



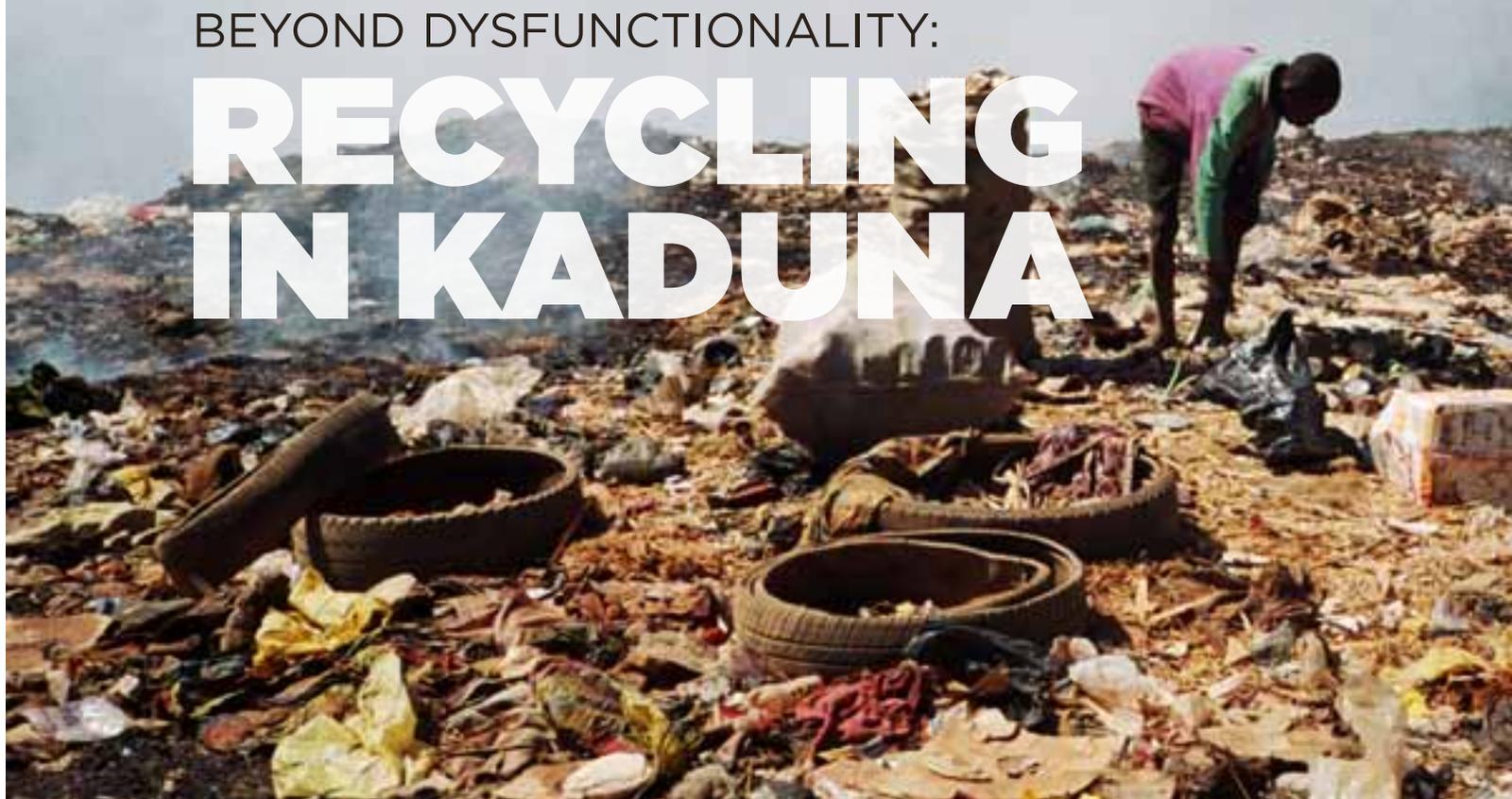
**URBAN/ONYANTA ADAMA-AJONYE**

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Groups of young men running after trucks that have come to dispose of waste in open dumps. Or dirty children picking materials amidst the smoke and stench of the garbage. These images of waste-picking fit the common perception that African cities are dysfunctional. But African cities do function – only not in the ways planners and development experts expect them to.

# BEYOND DYSFUNCTIONALITY: RECYCLING IN KADUNA



**BEHIND THE SEEMING CHAOS** is a constant, complex but structured flow of individuals and materials. Waste-picking and informal sector recycling generally takes place in various settings and involves a wide range of interconnected actors.

Kaduna is a declining industrial town in north-central Nigeria. Apart from the general economic crisis facing the cities across the country, in Kaduna the problem has been compounded by a spate of ethno-religious crises in recent years, which have driven investors to nearby Abuja, Nigeria's capital. However, some factories remain, including a car assembly plant, construction companies and others producing beer, soft drinks, building materials and household products.

The story of solid waste management in Kaduna is a familiar one. There is no formal waste sorting or recycling; not all the waste produced is collected; and waste is dis-

posed of in open dumps and even illegally in public spaces. Figures obtained from the government put the amount of biodegradable waste produced per day in Kaduna at 2.1 tons, while non-degradable waste amounts to 8.2 tons per day. The latter, comprising mainly metal, paper, plastic and glass, forms the bulk of the material found in the informal recycling sector.

**THE INFORMAL SECTOR** has positioned itself to target waste at specific crucial points: households, streets and other public spaces, dumps and factories. The household is a major source of waste. An informal waste-sorting system has emerged largely through the activities of itinerant waste-pickers, known locally as *mai kwalabe*, whose main area of operation is high-density low-income areas. *Mai kwalabe* is a Hausa word meaning someone who deals in bottles. While old bottles used to be the only material collected, the busi-



PHOTOS: ONWANTIA ADAMA-AIONYE



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A *yan bola* in Kaduna, a local word referring to young boys who make money from picking up waste materials from public places.

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ness has expanded to include items such as second-hand shoes and aluminium cooking pots. The collectors advertise themselves by chanting *mai kwalabe* on the streets. When they find a customer, the materials are assessed and the price negotiated with households. The price is generally not much, since people are happy to get rid of the waste.

In some cases, children also gather used perfume and body-cream bottles to sell to *mai kwalabe*. The children are offered a little cash or sweets in exchange. In households where Islamic injunctions prevent women from lea-

ving their houses, doing business with the *mai kwalabe* may be the only opportunity the women have to engage in an economic activity.

**ANOTHER GROUP DESERVING** of mention is what I call “opportunistic waste-pickers”, children between the ages of five and ten. They sort and keep waste, particularly plastics and light metal from their own homes and from neighbours, and sell to middlemen in their neighbourhood.

Public spaces, ranging from streets to markets and business premises, are another important source of materials for waste-pickers.

One important and active group is the *almajiri*, Muslim children in Koranic schools. Parents bring children to such schools from the age of four or five and leave them with a *mallam* or Islamic scholar to study the Koran. The *mallam* is supposed to provide accommodation and food, but in many cases they fail to fulfil their obligations. It is common to see *almajiri* begging on the streets, but the more resourceful among them have taken to waste-picking to feed themselves. *Almajiri* sell their materials, mainly light metals and plastics, to middlemen.

As noted earlier, the official waste disposal system is open dumping. Waste from households and factories is dumped at two sites in the city. There is no official sorting, but some of the personnel working for the waste-disposal contractors sort and pick waste. Waste-pickers are also allowed to come on to the dump sites to scavenge. These groups of pickers also sell to middlemen. ▶▶



Children waste-pickers eagerly awaiting the result as they put their load on the scale.

PHOTO: ONYANTIA ADAMA-NONYE

►► **THE FACTORIES AND COMPANIES** are a huge source of waste materials.

The major actors here are former waste-pickers who have made enough money to become middlemen. In many cases, the companies call the middlemen to come and buy or collect the waste materials. There are different kinds of arrangements for different companies. For example, when middlemen go to buy scrap metal from Sunglass Bottles, they also sell bottles to the plant. The waste, once bought, is sorted into various categories: tin, steel, special metal, caterpillar and glass.

Some of these materials are sold locally to artisans, but most of the waste is transported to recycling companies across the country. If the middleman has no links with a recycling company, he can sell his materials to an agent at the gate, but at a lower price than the recycling company offers. The agent then sells the materials to the company. Agents are individuals with enough capital to buy huge quantities of waste material directly from the waste-producing companies or from middlemen. Some middlemen with enough capital also double as agents.

**THE ABOVE ACCOUNT DEPICTS A SYSTEM** with an appreciable level of connectivity and interdependence. Particular types of waste are picked from specific places by specific actors. Age and gender are determinants. Children dominate the lower end of the chain. There is no female waste-picker or “middlewoman”.

Actors are intrinsically linked from the beginning of the chain to the end. The producers of waste – households and companies – have established links with the waste-pickers. It is common for a resident to refer to my *mai kwalabe*. Waste-pickers are the link between generators of waste and middlemen, while middlemen link waste-pickers to the final end-users, the recycling plants. The link between waste-

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pickers and middlemen is particularly interesting and provides some sense of continuity since, in many cases, it is waste-pickers that eventually become middlemen.

**WHILE PEOPLE BECOME** waste-pickers primarily to earn a living, informal sector recycling has broader implications for urban liveability and environmental sustainability. If a major aim of municipal solid waste management is to move up the waste hierarchy, then informal sector recycling is making valuable contributions by limiting the amount of waste going for final disposal. In the case of Kaduna, it is only the informal sector that is performing this function. ■