

Consortium on Law and Values in Health, Environment, and the Life Sciences

Grant Report submitted by Rajyashree Narayanareddy, Department of
Geography

Project Title: Specters of Waste in India's "Silicon Valley": the
Underside of Bangalore's Hi-Tech Economy”

Funding from the Consortium on Law and Values in Health, Environment, and the Life Sciences made it possible for me to complete research to support my dissertation on the solid waste disposal practices of Bangalore. Bangalore fashions itself as an emerging global city and has been at the forefront of the information technology (IT) revolution. Bangalore's IT sector is one of the largest producers of electronic waste or e-waste. In my original research design I proposed to focus upon the geographic dimensions (distribution) of e-waste, the policies and practices of e-waste disposal as well as the health and environmental hazards of e-waste with a particular focus upon workers who disposed off e-waste.

The Consortium grant allowed me to travel to Bangalore and supported the first phase of my research there. During the first phase of my research I had intended to focus upon informal e-waste disposal units. Upon arrival in Bangalore I found out that on account of new stringent requirements (which made it impossible for informal e-waste recyclers to obtain licenses from the city's Pollution Control Board) most of the informal units were not functioning or only functioning part time i.e. a lot of the workers in these units had to look for other employment. .

Therefore in the first phase of my research I decided to work with an international development initiative that was working towards setting up a “clean e-waste channel” in electronic city (e-City) in Bangalore. e-City is an industrial cluster developed by the Karnataka State Industrial Development Board and this location has the highest concentration of IT firms in Bangalore. The goal of IN-DE-CH e-waste initiative's pilot project is to put in place a model “clean e-waste channel” that could be scaled up to the rest of the country. CeWC as defined by the IN-DE-CH e-waste would be a system where companies that produce e-waste keep track of their waste and hand it over to “authorized recyclers” that will dispose off these wastes in a green manner. The IN-DE-CH e-waste initiative also aimed to set up a monitoring system for the CeWC.

I decided to become formally affiliated to the IN-DE-CH e-waste initiative i.e. I worked as volunteer intern for a period of three months. Only by formally working with them could I get access to corporate sector, government officials, recyclers (formal as well as informal) and development initiatives itself.

As a volunteer intern I assisted with a survey that assessed the flows of e-waste in e-city. A flow assessment was necessary because to set up CeWC we needed to know the volume of e-waste generated in e-City. This survey was administered in person to 17 major IT firms located in the premises of the e-City, Bangalore. Further, this survey was necessary as we do not know the means by which the e-waste was disposed off. Ultimately the result of flow assessment survey was combined with that of “needs assessment” survey that was conducted earlier. The needs assessment tried to assess what aides and what deters companies from disposing off e-waste in a sound manner. Both of these survey’s was used in designing a model clean e-waste channel that could be implemented in e-city.

This internship has helped me with my dissertation in a number of ways:

Enabled Access to IT firms:

1. The information that the IT company’s divulged through these survey wouldn’t have been available had I approached them as a university research student and even with the backing of an international project we were finding it difficult to get companies to talk to us (Studying up is probably always hard). Primarily because “waste” is last on their priority list but now on account of this survey the results are out in the open and can be used for my dissertation.
2. Administering these surveys has helped me to gauge how companies understand their environmental responsibilities and obligations
3. I gained insight into how government and international organizations are trying to devise strategies to keep e-waste out of the municipal waste stream and struggling to institute an environmental policy that adheres to the “polluter pays principal.”

Enabled Access to recyclers:

4. My association with the IN-DE-CH initiative enabled me to network with the “informal e-waste disposal sector.” The IN-DE-CH initiative aims enable the informal e-waste sector to participate fully in the CeWC and the informal recyclers were urged to form associations that could represent them ... eWAARD and Eco-Bird are the 2 associations of informal recyclers that have been created thus far. I have after the end of my internship interviewed members of the eWAARD in order to gain insights into their daily toil to acquire raw

materials, get certified by the Pollution Control Board and compete with the authorized e-waste recyclers.

5. I have also interviewed the 2 “official” recyclers of e-waste in Bangalore. This has proved to be highly interesting especially as one of these official recycler belongs to the backward scrap dealing community and has faced many hurdles on his way to being authorized.

Enabled Interviews with formal Institutions that are emerging as key stakeholders in eWaste Management:

6. My association with the IN-DE-CH initiative enabled me to network with NGOs. The training of the informal recyclers was delegated to the NGO “Centre for Sustainable Development.” This NGO is also currently completing a report called “E-waste in Bangalore.” The IN-DE-CH initiative was actively encouraging Centre for Sustainable Development to constitute a “eWaste Agency” that would emerge as the monitoring body of e-waste in Bangalore. I interviewed the program coordinator of the eWaste Agency. And also interviewed other government officials.

In addition, I have gathered considerable amount of documents and policy papers. These will help me to understand how the government and international initiatives overtime tried to address the problem. I am presently going through these as well transcribing my interviews.

I believe that the interviews with recyclers and workers are particularly invaluable as they will allow me to document the working and living conditions of workers who process the hi-tech trash of Bangalore. This will, in turn as I have posited in my proposal call attention to the social life of waste that undergirds emerging global cities like Bangalore. Finally the research that I conducted with assistance from the Consortium will draw attention to the environmental and social impacts of the emergence of a booming IT sector and will document the struggle to put in place effective policies to deal with the problem.