

# ENFORCEMENT OF SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT LAWS AND PUBLIC HEALTH OUTCOMES IN URBAN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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## Abstract

This qualitative study examines why robust solid waste management laws consistently fail to protect public health in the rapidly urbanising cities of Southeast Nigeria (Enugu, Onitsha, and Aba). Drawing on 72 in-depth interviews, six focus groups, and 180 hours of participant observation, four interlocking themes emerged: the theatre of enforcement (laws brandished but never applied), jurisdictional musical chairs (endless buck-passing between federal, state, and local agencies), the politics of the belly (systematic diversion of resources through patronage and corruption), and the slow violence of waste (gradual, embodied harm experienced as poisoned water, chronic respiratory illness, and recurrent epidemics among the urban poor). These findings reveal enforcement failure not as technical incapacity but as deliberate political subversion. Comparative analysis with Ghana, Kenya, India, Indonesia, Brazil, and Mexico shows the same dynamics recur globally wherever informal institutions of power override formal statutes. The study concludes that meaningful change requires depoliticising enforcement, clarifying responsibilities, ring-fencing revenue, professionalising officers, and integrating informal waste workers into participatory governance structures.

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Urbanisation in Southeast Nigeria presents a contradictory mix of economic prosperity and environmental danger, with rapidly growing cities such as Enugu, Onitsha, and Aba functioning as commercial hubs and migration destinations while struggling under the burden of uncontrolled solid waste. By 2050, Nigeria's urban population is expected to reach 67%, with an annual growth rate of approximately 3.5% driving waste generation to over 0.5 kg per person per day. This waste primarily consists of organic and recyclable materials, which can lead to ecological degradation and public health crises if not properly managed (United Nations, 2018). In Onitsha's commercial hub, daily waste totals over 200 tons, much of which is carelessly discarded along waterways and roadsides, thereby worsening flooding and pollution during rainy times (Ezechi et al., 2017). This scenario illustrates the general urban challenges in Africa, where rapid population growth outpaces infrastructure development, leading to open dumps that release contaminated leachates containing heavy metals and pathogens, directly putting respiratory, gastrointestinal, and vector-borne health outcomes at risk (Kadafa et al., 2012).

The literature on solid waste management (SWM) in Nigeria underscores a systemic failure rooted in historical colonial legacies and post-independence policy fragmentation. Early town laws, including the Township Ordinance of 1917 and the Public Health Ordinance of 1929, placed basic sanitation responsibilities on urban authorities but focused more on European settlements, overlooking indigenous communities and setting the stage for unfair enforcement (Mabogunje, 1968). Post-colonial reforms, such as the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) Decree of 1988, sought to consolidate supervision by controlling hazardous waste disposal and requiring environmental impact assessments for urban projects. However, the National Environmental Standards

and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) Act of 2007, which covers a wide range of environmental issues including air, water, and land pollution, has failed to be effectively implemented at the local level due to the division of responsibilities under the 1999 Constitution, where primary duties for solid waste management are assigned to state and local governments (Amasuomo & Baird, 2016). The 2009 National Environmental Regulations for Sanitation and Wastes Control spell out standards for segregating, collecting, and disposing of waste, with penalties of up to ₦500,000 for non-compliance, though enforcement is inconsistent, illustrated by the continued existence of unregulated landfills in Enugu as reported in the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2009). Analytical reviews of Nigeria's legal architecture reveal a tension between aspirational statutes and operational deficits. Kadafa et al. (2012) argue that the numerous overlapping laws, including the Harmful Waste (Special Criminal Provisions) Act of 1988, which imposes life imprisonment penalties for unauthorized dumping, and state-specific laws such as Anambra's Public Health Law (Cap 111, 1991), hinder cooperation by fostering bureaucratic inefficiency. In their comprehensive survey of municipal SWM, they document how federal pre-eminence in standard-setting clashes with local fiscal constraints, resulting in collection efficiencies below 40% in most cities. The lack of institutional capacity is worsened by insufficient resources; this can be observed in the case of environmental health officers (EHOs), who, under the 2009 Regulations, have the power to address disturbances and prosecute those who violate the law, yet frequently lack the required assistance, resulting in de facto immunity for offenders (Nwankwo, 2018). Nwankwo's study in the Southeastern state of Anambra, which quantifies the issue, found that 88.7% of EHOs lacked sufficient training to prosecute effectively, consequently resulting in conviction rates of only 22.1%, thus perpetuating a cycle where laws are theoretically in place but fail to be enforced.

Enforcement challenges in Nigerian SWM extend beyond institutional voids to socio-economic and cultural dimensions, as dissected in regional studies. In Southwest Nigeria, Ogwueleka (2009) attributes low compliance in Lagos to public apathy and informal economies, where scavengers recycle 20-30% of waste but face harassment under ambiguous bylaws, distorting formal systems. In the Southeast, Iyida's (2015) study of Enugu's metropolitan area reveals that urbanization-driven consumerism produces 75-90% organic waste, which is at odds with the community-oriented disposal habits that are hindered by top-down policies. Patronage networks divert allocated funds, with state agencies such as the Abia State Environmental Protection Agency (ASEPA) only capturing 10-15% of budgets for core operations, according to Amasuomo and Baird (2016). This echoes continental critiques, such as in South Africa's Waste Act of 2008, where enforcement gaps similarly amplify inequities, though Nigeria's federalism exacerbates decentralization pitfalls (Godfrey et al., 2007).

The public health ramifications of these enforcement lapses are starkly illuminated in epidemiological literature, linking unmanaged waste to a disproportionate disease burden in urban poor communities. Ezechi et al. (2017) found a link in Aba between leachate from open dumps and elevated nitrate (up to 150 mg/L) and manganese levels, which led to groundwater contamination that caused cholera and diarrhea outbreaks at a rate 2-3 times higher than in nearby settlements, exceeding WHO limits of 50 mg/L. Their geochemical profiling reveals bioaccumulation in soil, posing chronic risks like neurological disorders, while airborne particulates from open burning contribute to 25-30% of acute respiratory infections among children under five. Studies by Ogbonna and Nzegebuna (2007) found that long-term dumping in Port Harcourt, a city near Southeast corridors, leads to soil pH and nutrient changes, causing a 40% drop in agricultural yields and consequently contributing to increased health risks from malnutrition. The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey conducted in 2013 discovered that 57% of urban households are unable to use improved sanitation facilities, which has been linked to a 15-20% increase in waterborne illnesses resulting from blocked drains (National Population Commission, 2013).

The spread of vectors from waste heaps contributes to an increase in malaria and typhoid cases; a cross-sectional study conducted in Ibadan revealed that 58-77% of residents living near dump sites were affected, a similar trend was observed in Onitsha where rodent vectors transmit leptospirosis in flooded refuse environments (Abel, 2007). Health-related externalities incur significant economic costs, estimated to represent 1-2% of GDP, resulting from lost productivity and treatment expenses, which underscores the importance of solid waste management as a public good hampered by inadequate governance structures (World Bank, 2013). Furthermore, research highlights the disproportionate effects of disease on women, who, as primary caregivers, bear 70% of the burden associated with fetching contaminated water, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and increased exposure.

Despite this robust corpus, significant gaps persist in the scholarship, particularly concerning the Southeast's unique socio-cultural and geopolitical context. National summaries such as Kadafa et al. (2012) and Amasuomo and Baird (2016) offer broad analyses, however, more specific regional studies are scarce and frequently limited to quantitative data on waste volumes, failing to explore the complexities of enforcement, like the impact of Igbo communal land tenure on compliance or how post-civil war migrations affected sanitation issues in informal settlements. Moreover, existing studies predominantly adopt positivist lenses, emphasizing correlations over qualitative explorations of power dynamics, institutional narratives, and lived health experiences that animate enforcement failures (Iyida, 2015; Ezechi et al., 2017). Few integrate political ecology to unpack how elite capture marginalizes subaltern voices in policy formulation, a gap evident in the dearth of ethnographic accounts from

Anambra or Abia States. Internationally, parallels with Accra's governance voids (Oteng-Ababio, 2010) suggest transferable insights, yet Nigeria-centric research rarely engages such comparatives to inform localized reforms. This study fills the gaps in existing research by adopting a qualitative, interpretive approach, drawing on institutional theory, critiques of the waste hierarchy, and the political ecology of health to examine the socio-political foundations of enforcement in urban Southeast Nigeria. By centering voices of EHOs, policymakers, and residents in Enugu, Onitsha, and Aba, it illuminates "rules-in-use" versus formal statutes, revealing how corruption and jurisdictional ambiguities sustain health inequities. The central argument posits that robust enforcement demands not merely resource infusion but a reconfiguration of power relations, embedding participatory governance to align laws with cultural realities.

## METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilizes a qualitative research design to examine the enforcement of solid waste management laws and their impact on public health outcomes in urban Southeast Nigeria. The research seeks to expose the intricate socio-political, cultural, and administrative processes responsible for systemic failures in waste management, concentrating on personal experiences, organisational stories, and contextual explanations rather than numerical data.

### Theoretical Framework

The investigation is anchored in three complementary theoretical lenses that are particularly suited to interpretive, qualitative inquiry in developing-country contexts. First, the study employs the waste hierarchy framework not as a technical prescription but as a normative and political construct that reveals power relations in urban environmental governance (Amasuomo & Baird, 2016). In Nigeria, the hierarchy is routinely inverted: disposal dominates while prevention and recycling remain rhetorical. This inversion is seen as a sign of structural neglect rather than simply a lack of technical capacity, reflecting criticisms of how global sustainability discourses are selectively adopted in the Global South (Wilson, 2007). Secondly, institutional theory (North, 1990; Ostrom, 2005) forms the basis for examining the failure of enforcement. Laws, rules, and sanctions exist formally, yet "rules-in-use" diverge dramatically from "rules-in-form" because of overlapping mandates, patronage networks, and resource capture. The framework directs attention to how informal institutions – bribery, political interference, and ethnic favouritism – systematically undermine formal environmental and public health statutes in Southeast Nigeria (Nwankwo, 2018). The research relies on the political ecology of health (King, 2010) framework, positioning waste-related disease as a result of power imbalances in rapidly urbanizing areas. Informal settlements in Aba and Onitsha are being deliberately excluded from service distribution, resulting in a significant gap between the urban environments of the wealthy and the poor. This gap directly correlates with unequal exposure to diseases such as cholera, malaria, and respiratory illnesses. By combining these approaches, it becomes clear that technocratic explanations are insufficient and that power, history, and economic factors are crucial in understanding both waste accumulation and vulnerability to illness.

### Methodology

A multi-sited, interpretive case study approach was used, centring on three key urban areas in Southeast Nigeria: Enugu, Onitsha, and Aba, chosen for their distinct political economies and shared Igbo cultural context despite their contrasting roles as a state capital, commercial centre, and industrial city, and their comparable waste management issues. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit 72 participants whose positions afforded privileged insight into enforcement practices and health consequences, including Environmental Health Officers, traditional rulers, local community development chairmen, and residents living within 300 metres of major open dumpsites in informal settlements. Primary data were generated through three interconnected qualitative techniques conducted between March and November 2019. In-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 45–90 minutes, digitally recorded with consent. Interview guides explored lived experiences of law enforcement, bureaucratic obstacles, political interference, and observed health consequences. Six focus group discussions (8–10 participants each; three with residents, three with waste workers) to surface collective narratives and contestations around blame, responsibility, and coping strategies. Direct and participant observation at dumpsites, motor parks, markets, and during EHO patrols supplemented by photographic documentation and field notes were conducted.

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim in English (with Igbo phrases retained and translated where necessary). Analysis followed the iterative, inductive procedures of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Initial line-by-line coding gave way to focused coding and theoretical coding, yielding core categories such as "theater of enforcement", "jurisdictional musical chairs", "politics of the belly", and "slow violence of waste." Triangulation across data sources, prolonged engagement, member checking with 18 participants, and peer debriefing enhanced credibility and trustworthiness.

Ethically, informed consent was secured in writing or thumb-printed; anonymity was guaranteed through pseudonyms; and participants were free to withdraw at any stage. This qualitative approach emphasizes depth,

context, and the viewpoints of those directly affected by the crisis, offering an alternative perspective to the technocratic accounts that have typically dominated waste policy debates in Nigeria.

## RESULTS

A qualitative investigation into the enforcement of laws governing solid waste management in urban Southeast Nigeria yielded substantial, multifaceted data from 72 in-depth interviews, six focus group discussions, and 180 hours of direct observation conducted in Enugu, Onitsha, and Aba. Four overarching themes emerged through iterative grounded-theory analysis: (1) the theatre of enforcement, (2) jurisdictional musical chairs, (3) the politics of the belly, and (4) the slow violence of waste. These themes illuminate how formal laws are systematically undermined by informal institutions, producing a landscape of impunity that translates directly into preventable public health harm.

### **Theme 1: The Theater of Enforcement**

Participants repeatedly described enforcement as performative, rather than substantive – a “theatre” in which laws are brandished but rarely applied. Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) in all three cities recounted being sent on patrols without fuel, vehicles, or even basic protective equipment. One senior EHO in Onitsha explained: “We go to the market, we write reports, we take pictures, we issue abatement notices. After one week, the trader tears it and throws it into the same gutter. Nothing happens. The law is there, but it has no teeth because nobody fears consequences,” (EHO-07, Onitsha). This performative quality extends to prosecutions. In Anambra State, officers described preparing dockets only for cases to be withdrawn at the Ministry of Justice following telephone calls from politically connected offenders. A magistrate interviewed in Awka confirmed that of the over 15 waste-related cases brought before his court between 2016 and 2019, only four resulted in convictions, and even those fines were never paid. The phrase “arrangement don happen” recurred across interviews, signalling informal settlements that render legal processes ceremonial.

### **Theme 2: Jurisdictional Musical Chairs**

A second dominant theme was the deliberate diffusion of responsibility across federal, state, and local tiers – described by an informant as “musical chairs where nobody ever sits down.” The National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency asserts jurisdiction over standards, yet maintains that collection and enforcement fall under state responsibility. State ministries defer to local governments, while local governments protest that they receive no statutory allocation for waste. A staff in the Enugu State Ministry of Environment captured the absurdity: “When there is fire on the dump, NESREA will say ‘it is a state issue’. The state will say, ‘Talk to the local government. The local government chairman will say, ‘We have no money, write to the governor.’ This vagueness is no coincidence; several policymakers have acknowledged in private that it shields political interests by making it impossible for anyone agency to be held accountable (POL-03, Enugu).

### **Theme 3: The Politics of the Belly**

Corruption emerged not as isolated incidents but as the organizing logic of the waste sector. Contracts for collection vehicles, landfill development, and incinerators are routinely inflated or awarded. In Abia State, participants described how a sanitation project funded by the World Bank failed after the purchase of a few refuse trucks, with most being diverted to campaign rallies or sold within a few months. A waste collectors’ association leader in Aba stated bluntly: “The big men eat the money meant for dustbins and trucks, and then they tell us to manage. How do you manage hunger with laws?” (WCA-02, Aba). Traditional rulers and community development chairmen verified that sanitation fees collected from households usually do not reach the agencies responsible for providing services, but rather are diverted into personal funds. This “politics of the belly” (Bayart, 1993) ensures that enforcement remains starved of resources while simultaneously creating powerful vested interests in the continuation of chaos.

### **Theme 4: The Slow Violence of Waste**

The most visceral theme concerned the lived, embodied experience of waste-related harm – described by residents as “slow violence” that kills gradually and invisibly (Nixon, 2011). In Onitsha, mothers spoke of children who developed chronic coughs from sleeping beside burning dumps, of pregnancies ending in miscarriage after drinking water drawn from wells only metres from leachate pools. A widow in Aba narrated “My husband died from typhoid three years ago. The doctor said the water was poisoned by the refuse. Every rainy season, the whole place becomes a river of rubbish. We know the law says they should clear it, but nobody comes. So we bury our people and continue living inside the poison.” In primary healthcare settings, medical professionals noted that 60-70% of their consultations during the dry season and a remarkable 90% during the rainy season are related to health issues such as malaria, parasitic infections, diarrhea, asthma flare-ups, and various skin conditions and diseases. Children under five and elderly women are disproportionately affected, thereby reinforcing patterns of susceptibility and vulnerability. Observations at major dumpsites corroborated these accounts. At the Enugu Abakpa market dump, children as young as seven were observed scavenging barefoot among waste, broken bottles, and smouldering plastics. In Aba, the Ariaria market gutter was clogged with a two-metre-high ridge of refuse that had not been cleared for months, creating a permanent lake of stagnant black water that residents must



wade through to reach their homes. The acrid smoke from perpetual burning hung like a pall, stinging the eyes and throat even of the researchers. Across all sites, participants articulated a profound sense of abandonment by the state. Laws were perceived not as protective instruments but as weapons selectively deployed against the poor – market women fined for minor littering while politically connected hotels and factories dumped with impunity. This selective enforcement deepened cynicism and eroded any remaining social contract around sanitation.

A self-perpetuating cycle arises from the interaction of these four themes: performative enforcement legitimates ongoing underfunding, jurisdictional ambiguity protects corruption, and the politics of the belly ensures resources never reach the intended recipients – all while communities suffer the gradual, oppressive effects of living amidst their own waste. Far from being a mere technical or behavioural failure, the crisis emerges as a deeply political one, rooted in the systematic subversion of law by informal institutions of power. These findings resonate powerfully with earlier qualitative work in Nigeria and elsewhere. The "jurisdictional musical chairs" phenomenon resonates with the inter-agency buck-passing documented by Imam et al. in 2008 in northern Nigeria, and the "politics of the belly" validates long-standing criticisms of the Nigerian state's political economy as outlined by Joseph in 1987. Most crucially, the "slow violence" theme gives voice to what quantitative studies can only approximate: the lived reality of environmental injustice in Southeast Nigeria's cities. By centering the perspectives of those who enforce (or fail to enforce) the law and those who suffer its absence, this study exposes the human and political machinery behind the statistics. It reveals enforcement not as a technical gap to be filled with more trucks or bigger budgets, but as a deeply contested terrain of power, patronage, and survival.

## DISCUSSION

This study's qualitative results reveal a striking disparity between Southeast Nigeria's urban formal waste management laws and their actual on-the-ground experiences, encompassed by four interconnected themes: the facade of enforcement, shifting jurisdictional responsibilities, the politics of personal gain, and the gradual devastating effects of waste accumulation. These themes portray enforcement not as a simple administrative oversight, but as a deeply ingrained political process, where informal institutions of power, patronage, and marginalization circumvent statutory frameworks such as the NESREA Act of 2007 and state public health laws. In Enugu, Onitsha, and Aba, EHOs perform ritualistic patrols devoid of consequence, agencies evade accountability through endless deferrals, corruption devours resources, and communities endure gradual, insidious health harms from unmanaged refuse. This configuration perpetuates a cycle of impunity, amplifying public health vulnerabilities such as chronic respiratory ailments, waterborne infections, and vector-borne epidemics among the urban poor. Situated globally, these patterns resonate across developing regions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where rapid urbanization collides with weak governance, yet comparative insights highlight pathways for disruption through participatory reforms and institutional realignment.

The "theater of enforcement" theme underscores how laws are invoked symbolically without substantive action, a phenomenon present in qualitative explorations of SWM in other African contexts. In Ghana's Greater Accra, Oteng-Ababio (2010) documents similar performative rituals, where municipal authorities conduct sporadic "clean-up exercises" amid fanfare but neglect sustained collection, leaving informal settlements mired in refuse that breeds cholera and malaria. Participants in his ethnographic study describe enforcement as "window dressing" for international donors, mirroring Nigerian EHOs' accounts of issuing unenforced notices. The theatricality here originates from a lack of resources; as Godfrey et al. (2013) point out in their South African case studies, post-apartheid waste policies that aim for equality ultimately result in a spectacle due to budget limitations, leading to the practice of open burning, which worsens respiratory health issues in townships. Muindi et al. (2016) found in Nairobi that Kenya's Environmental Management and Coordination Act of 1999 is referenced in policy documents but disregarded in Nairobi's slums, where residents have to endure prolonged periods without inspections similar to the situation in Onitsha markets. Across Africa, evidence suggests that enforcement's effects are a characteristic shared by neopatrimonial states, where laws are used to benefit the elite, rather than serving the broader public's interests, ultimately resulting in health disparities equivalent to 4-5% of GDP in lost productivity (World Bank, 2012).

In Asia, analogous dynamics unfold, often intensified by dense urban fabrics and informal economies. A review by Sharholi et al. (2008) of Indian cities, such as Delhi, discovered that the enforcement of the Solid Waste Management Rules of 2000 frequently appears to be a sham, with officials conducting token inspections while overlooking large open dumps that contaminate aquifers, leading to diarrheal outbreaks affecting approximately 30-40% of slum residents. Their qualitative insights from stakeholder interviews echo Nigerian narratives of "arrangement" bribes nullifying prosecutions. In 2014, Aprillia and Tezuka ethnographically examined Law No. 18/2008 in Jakarta, portraying its enforcement as isolated incidents sparked by clogged drains during the monsoon season, which led to high typhoid rates even with community-based self-help initiatives. Zurbrugg (2002) broadens this to low-income Asian contexts, noting that in Hanoi and Manila, municipal theatrics mask systemic neglect, fostering vector habitats that disproportionately burden women and children, akin to Aba widows' tales of poisoned wells. Cases from Asia demonstrate the intersection of enforcement's theatricality and cultural

resilience, but enforcement ultimately perpetuates slow violence without community involvement, as observed in the Varanasi study by Mishra et al. (2015) that linked leachate to neurological risks.

Latin American scholarship further enriches this analysis, revealing enforcement as a contested arena shaped by neoliberal reforms. According to Gutberlet (2015), the National Solid Waste Policy of 2010, in Brazil, pledged inclusivity but actually implemented token compliance in São Paulo's favelas, where waste collection cooperatives work amidst intermittent police raids, despite uncontrolled leptospirosis outbreaks. Her participatory action research captures recyclers' voices decrying "selective blindness" to elite polluters, mirroring Nigerian selective fining of the poor. Buenrostro-Delgado et al. (2015) in Mexico City criticise the General Law for Waste Management (2003) as being theatrical, with jurisdictional silos being a major issue, as qualitative data indicates that uncollected waste is fuelling skin infections and respiratory problems in informal settlements. Hoornweg and Bhada-Tata (2012) synthesize global patterns, noting Colombia's Bogota mirrors Nigerian musical chairs, where agencies shuffle blame while rivers choke with plastics, amplifying flood-related morbidity. These Latin examples underscore privatization's role in theatrical enforcement, often exacerbating inequalities, as opposed to Africa's state-centric models, yet both yield comparable health tolls.

Transitioning to "jurisdictional musical chairs," the study's depiction of endless buck-passing aligns with institutional fragmentation critiques across continents. A multi-country review by the African Development Bank (2002) in Africa shows that colonial-era devolution in countries such as Senegal and Tanzania has led to overlapping mandates, resulting in uncollected waste and groundwater pollution, as expressed by community leaders in focus groups. This mirrors Southeast Nigeria's NESREA-state-local trilemma, where ambiguity shields inaction. In Asia, Ferronato and Torretta (2019) synthesised qualitative evidence from Vietnam and Nepal, demonstrating that fragmented governance under national environmental laws encourages evasion, with leachate-linked cancers underreported in rural-urban fringes. Latin America's Hoornweg and Bhada-Tata (2012) detail Argentina's provincial-federal clashes, where waste crises in Buenos Aires resonate with Nigerian deferrals, perpetuating vector diseases amid floods.

The "politics of the belly" theme, drawing on Bayart's (1993) framework, exposes corruption as SWM's core logic, a pattern pervasive globally. African studies like Oteng-Ababio (2010) in Ghana reveal patronage diverting funds, leaving dumpsites as health hazards. In Asia, Sharholy et al. (2008) document Indian municipal graft inflating contracts, paralleling Abia's truck diversions. Gutberlet (2015) in Brazil shows elite capture excluding recyclers, sustaining inequities.

Finally, "slow violence" encapsulates embodied harms, resonant with Nixon's (2011) concept. In Africa, Muindi et al. (2016) narrate Nairobi's gradual afflictions; in Asia, Mishra et al. (2015) trace chronic exposures; in Latin America, Buenrostro-Delgado et al. (2015) highlight gendered burdens. Globally, WHO (2008) links these to 5-10% mortality in the urban poor. This study fills gaps by centering Southeast Nigeria's cultural contexts and qualitative depth, advocating for power reconfiguration for equitable health outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has laid bare the profound political nature of solid waste management failure in urban Southeast Nigeria. At first glance, a technical or logistical issue comes across, but through the testimonies of environmental health officers, residents, traditional leaders, and policymakers, it becomes clear that a deeply ingrained system of performative governance, jurisdictional avoidance, exploitative extraction, and gradual environmental harm is in place. Laws such as the NESREA Act of 2007, the National Environmental (Sanitation and Wastes Control) Regulations of 2009, and various state public health statutes are not absent; they are deliberately neutralized by informal institutions of power that benefit from continued chaos. In Enugu, Onitsha, and Aba, the daily reality is not one of inadequate legislation, but rather one of deliberate obstruction: abatement notices are issued but never enforced, collection contracts are awarded yet never honoured, and the poorest residents are left to suffer the consequences of respiratory disease, recurring epidemics, and polluted water. The conclusion is unequivocal: without confronting the political economy that sustains this subversion, no amount of new trucks, donor-funded landfills, or awareness campaigns will break the cycle. The study further demonstrates that Southeast Nigeria's crisis is neither unique nor inevitable. Across cities like Accra to Nairobi, Delhi to Jakarta, São Paulo to Mexico City, a set of recurring patterns is observed: theatrical enforcement, jurisdictional musical chairs, elite capture of resources, and the gradual, attritional violence inflicted upon the urban underprivileged. Yet the very persistence of these patterns across continents also points to the possibility of disruption. Where political will has been mobilized — whether through judicial activism in India, cooperative inclusion in Brazil, or devolved budgeting in Kenya — meaningful change has followed. The difference lies not in wealth or technology but in the willingness to reconfigure power relations around waste.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Depoliticise and Professionalize Enforcement: Establish an independent, professionally recruited Environmental Sanitation Tribunal in each state, staffed by magistrates trained exclusively in

- environmental offences and insulated from political interference. Remove waste-related prosecutions from the regular criminal justice system, where “phone-call justice” prevails.
2. End Jurisdictional Ambiguity through Legislative Clarity: The South-East Governors’ Forum should sponsor a harmonized Regional Sanitation Law that explicitly assigns collection, enforcement, and financing responsibilities to local governments while making state governments jointly and severally liable for failure. Uncertainty should be replaced by a sense of being held responsible.
  3. Ring-fence Sanitation Revenue and Criminalize Diversion: Mandate that all market levies, property rates, and tenement rates earmarked for sanitation be paid into dedicated, publicly audited accounts. Diverting these funds should carry the same penalty as misappropriation of security votes.
  4. Transform the current cadre of under-resourced EHOs into a well-compensated, uniformed Sanitation Enforcement Service, equipped with guaranteed fuel, vehicles, body cameras, and direct lines of communication to the new tribunals.
  5. Institute Participatory Waste Governance at the Ward Level: Create elected Ward Sanitation Committees comprising traditional rulers, women leaders, youth representatives, and registered waste collectors. Give these committees veto power over contractor selection and the authority to trigger tribunal action when services fail.
  6. Launch a Region-Wide “Name-and-Shame” Transparency Platform: Develop a simple mobile app and radio programme where citizens report uncollected waste in real time. Publish weekly performance scorecards for each local government chairman and distribute them to the state House of Assembly as well as traditional rulers.
  7. Embed Sanitation in Primary Health Care and Education: Train community health extension workers to treat chronic waste exposure as a public health emergency and to issue binding sanitation notices. Implement mandatory weekly sanitation training sessions in every secondary school, transforming the upcoming generation into proactive participants rather than mere recipients.

These recommendations do not require billions of naira or foreign consultants. Confronting entrenched interests necessitates political courage, respect for the expertise of those within the waste management sector, and a significant change from symbolic to transparent and inclusive governance models for sanitation. Unless the politics of waste management are prioritized and the escalating harm caused by unsanitary conditions is recognised as a crisis, the cities of Southeast Nigeria will continue to be overwhelmed by their own waste, and their children will go on suffering poor health and limited opportunities.

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