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Solid waste collection in Accra: The impact of decentralisation and privatisation on the practice and performance of service delivery

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Preface

In May 2001, Ghana Television (GTV), in its late news, showed a 5-minute caption on sanitation in certain parts of Accra. The part that struck many spectators, including me, was on an area called “Sodom and Gomorrah”. I was upset not only by the extent of filth and unsanitary conditions, but also by its name. The Biblical “Sodom and Gomorrah” is synonymous with social vices such as prostitution and promiscuity to the extent that God ordered its destruction.¹ Besides such negative activities that according to the GTV programme, also apply to this slum in Accra, there seems to have been a lack of laws, at least with regards to sanitation and basic hygiene in this residential area. The unsanitary conditions were, even on television, just frightening to watch. Viewers were so horrified at the terrible conditions in the centre of Accra that there was a public outcry for immediate demolition of “Sodom and Gomorrah” to save the people from a possible public health disaster. Innocent children were particularly at risk, sitting and playing on the ground and eating near uncollected waste dumps and scattered human faeces. Moreover, as in the biblical case, where God heard the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and ordered its total destruction², the government also called for the demolition of “Sodom and Gomorrah” after reviewing the programme.

But where is “Sodom and Gomorrah” and why did it cause so much commotion? To answer these questions, I visited the area. “Sodom and Gomorrah” is a new slum near the Agbobloshie-Kokonba Yam Market, in the centre of Accra, which sprang up following the construction of the market in the early 1990s. It is a make-shift squatters’ area of mat walls, cardboard and wooden structures, roofed with all kinds of materials, including polythene bags. It is perhaps the filthiest place in Accra. There is no waste collection in the area by any organisation, agency or individual, resulting in waste dumps and litter everywhere. There are no toilet facilities in the whole area. Although the adults may use public toilets in other parts of the city, the children who stay behind at home simply have to defecate outside. Such free-for all defecation means human faeces are a common sight. There is no drainage system and the few natural drains are blocked by all manner of waste including plastics and polythene bags through indiscriminate dumping. The stagnant waste water, which is greenish black in colour, offers a fertile breeding ground for mosquitoes and other disease carriers. It helps to sustain the high incidence of malaria and other diseases

¹ See the Holy Bible book of Genesis Chapter 18:20, Chapter 19 versus 23-25, and 27-29.

² Genesis Chapter 18, versus 20.

in the area and beyond. The place is waterlogged, so the ground is almost always wet. Children sit and play on the ground and also eat near waste dumps, which are in close proximity to the houses. There is congestion and overcrowding in this small area. These factors simply aggravate the situation as regards waste and sanitation. The waste dumps, which are at various levels of decay, attract flies and create a terrible stench which is a combination of the stench of human faeces and the stagnant wastewater, producing a repulsive strong odour similar to rotten eggs. The extent of wanton disregard for simple hygiene in the area makes it a potential powder keg for the outbreak of an epidemic that would affect the whole city.

What has forced people to come to Accra to live in such horrifying conditions, which they would certainly not have in their rural community? Why has the local authority allowed 'squatter settlements' in the city's centre to this day? Is this area the only one in the capital or just the tip of the iceberg? How do such behaviour and activities affect the urban environment? And what efforts are currently being put in place to rectify the situation? "Sodom and Gomorrah" epitomises the consequences, which neglect of simple basic rules for waste management and sanitation, as well as non-enforcement of physical planning and land-use regulations can bring to a community: haphazard development, environmental degradation and potential threat to public health and productivity. The paradox is that people are still coming into the cities in droves because they believe it offers them a better life. In many areas in Accra, the design of buildings, places and space is often at odds with the needs of urban society.

Knowing "Sodom and Gomorrah" encouraged me to undertake this study on solid waste collection in Accra. This would not have been possible without the support of many persons and institutions. I am grateful first and foremost to the Netherlands government, which funded this study through the Netherlands Israel Development Research Programme (NIRP) and the University of Amsterdam (AGIDS). I am particularly grateful to my promoters and supervisors, namely Professor de Bruijne, Professor van der Geest, and Dr Johan Post, all of the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. I am also grateful to Professor Eran Razin of the Hebrew University, Israel, who was the coordinator of the NIRP- Ghana Project, Dr M.A. Odei, the former Director General of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and Dr J. O. Gogo, the Director of the Science and Technology Policy Research Institute (STEPRI) of the CSIR.

I am very grateful to all the staff of AGIDS who in diverse ways made it possible for me to carry out this study. I would especially like to thank Carina Mulié, until recently the indefatigable managing director of AGIDS, who helped me in so many

ways that I have insufficient space to detail them all here. Special thanks are also indebted to Dr Mirjam Ros of AGIDS for editing this work and making it more readable. I would also like to thank the people at the Secretariat for their enabling and supporting role during my stay in the Netherlands.

I am most grateful to all those who responded to my questionnaires for their cooperation and patience in providing answers to the questions, as well as expressing their candid opinions on the issues raised during the interview schedules. Last but not the least, I am grateful to my wife Beatrice and all my children who sacrificed the comfort of having me in their midst and enduring long periods of absence to enable me to do the studies.

This study, the impact of decentralisation and privatisation on solid waste collection in Accra, Ghana, is a component of a wider research project entitled "Effect of decentralisation and organisational reforms on social and environmental management in Accra metropolitan area and surrounding towns and villages". The project was an international collaborative research effort between the Netherlands Israel Development Research Programme (NIRP), the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel), the University of Amsterdam (the Netherlands), and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR, Ghana).

Focusing on solid waste management, this study examines some of the major contributing factors that undermine sustainable development in the Accra metropolis and the current efforts aimed at improving the quality of the urban environment. I hope this study will be useful to researchers, planners and policymakers. Though it offers some policy recommendations, it is more diagnostic than prescriptive. Decentralisation and privatisation bring institutional change and create new institutions and institutional arrangements for development, management and governance. The agent of change is, however, the individual actor or entrepreneur responding to incentives embodied in the institutional framework (North, 1996: 83). Any change depends on his or her response to the changing environment.

