs, and we're here to help you to meet these policies." The City people were whispering to each other: "If they create an 'island of Europe' for illegal workers and settlers, how are we going to deal with the rest of the population tomorrow" It's not our policy; it's theirs, so let them do it."

The City, as client, asked: "How you are going to deal with these people, carry out a census, survey and consultations? They are not easy to deal with… They do not talk to anyone and they are even dangerous. But let me introduce you the representative from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, who can provide as many police as you need, so that your security will not be threatened."

Before the second presentation was finished, the leading City official in the room informed the "Development Sustainable" representatives that the City was willing to support the project in any way, that they would provide security to deal with the illegal workers and residents and that they looked forward to continued cooperation. He also warned the consultants to "be careful" at the site. Before closing the meeting, it was suggested to leave 5-10 minutes for possible questions from the City and people began raising various other issues – homelessness, pensioners, other informal citizens –asking why we were only helping this particular group, and how "Development Sustainable" could help with these other issues. They were interrupted by other City specialists who knew the context of this particular project better and explained that this was not a social project, but rather one focused on the dump and on the specific people who would be affected. There were no more questions and the specialists wished one another good luck and, without having reached a common understanding, finished the meeting hoping for fruitful cooperation and repeating that they

were ready to support one another in all ways possible.

3.3 Informal Meetings

We walked to the office of a city official-Star 2 and he asked me whether I understood what I was going to deal with when I worked with the waste pickers and whether I have ever been there. I told him I had spent about 4 months visiting the dumpsite twice a week and talking to people when I was writing my Bachelor thesis and that now I was writing my MA thesis in Budapest.

The next question was about my age and whether I was married. I said that I was 27 and not married. He said "Mmmmm, we're almost the same age. I'm 32 and I already have 4 children." "Mmmmm, are you?" I replied: "That's cool." "Yes, I have 4 kids," he shot back: "but what's cool about it, Aikokul? I have to work, send them to school, buy clothes and feed them, and my salary is small. I'm sure that as a student abroad your stipend is much higher than my salary. That's why I sometimes have to take a bribe.' Then he laughed and continued: "That's our reality; that's how we live." Then he asked: "What's your stipend in Budapest?" "USD450 a month," I answered. He replied: "That's three times my salary. Do you want to share so your work starts moving?"

Seeing my silence, he continued: "I know that local consultants in this country earn around 150-200 USD for a working day and some even get that amount in Euro. We pretend that we don't know, but we know everything. How much do you get for your work?" He was right in his predictions of the payment, but I could not tell him how much I earned, because my 60 days' payment was nearly his five-year salary (minus the bribes he had mentioned). I said: "I don't know how much local consultants earn. I'm still a student and I was hired temporarily by 'Development Sustainable' to help the City prepare a Plan to deal with the waste pickers when they lose their jobs." Without letting me to finish, he responded: "Aikokul, did you grew up here? Do you know how many problems the City has today? We

can't help pensioners or orphans; we can't create job for youth, let alone these illegal workers and settlers. From the very beginning, when discussion of this project started a year or two ago, we informed your organization that we can't deal with the problem of the waste pickers and illegal settlers. After some time he sent me the waste dump to meet with 22 formal workers of Tazalyk who work there to bring the site to possible order.

I reached the dump. I was invited to an office like room in which some 10 to 12 people were sitting around the table about to eat. I entered the room, greeting them loudly, as I had met them before… I sat at the table among them, knowing that my brash behavior had nothing to do with what I was feeling at that moment… Finding myself among all these men reminded me of the Soviet movie "Koroleva Benzakolonki" "Queen of the Petrol Station."

From the darkness of the room, I could see that the smoke reached there as well. They had a simple dining table with benches like seating on both sides. There was a stove, a microwave, a refrigerator, plasma TV and a DVD player. Somehow they seemed out of place. While they were studying me, I was studying them, looking carefully at each one… Working at the site and dealing with other people's waste for a living had left signs on their hands and faces, although this was not necessarily the case for the one who introduced himself as the Director of the site. Their ages ranged from 20 to 50. Their eyes of tended to be a bit red or yellow and some of their faces were covered with black smoke. Their lips were dry with noticeable traces of black smoke or dust on the outsides … Some had fake gold teeth and others were missing one or two teeth.

One of them brought bread to the table and others brought several pots full of fried meat. Each pot was shared by 3 or 4 people. As they were watching me closely, they quickly noticed that I was somewhat reluctant when the food arrived. "Don't worry, it's not from the dump," one said: "We just bought it… You thought people at the dump didn't eat meat; that they were homeless, poor and alcoholic" … I said "no" and I took a piece of bread, put some

meat on it, and began to eat. At the same time, I was observing how they were sending one another eye signals. I thought to myself: "Okay, I passed the first test…"

While I was chewing my first bite of bread and meat, I was asked: "What did you lose here a young lady?" Then others chimed in: "Are you married? Do you have kids? Why aren't you afraid to come to the site alone?"… I answered that I had done research at the site for my thesis, that I was also working temporarily for a project and that my task was to study the waste pickers' socio-economic status in order to be able to find alternative job opportunities if the existing waste dump were to close…

They answered that it had been 10 or 15 years since the closure of the waste dump was first discussed, but that it had never happened. The government and international organizations had divided the all money and nothing had ever been done to improve their lives. They said that Danish or Dutch experts had come to the site with fairytales about the landfill gas being drilled. Some expensive equipment was brought and installed, but it never worked and remains there unused till this day. (One of them took me to the equipment later to show me they were not telling the truth. Indeed, it was there and not functioning.)

They further said that the City had forced them to work for those experts for 120 soms a day (about USD3) helping them install pipes; that the experts were properly clothed, with boots, gloves and masks while they themselves had none… They angrily recounted how the experts changed their boots and protective clothes every day and left the used ones at the site and that they then picked them up to wear… These people very clearly had no faith in either the government or development organizations. They had heard enough stories that never came true that they were unwilling to listen to mine. I could only listen and learn about their perspective.

In between these discussions, some young boys entered and joked that if I really wanted to see things from inside, I should marry them and stay at the site; then I could just

cook for them and write my thesis there… The boy whom they suggested I marry was younger than me and when he smiled I noticed that he had a full mouth of fake-gold teeth. I smiled and kept silent. They continued teasing me, saying that he had three story houses and a nice car, was hardworking, did not drink or smoke and prayed five times a day, as did many of them. I replied that I had a boyfriend. They said that was not a problem and laughingly suggested that if I brought him, they would kill him and a new love story would begin. I knew that they were only teasing me to see my reaction. They knew I was from a different background and reality, that I had my own perception of them, and that I had come for a particular purpose, for a limited time… Later, one of them asked for my phone number, and, without waiting for my answer, others told him: "Come on! What will you do with her phone number?"

While making these jokes they returned to serious things and again asked me what I wanted from them, when my Star 1 walked in, who had called me a spy when we first met. He entered the room and asked: "What is this little spy for the 'Development Sustainable" Company doing here again?" I answered with a big smile, a bright red blush and silence… One of the men sitting nearby said: "She came to write about how bad our lives are and that we eat out of the the trash," to the laughter of the men… Star 1 did not stay long. He took some water and a glass of kefir and announced that someone fainted again…

They kept asking what I wanted from them but each time I tried to answer I was interrupted with stories about their low salaries, government corruption, and how all discussion of closure of the dump and building of a new one was empty talk. They said that many people at the dump used to work for the nearby brick factory, which they said was driven into bankruptcy on purpose through the involvement of some deputies, and sold to a Chinese company that fire all of the workers and brought in 300 of their own Chinese workers. One of them added: "People think China is rich and their people are rich, but they

have a part of the population that is ready to work for food and many are working in road construction in Kyrgyzstan." someone else added: "The ones who work in the brick factory are illegal: they keep everything closed and let no one in. If you don't believe this, go and see.

They spoke of an oil company in the country that was also to the Chinese sold through the interference of deputies, saying that even though there was an agreement they would hire 50% Chinese, 50% Kyrgyz workers, 95% of workers are Chinese. They said: "If one day the City manages to build a new waste recycling plant, they'll probably give it to some Chinese company that'll chase them all away and bring in their own workers…"

Without ever having listened to what I wanted from them, they sent me home saying: "You'd better go home and if you're not married have a nice time with your parents, make them some tea. This place is not for you… There were some girls like you who came before saying they wanted to write down our stories, but they were put in their place… There are various people here… You can never know who is good and who isn't… But if they see you causing trouble on their road they'll just take you and no one will notice you're gone. You seem to be a good girl. You'd better go home…"

I thought I had come to save them and now it looked like they wanted to save me. Despite my appreciation for their concern, I was confused. They all wished me good luck with everything: studies, personal life, etc., as if it were the last time we would see each other, but I knew I would be back on the site, as I had a task to complete…Beyond my academic interest, however, my involvement in the project had to do with meeting my own needs, although I could not tell them that. One of them went out to see me off and asked "are you going to the city" I said "yes" and he stopped the Tazalyk truck and asked: "can you give this sociologist a lift somewhere in the city?" The truck driver agreed and I found myself in a very old "Zhil" truck which exposed me to yet another reality.

I cannot describe the truck, but it was a very sweet dark green old Zhil and this was

my first time sitting in such a truck. Everything inside reminded me of some past: the seats, the interior design, the ruler, the motor, the doors and windows… Just sitting inside this truck felt like travelling 40 years back in time and somehow, I felt excited.

The driver was in his 50s with wrinkles and a lot of white hair… While I was looking around the inside of the cab, he asked me where I wanted to get off. I answered: "Any place that's convenient for you." He suggested a place not far from my apartment. While driving, we began to talk. I learned that he had been working for Tazalyk for 15 years, came from a remote region of Kyrgyzstan, and had four kids. When I told him I was studying in Hungary, he immediately asked whether I worked for the Hungarian company that had installed GPS's in their trucks. I said no and that I had no idea what a GPS was. He explained that it measured the kilometers they drove each day. Without my asking another question, he told me that, before the GPS's were installed, the drivers were able to "save" a little petrol each day, sell it, and bring some extra money home. I noticed that he used the word "save." when, from my perspective, it would be "stealing"… Now, he explained, the GPS makes it impossible to do this and he was surprised at how such small equipment could exert such control over them. Since the drivers could no longer "save" anything, they had to wait for their 7000-som monthly salary (around 130 USD) and were obliged to borrow from nearby kiosks and record their debt for food until their salaries arrived. In many parts of the city's periphery there are kiosks that sell food and other goods. They have special notebooks for clients who take food and pay once they get their salaries. He complained that his entire salary went to the kiosk. Finally I reached my destination, thanked him and went home.

3.4 Meeting of Stakeholders at the Site

We gathered at the Hyatt with the surveyors and the international consultant. I asked all surveyors to dress as simply as possible. With our clothes and boots for the dump, we

attracted a lot of attention at the hotel. The surveyors were joking that they should see us when we were back from the dump and that we should come to clean our shoes with the hotel's shoe polishing machine. These jokes had started the day before when I had told them to meet at the Hyatt. We had our drinks while listening to classical music, went through the survey instructions once again and got back into our taxis. In 20 minutes, the taxis would take us to a completely different world of people. In the taxi, I kept calling the City worker who had informal influence at the site. Finally, he answered his phone. He said he was available only for 10 minutes at the site and then had to go. I had to take what I could, so I said that would be fine.

Although people work in various parts of the dump in small groups or families, the majority work at the end of the site. We decided to start from that part and the City official took us there. He started to call the people, explaining that the City was starting a project with the support of "Justice for the Poor" and that anyone interested should come closer. It was clear that people knew him and that he had influence. About thirty people circled us and more were coming. They were talking to one another and asking questions at the same time and my voice could not reach many. They were asking exactly what would happen to them if the dump closed and we did not have a clear answer. I felt I was losing control over the crowd. Meanwhile, the City official was leaving and I heard him telling some people not to beat us up. They were getting louder and louder and as soon as I started telling them about the project and why we needed to conduct a survey, one man came forward-Star 3.

He was a tall, handsome man in his 40s. Working at the site had left signs on his hands, his face was partly covered in the black smoke, and his eyes were a bit red. I could already feel that he was full of anger when he first tried to come up front. Without listening to what was being said he started: "Why are you lying to the people here saying you want to do good for us and so we have to fill out your papers… None of you here think about us

people… Those days are gone… Why don't you just admit that you were paid to come here to get your papers filled out… Why not do something real? Why are you spending money at all on those papers that do nothing for anyone… You think we're crazy, but come on – we live in the 21st century and we know about your dirty business!" The people were getting louder and I started to lose myself again when the international consultant stepped out, raised his hand and asked the people to give him a chance to speak. People started asking Star 3 to calm down and listen to the gray haired foreigner who probably came "uuuuuuu" from far away and might have something to say.

After some time, we reached a reasonable level of silence. The international consultant started to introduce himself and give information on the project. He explained that the closure of the waste dump was being considered by the City for environmental reasons, but that was not certain yet. The site might close, and it might not, but if it closed, they would lose their work and so the project was looking at how their lost incomes could be restored. He explained that within the framework of the project, only those who registered and filled out the survey form would be entitled to any benefits and that it was their choice to fill it out or not. He said the place was harmful for their health and that if the new site were built; some people could be integrated there in better conditions.

While some people were listening to him with some hope, Star 3 would not listen. I was translating and asking him with my fingers to wait a minute and let the international consultant finish his speech. He still said: "Stop this dirty business." The international consultant asked me to translate what he had said. A bit reluctantly, I translated word for word. He misunderstood me and started to say: "No waste is not a dirty business, it is practiced in many parts of the world and I work my job is to help create better and safer conditions for people doing this work." I clarified: "He's telling that what we are doing is a dirty business, not what he is doing…" The consultant looked a bit shocked and said: "Oh,

that's what he's saying…" In the meantime, I translated his speech to the public and Star 3 again immediately responded: "You seem to be worried about our physical health, but what about our mental health? If I end up losing my job here, I'll go mad… I'll certainly have a mental problem, because I won't be able to sleep if I can't find a job that can feed my four kids… Let's say there are 500 people working here and on average they have 4 kids, that makes about 2500 people – and I'm not counting the ones who support their relatives back in their villages with their earnings… So, if your project closes the site and offers nothing backing return, you'll be responsible for the starvation or mental problems of 2500 people… Does your project also deal with the mental problems resulting from unemployment?"

The consultant answered: "Exactly, that's why we're here. We want to get information to see how we can help people who will lose their incomes. My job is to make suggestions and I would like to suggest that you should keep working at the site in better conditions: protective clothes, boots, a kitchen, showers, first aid, vaccinations... But I'm not the one who makes the final decision. My job is just to make suggestions."

Star 3 interrupted him again and asked how he was going to do all that for them, if he knew any worker in Kyrgyzstan who had those facilities and that he should tell this fairytale to someone else, not to them. Star 3 did not allow anyone to speak, so people started getting angry with him. They asked him to calm down and let the person answer their questions as well. Some people were already showing interest in registering and filling out the survey. The surveyor girls asked whether they could start and the international consultant said yes.

He continued: "You see where certain life conditions brought people… They have no position… They sell everything when they see a little sign of a hope… Why do you think they're filling your papers…? They think you may give them something - it doesn't matter what, anything would be okay…" Then he said "I know you are doing just your part of the job" and walked away.

I stood for a while looking from the distance at what was happening on the site. Trucks were coming and leaving the waste that looked like a young growing mountain. It was quickly picked up by the people. After they took the recyclables, the leftovers were consolidated and straightened by the yellow tractor. Some parts of the dump were still burning and smoking, but that was mainly along the edges and in the areas where people were not working. The many birds also seemed used to the smoke. Some were flying while some were sitting comfortably as if this were the nest they were born in.

There was a parking area at the top of the site with five cars: three Soviet Moskvich cars, one Lada and one Audi. The surveyors were using the cars as tables to write down the information people were providing. Some surveyors were walking up to people who were working; others were sitting next to the ones who were resting, if they agreed to fill out the survey. The general atmosphere was calm. I started walking to get my part of the surveys filled out…

3.5 How to bridge

It was raining and we were at the dump site to carry out a consultation with the waste pickers. Because of the rain there were only about 40 people working at the site. It took us some time to gather about 10 people, as most were not very interested in our consultation. One of the waste pickers found a tire and started a fire, so we can warm up. It produced an immense black smoke and we stood around it discussing the project and tried to answer their questions about what would happen to them if the site were closed. We tried to answer questions and discuss possible livelihood restoration options towards more "sustainable development"…

Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion

In this Chapter, I will use the case of Bishkek as a prism through which to examine some of the limitations of international development constructions of waste pickers. As elaborated earlier in my literature review, there are three main assumptions that guide the observation of the "waste-picker" issue in development discourse: (i) that waste pickers are poor and vulnerable; (ii) that empowerment through formalization, normalization and organization will lead to improved access to income, public recognition, and self-esteem; and (iii) that support to and integration of manual waste picking is a means toward sustainable development in developing countries. In this Chapter, I will look at how these arguments relate to the specific case of waste picking at the site in Bishkek. Drawing on the empirical data presented in Chapter 3, I will argue that the picture is in fact more complicated, and specifically: (i) that the case of waste pickers in Bishkek problematises uncritical assumptions of what "poor" and "vulnerable" may mean in certain contexts; (ii) that waste pickers themselves may not always support the "formalization" or "normalisation" of their activities and other "solutions" that are supposed to "empower" them; and (iii) that waste pickers themselves can be extremely critical of development work, seeing it, not as intended to help them, but rather the development agencies and workers who engage in it. In sum, in the context of waste picking at an open dumpsite, talks and slogans of "sustainable development" may not hold a commonly shared meaning or understanding among diverse actors. I will now discuss these overlapping arguments one by one in more detail.

4.1 The "Before the Reform" images

The "before reform" discourse of what I have termed the 'consultant view' describes an image of waste pickers before the anticipated reform action. According to this description, waste pickers throughout the world tend to share certain common aspects: being generally poor, vulnerable, excluded, stigmatized, etc. The emergence of this activity is supposed to be

linked to structural socio-economic issues, such as poverty, unemployment, low levels of education and job skills, etc. This discourse also emphasizes the regular exposure of waste pickers to fires, injuries, illness and the dangers of coming into direct contact with hazardous and medical waste. To address this situation, they advocate measures to "empower" waste pickers. Yet the data from my fieldwork suggest that, while waste pickers at the Bishkek municipal dumpsite may indeed be characterized as poor, vulnerable and excluded (depending upon the context in which these terms are applied), such a characterization may be problematic – and even misleading – when placed in the broader context of the current socioeconomic realities of Kyrgyzstan.

The economic crisis that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union affected Kyrgyz lives in both villages and cities. Many people lost their sources of income and had difficulties surviving and adapting to the changes of "transition." Kyrgyzstan was the first post-Soviet country in Central Asia to engage in structural adjustment; privatizing land ownership (although with some restrictions) and reorganized its pension and healthcare systems to make them financially self-sustaining (Olcott 2005). Although the changes that came with structural adjustment promised a brighter future for all, few were actually able to benefit from them and life for many others became a daily struggle for food, marked by increasing anxiety, insecurity, and despair. Social benefits that people had come to see as a right, such as: access to hospitals, quality education and security now became a privilege. According to DeYoung (2009), unemployment and underemployment became the norm in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. All of these factors sparked a mass migration, from the countryside to the cities as well as to neighbouring countries. Today, nearly every Kyrgyz family has at least one member working abroad and sending remittances back home.

The number of internal migrants coming to Bishkek in search of better job opportunities to Bishkek has greatly increased, as life in the villages has increasingly failed to provide access

to needed cash. Formal employment in villages is generally limited to village schools, small medical units that often lack heating and access to hot water, village municipalities and small branches of banks or microcredit companies that "help" villagers by providing them loans at interest rates of 26% to 30%. As there are almost no opportunities for young people beyond livestock-raising and agriculture, many find themselves in informal jobs in Bishkek; in bazaars, construction, textile, taxi driving, etc. These informal sector jobs do not only absorb internal migrants and people who lack job skills, but also many highly skilled people who had jobs during the Soviet period and now may be found working in bazaars, driving taxis, etc. Just to bring up one short example from personal memory: my own mother, who had 14 years' experience as a midwife in a hospital, now works in a local bazaar, while my father, a former Executive Judge, works in construction, and my sister with a degree in Environmental Studies migrated to Russia 7 years ago, where she works in the service sector.

The problem is less a lack of availability of job opportunities but much more type of jobs and low salaries provided. A short trip to local bazaar in Bishkek provides with full information on this problem. From loudspeakers that are used to announce available job, typical offerings include: cart pusher, juice vender, dough maker, dish washer, shoe cleaner, cattle herder, carpet washer, car washer, sauna washer, babysitter migrants labourers to Kazakhstan and Russia, and highly paid jobs for girls on Kulieva Street (one of the city's red-light district). Average salaries in formal positions for doctors, lawyers, teachers and other professionals of USD 170-200 a month barely cover food costs in Bishkek. In such context, at the data from the dumpsite problematise our definitions of "poor" and "vulnerable," at least in their economic aspects. The waste pickers claimed to earn on average somewhere between 5 and 25 USD a day. So, although they indeed may be stigmatized, the sheer amount of money they earn which must be calculated with 150 USD for the lowest category and 750 USD for the highest at the dump helps them to re-integrate into the broader society; for which the main

criteria of access have effectively become money. As one 11-year-old child at the site asked me: “Why I should study? What will an education give me? There are so many people with diplomas who are unemployed. I can do better working here to buy a house and car…” And indeed, unemployment among recent University graduates in Kyrgyzstan has been estimated at between 53% and 80% (DeYoung (2009).

The data provided by Sim (2011) adds further substance to my claim. She estimates that there are 8800 informal waste pickers in Bishkek and divides them into three groups: homeless, pensioners, and other waste pickers. Sim (2011) quotes that there are 73,000 pensioners in Bishkek of whom some 89% receive pensions that are below the national cost of living, which is around 4000 soms (USD 90) per month.. Thus one waste picker interviewed at the dump told me: “We don’t need your help here. If you want to help people, go help people who really need help, like pensioners, homeless people and street kids.” This is not to say that the living conditions of waste pickers in Bishkek are acceptable, but simply that within the broader context of impoverishment and exclusion in Bishkek, terms such as “poor,” “vulnerable” and “excluded” should be applied with great care. Thus we find people who are framed in this way by others reframing these designations themselves. Concluding on this first argument, I think two points need to be highlighted: first, the assumption that waste pickers are vulnerable and poor irrespective of context and situation falls short of the given realities. Approaching waste pickers in the framework of a development aid project as it happened with the “Development Sustainable” initiative with the described “image”, therefore risks to apply instruments that miss the existing incentive structures on the ground. Second, the image prevents practitioners and theoreticians alike to develop new means for contact and exchange. The waste-pickers have their capital (mostly finance, but, as we shall see, also social capital and even political capital) and they must be taken into consideration not as the

non-possessive but as owners. Otherwise every initiative for dialogue risks ending up in mutual non-understanding.

4.2 The Tools of "Empowerment"

Based on the first assumption discussed above that waste pickers are poor, vulnerable and excluded, the 'reformers' call for measures to "empower" informal, unregulated waste pickers. This "empowerment" is believed to come through: (i) the *integration* of waste pickers into formal municipal waste management systems; (ii) public and official *recognition* of their work and its environmental, economic and social benefits; and (ii) improved *organization*, into unions, cooperatives, associations, etc. 'Reformers' claim that supporting waste pickers through these basic empowerment strategies can lead to better access to income, social benefits, public recognition and self esteem. The Bishkek data suggest that this view is limited in that it ignores the broader social context. Now I will examine each of these proposed reformist strategies more closely, starting with tools of "empowerment."

4.2.1 Formalization

While formalization is presented as something people have to strive for to gain access to benefits, in current context of formal employment in Bishkek, formalization is not an attractive goal for people who are already earning more than most formal workers. As discussed earlier, the average salary for formal workers is approximately USD 170-200 and most formal workers live from salary to salary and from debt to debt. Corruption has thus become such a part of the culture that certain common expressions ("I decided to help," or "I have to make a living," "you know how things work"), are used as easily understandable veiled references to the paying or receipt of bribes. The City official described in the data Chapter, who requested money "to spin the wheel of the project," explained that that his

salary was low and that he had to take care of his family, is a typical example of this type of discourse. We also saw that formal Tazalyk site staff work in similar work conditions to informal waste pickers and were in fact directly involved in the informal economy of the dump. According to Sim (2011), many Tazalyk drivers can be seen hanging sacks from the back of their trucks to gather valuable materials found at the top of waste bins as a supplement to their relatively low formal salaries. In such a context, in which 45% of all employment is informal (Sim 2011), and informal workers can earn considerably more than formal ones, "formalization" is simply not a meaningful goal. The "Development Sustainable" initiative risks, again, to approach the issue of waste picking by means that will most likely fail to establish mutual understanding and exchange. If stakeholder involvement is being desired by the project managers, one could conclude from that, then the generally accepted forms of involvement in any activity in Kyrgyzstan creates new challenges for development aid. Formalization as such seems to be no way out of the problem.

4.2.2 Normalization

When it comes to the "normalization" of this activity through recognizing waste pickers' environmental, economic and social contributions, often involving their renaming as "reclaimers," or "city beautifiers," as it was a case in some parts of India, my data suggest that waste pickers themselves to do not think of their activities in terms of such contributions. When I tried to talk in such terms, some would reply: "Aikokul, we are not concerned about environment, the economy or waste management; we work here for socioeconomic reasons." As can be seen from data Chapter they have their own perspective and way of interpreting things; such as calling me a "spy" or my team's work at the site as "a dirty business." They tend to be highly aware of the politics around the waste and they are perfectly able to differentiate what works from does not. Thus they do not necessarily share the idea that

"normalization" of their activities may be a means to their empowerment.

I would question the normalization of manual waste picking and how it is being presented today in international development, namely, as a successful case. I was stricken to read in the ''consultant view'' literature that in some cases women waste pickers consciously choose to form women only co-operatives such as Coopcarmo in Brazil, in order to build women's confidence, provide women with greater opportunities, challenge gender stereotypes and demonstrate that women can do the same work as men. This claim is validated with the quote below:

> We want to show we can do things as independent women that we can carry bundles of materials and also be in charge of burning copper. We want to show we can recycle.
> (*Quote from Samson's book 2009: 24)*

My intention here is not to question that women can do a lot of things men do, but in comparison with the realities I described in my stories, such approach, the very idea of a normatively driven form of appreciation is simply at odds. It is rather strange that affirmation for some women's work can come by means of waste picking and carrying bundles of materials and also being in charge of burning copper. Such "normalization", in my opinion, risks to simply label the same life conditions differently for the sake of producing success stories but it does not lead to the emergence of empowered groups of the formerly excluded.

Proceeding from the provided contextual and empirical information, I claim that empowerment through formalization, normalization and organization in the forms and the dimensions described in the ''consultant view'' literature does not correspond with lived realities of waste pickers in the current conditions of the country. Taking into consideration that boundaries of informal and formal sector is rather lose, if not to define it outright as open since people easily move between these intermingled boundaries. To put it differently, low formal job salaries together with state unemployment benefits of about 15 USD a month and minimal monthly salary of the same amount does not seem to inspire waste pickers in Bishkek. To empower them in terms of an more visible societal representation seems not to

fully take into consideration the given structures and constraints already at place, with wide incentives to invest in informality, with various features of organization and coordination already in place and with normalized forms of social and economic activities as socially accepted behaviour.

4.2.3 Organization

While the 'reformers' tend to promote particular modes of organization (i.e., trade unions, cooperatives, associations, MSEs, etc.) waste pickers in Bishkek do not fall into any of these categories, yet this does not mean that they are not organized. Rather, they are organized in a different way; one that is actually well adapted to the current conditions of the city. As one can see in the data Chapter, most of them work at the main tipping face of the dumpsite, in cooperation with Tazalyk workers, who routinely wait for the recyclables to be extracted from freshly dumped waste before pushing the remainder into the pile. Their behaviour as described on the day of the Survey shows that they can easily gather when called and collectively express opinions and make consensual decisions. The practical division of the site into territories, the fact that they cannot remove so much as a bottle from a given territory and rather must sell their materials to particular middlemen who come to the site daily at certain time – all of this shows organization, structure and the collective following of rules. Beyond this, there is also the larger picture of how the industrial waste dumped during the Soviet period is being extracted from the dump and sold to China, which involves the passing of formal borders. Informal waste picking in Bishkek can thus be seen to be a highly organized and structured activity, on many levels. Even if the intention to organize the waste pickers rests in a different motivation, namely to create forms of political representation, one – and especially the reformers – must take into consideration the existing forms of organization that have their own borders, responsibilities, informal representations and

coordinating mechanisms that can interact but also prevent, hinder and undermine any effort to build new organizations on top of that.

4.3 "After Reform" Images

The third assumption focuses on images of waste pickers after the "reform." Reformers claim that when manual waste picking is properly supported, it can represent a viable example of "inclusive" and "sustainable" development in the Third World countries: jobs can be created, poverty reduced, materials costs for industry lowered, resources conserved, pollution reduced, and the environment is protected. While beautifully framed and presented, the data presented above suggest that, at least in the case of the Bishkek municipal dump, there are few clearly shared understandings among different actors of what "inclusivity" and "sustainability" actually mean in practise. Rather, from their experience of development projects, endemic government corruption, and the difficulties of living in an "NGO republic," they tend to see any promised "benefits" as purely rather symbolic and existing only on paper, and to resist the apparently good intentions of outsiders to "improve" their situation in any way.

The idea, for example, that their work contributes to protecting the environment makes little sense when they themselves are daily exposed to gas, smoke and hazardous waste, and burn tires to warm themselves. Nor does talk of contributing to the economy make much sense when their country's deep economic and political problems have led them to a situation in which working at a dumpsite is their best work opportunity. To talk of "safeguard policies" and "livelihoods restoration," the waste pickers at the site will simply say: "Go tell this fairytale to someone else…" They do not believe in the good intentions of others to help them. The statement by Star 3 quoted earlier – "Why are you lying to the people here saying you want to do good for us and so we have to fill out your papers… None of you think about

us … Those days are gone" – offers a window into the waste pickers' vision of development workers, who come and go while they remain in their daily reality.

It was shown in the Context Chapter that the socioeconomic conditions in Kyrgyzstan continue to produce an increasing number of people who are dependent on the waste stream for their income and livelihood. While this thesis has focused mainly on waste pickers at the dumpsite, the majority of these people actually operate elsewhere in the city: homeless people, pensioners and others who collect recyclables from waste bins. The 'reformers' also inform us that number of waste pickers is estimated to be growing, due to the structural problems that they identify. When generating "solutions," however, they tend to focus rather on symptoms than on the true underlying problems. They explain that the developing world faces issues such as a surplus of cheap unskilled labour and a scarcity of capital, and they propose as a solution measures to "empower" informal workers through formalization, organization and normalization and think creatively about waste picking at the open waste dump.

4.4 Conclusions

The very problem that I today see, based on my findings, is a situation, in which waste pickers have long abandoned the idea of development itself and became overtly suspicious of any event or action related to it. The experience of disappointment, of multiple abandonments after each project closed its doors has created an atmosphere of hostility and firm opposition against development initiatives. Not only are structural problems of the "Third World" to be taken into consideration for any new development aid project, but it is also the very result of failing projects that create new obstacles for any further initiative. It is this last point that I want to elaborate on a bit further while concluding my thesis.

My findings and the case of the waste dump site in Bishkek provides evidence to the

hypothesis that development aid becomes increasingly dependent upon its own results. And it does so in a negative was, one could say, by means of a vicious cycle. If a yet untouched social reality - the waste dump site – might offer various connecting points and ways and forms of and for engagement from outside, it seems to me that the already transformed situation in Bishkek currently has been transformed heavily by development aid. Talking to the waste pickers on the site, running into offices in the city administration, translating between various stakeholders, conferring with international consultants not only provides you with the picture of "business as usual", of the big industry that needs projects to keep its organizations running, but it moves into directions, where new inter-dependencies, new antagonistic attitudes and negative expectations seem to further lead projects such as the one of the "Development Sustainable" donor into a deadlock. Nobody within the project seems to be able to take claims by the other site for real, no translation is enough to create real exchange, when mistrust and the experience of failure has already closed all doors for authentic exchange.

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