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# **Private Sector Participation in Municipal Solid Waste Management**

Sustainability Dynamics and Policy Correction

Kiran Sandhu

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# Contents

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<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgement</i>	<i>xiii</i>

## **PART A: Municipal Solid Waste: A Forage in the Garbage Land**

<b>1. Municipal Solid Waste Management in India: The Road to Privatization</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1 Introduction	2
1.2 Private sector participation in municipal solid waste management	4
1.3 Contextual setting: India	5
1.4 Amritsar: Case study impressions	11
1.5 Study aim	14
1.6 Key research questions	14
1.7 Justification of the study	17
1.8 Methodological framework of research	18
1.9 Conclusion	19
<b>2. Municipal Solid Waste Management: A Conjectural Discourse</b>	<b>24</b>
2.1 Introduction	24
2.2 Theoretical discourse methodology	25
2.3 Municipal solid waste: Exploring the heap	28
2.4 Private sector participation: A municipal solid waste perspective	41
2.5 Private sector participation in MSW management: review	50
2.6 Determining the lens of sustainability, assessment criteria and indicators	62
2.7 Criteria and indicators in the private sector participation literature	67
2.8 Private sector participation in MSW management: Assessment of criteria and indicator choices	70

2.9	Sustainability assessment framework for case study evaluation	73
2.10	Neo-institutionalism and evaluation of inter-organisational relationships	74
2.11	Sustainability assessment framework	78
2.12	Conclusions	80
<b>3.</b>	<b>Sustainability Assessment Framework for Evaluation of Privatization</b>	<b>94</b>
3.1	Introduction	94
3.2	Revisiting the key research question	95
3.3	Sustainability assessment framework for the study	96
3.4	Of ontological and epistemological premises: Detangling the paradigm web	100
3.5	Research design	103
3.6	Reliability and validity	106
3.7	Case study protocol	108
3.8	Methods employed for data collection	109
3.9	Sampling methods	115
3.10	Data analysis	118
3.11	Research ethics	121
3.12	Conclusions	122
 <b>PART B: Privatization of Municipal Solid Waste Management in Amritsar City: Empirical Analysis and Outcomes</b>		
<b>4.</b>	<b>Amritsar: A Waste Trajectory and Chronicle of Privatisation</b>	<b>128</b>
4.1	Introduction	128
4.2	Amritsar: A Spatial-Demographic brief	129
4.3	The waste trail	131
4.4	MSW characteristics and composition	133
4.5	MSW management operations	137
4.6	Community perceptions of MSW management	145
4.7	An account of waste litigations	147
4.8	Romancing privatisation; on shaky grounds?	149
4.9	Inferences and conclusions	156

<b>5. Sustainability Assessment of the Social Dimension</b>	<b>160</b>
5.1 Introduction	160
5.2 A brief review of social sustainability benchmarks	161
5.3 Informal waste management operations in the city	164
5.4 Local government policy towards informal waste sector integration	169
5.5 Impacts of privatisation on the informal sector	171
5.6 Impact on AMC sanitary workers	174
5.7 Impact on sanitation workers of the private waste handling company	181
5.8 Equitable access to service	186
5.9 Community participation in MSW post-privatisation	187
5.10 Inferences and conclusions	189
<b>6. Sustainability Assessment of the Economic Dimension</b>	<b>196</b>
6.1 Introduction	196
6.2 A brief review of economic sustainability benchmarks	197
6.3 Economic efficiency	205
6.4 Labour productivity	212
6.5 Vehicle productivity	217
6.6 Inferences and conclusions	225
<b>7. Sustainability Assessment of the Environmental Dimension</b>	<b>233</b>
7.1 Introduction	233
7.2 A brief review of environmentally sustainable MSW practices	234
7.3 Waste generation	240
7.4 Waste storage and segregation	242
7.5 Waste collection and transportation	247
7.6 Waste treatment	253
7.7 Waste disposal	256
7.8 Environmental and occupational risk	260
7.9 Inferences and conclusions	264

<b>8. Sustainability Assessment of the Institutional Dimension</b>	<b>270</b>
8.1 Introduction	270
8.2 A brief review of institutional sustainability dynamics	271
8.3 Pre-requisites framework	277
8.4 Key contract specifications	285
8.5 Inter-organisational relationships	300
8.6 Inferences and conclusions	305
<b>PART C: Reflections and Way Forward</b>	
<b>9. Pragmatic Reflections</b>	<b>314</b>
9.1 Introduction	314
9.2 An analytical summary of findings	316
9.3 Contribution of the study	322
9.4 Critical reflections	325
9.5 Propositions for future studies	326
9.6 Recommendations for progression towards MSW sustainability	329
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>342</b>
<b>Appendix I: Supplementary Figures and Tables</b>	<b>342</b>
<b>Appendix II: Interview Protocols and Survey Instruments</b>	<b>360</b>
<b>List of Abbreviations</b>	<b>399</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>402</b>

## Preface

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The most visible outcome of the increasing pace of urbanisation, along with the rise in the spate of consumerism in the liberalised economic setup, has been the sharp increase in municipal solid waste generation across the urban centres in the developing countries. As the challenge of providing this service becomes more and more pressing, municipalities are turning to the private sector to fill the gap and become the prime service providers. Privatisation of solid waste management services has thus emerged as 'the' alternative and, as such, several municipalities have taken hasty steps to introduce private sector participation in solid waste management services, treating it as a panacea for the municipal solid waste management woes of the cities. The logic of private sector participation in municipal solid waste management services hinges on the assertion of it performing more efficiently on all fronts.

While there is a flurry of rhetoric and excitement around private participation in municipal solid waste management services across Indian cities, there is an acute lack of empirical evidence and research (MoUD, 2010; Anderson, 2011) assessing the impacts of private sector participation in municipal solid waste management. Moreover, none of these studies, to the best knowledge of the author, have been conducted explicitly and in detail in conjunction with the principles of sustainability of municipal solid waste management systems.

Set against a background of serious concerns from inadequate municipal solid waste management on one side and the impetus given to private sector participation, this book critically examines and generates empirical evidence on the implications of private sector participation in municipal solid waste management through the lens of a sustainability assessment framework that is specifically constructed for this purpose. The book questions and challenges the perceptions of private sector participation as leading to sustainability outcomes in municipal solid waste operations in Indian cities. The book employs the single case study research design using the city of Amritsar as the case for application of the sustainability assessment framework. Amritsar, the city of the Golden Temple in India and a major tourist

attraction, also joined the bandwagon to involve the private sector to deal with its waste woes. With robust evidence emerging from the four-cornered sustainability assessment framework, i.e. social, economic, environmental and institutional, the study offers valuable insights for retrospection and policy correction, while also making a humble claim to be one of the first and few studies of this nature in the Indian context.

## Foreword

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Cities are phenomenal places, embodying most that is good and bad about the human condition. Cities are often centres of culture, entrepreneurship and progressive social movements, but they are also places of great poverty, inequality and harm. They generate wealth but also many of the emissions that are harming our planet. Waste is another by-product of urban life and contemporary forms and patterns of urban consumption have accelerated the production of waste. Dealing with the waste of cities is, therefore, a long-standing problem and an ongoing challenge for urban planners and leaders.

As a country experiencing a high degree of urbanisation as well as continued population growth, Indian cities confront this problem in stark form. With over fifty cities of over one million people, dealing with municipal solid waste is a significant challenge, but one that also presents important opportunities. Once the preserve of casual workers in the informal economy, waste has become big business and attracted the attention, inevitably, of large and multi-national corporations. Promising to deliver more efficient and effective waste management services, these large corporations have been embraced by many municipal governments. However, these new relationships have a wide range of social and economic impacts, many of which have not previously been documented and assessed.

Dr Kiran Sandhu's research, presented in this book, makes an excellent and timely contribution to this much-needed assessment using the sustainability dimensions very effectively and creating a sustainability assessment framework that can be used in any case context across the world to evaluate privatization in waste management. Using a case study of the city of Amritsar she reveals how the privatisation of municipal solid waste management performed when analysed on the multi-dimensional scales of sustainability. For instance, in context of social sustainability, private sector involvement disrupted the complex informal waste systems that complemented the formal sector and provided much-needed employment to a significant section of the urban poor.

I had the privilege of supervising Dr Sandhu when she carried out this research while based at Griffith University, Australia; and I am delighted that the research is now available to a wider audience at both national and international levels. The research as it has emerged in its current form, undoubtedly provides important lessons for anyone or any institution concerned with urban waste management, the realities of privatisation and the wider and complex issues of urban governance.

**Professor Paul Burton**  
**Director, Cities Research Institute**  
**Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia**

# Acknowledgement

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*Nothing grows in the shadows of want, without the sunlight of acceptance of all that made it real.*

(Modified from Bryant Macgill)

My journey into the world of waste began with my tryst with the waste pickers in Amritsar city nearly a decade ago. What began as an attempt to understand chronic poverty from a socio-spatial perspective amongst the bottom rung of recyclers, i.e. the waste pickers, gradually transited into a forage in the garbage land and life. What is waste all about and why is it the way it is? This question led me to associate myself with waste complexities and follow its trails closely in terms of both theoretical and empirical contexts, and especially in the city of Amritsar. It was perhaps only natural that when the private sector began operations in the city, I was immediately concerned about the livelihood issues of the informal waste pickers and other related aspects, and hence the seeds of this study began to germinate in my mind. Therefore, first and foremost, I wish to make this acknowledgement to the informal waste pickers who have led me on to this path of learning and discovery.

My journey, I must admit, was not without its share of challenges. My personal and professional trials and tribulations posed a formidable challenge. At this juncture, I most gratefully thank my worthy research supervisors and mentors, Dr Paul Burton and Dr Aysin Dedekorkut-Howes. Their immense support anchored and encouraged me to carry forward this journey to its logical culmination. Words may not be enough but the truth is that I could have never come this far but for them. Undoubtedly, their constructive comments and advice helped detangle many a dilemma and has shaped the research study to its current form herein. My benevolent thanks are due to the administrative staff members at Cities Research Centre for their incredible support and to Griffith University, Australia, for its outstanding resources and services that facilitated all my interactions and endeavours in this direction.

I am blessed with an incredibly supportive and loving family, where I stand today in my life could not have been possible without them. My wonderful friends, colleagues at Guru Ramdas School of Planning, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, for your support and motivation, let me claim the right of togetherness to say thank you.