

## Waste Scavenging as a Means of Livelihood in Southwestern Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Waste scavenging has become a means of livelihood in this part of the globe, especially among the less privileged. Several individuals are in the trade without considering the social and health implications of the profession on them. This study examined this waste scavenging as a means of livelihood and the coping strategies among the professionals. Findings from the study revealed that the respondents are in the business based on the fact that they have unfavourable socio-economic status. Findings also revealed that majority of the respondents are Nigerians, a contradiction with the existing literature. Also, the trade may not continue in the future as entrants into the business keep reducing in the last five years. The findings also showed that scavengers understand the social and health implications of the trade but are not capable of changing their situations. The study recommends ways by which the trade can become a descent profession, which would benefit both the practitioners and the general society.

**Key words:** Scavenging, livelihood, waste

### INTRODUCTION

The issue of waste is as old as human existence itself. Equally, picking or gathering relevant materials by man may not be considered as a strange event in the history of man anthropologically<sup>[1]</sup>. However, industrialization brought about a slight change in this old way of life. Waste that is often defined as discarded material<sup>[2,3]</sup>, becomes increased drastically and the old form of life of humans in picking or gathering materials evolved in a new dimension now referred to as scavenging. This new development also gave way to a serious problem of controlling and managing wastes in the society more especially in the developing world where there is low level of technological development<sup>[4,5]</sup>. In order to reduce this problem of waste management and also to make economic gain out of it, the need to recycle these items became the order of the day. As the government and its agencies are battling with managing waste, certain individuals also scout for items that could be recycled for local industries that may need it. In developing countries like Nigeria, the need to survive due to the economic problem has forced some of the citizens to devise scavenging as a means of livelihood. They go from one place to the other, picking waste that can be recycled. They are often found on the streets, in open dumps or land fill areas. Some of them even go as far as visiting homes to request for used items. We need to state here that this devised means of survival is a welcome development on the part of the citizen especially for monetary gains for the scavengers and reduction of overhead costs for the factories.

However, a closer look at the trade itself and the people involved in the trade suggests a potential risk both for the individuals concerned and the society at large. The health risks, inherent in this trade are devastating. There are reports on the health implications of the actions of human beings in relation to scavenging. Health risks associated with scavenging include premature wound infection from sharp objects, inhalation of dangerous gases, accidental swallowing of dangerous and contaminated materials, diseases like cholera, typhoid, infection with HIV, to mention a few<sup>[6,8]</sup>. Going by the health reports stated above, one begins to ask whether these scavengers understand the health implications of their actions. For instance, these scavengers eat their meals while scavenging; as a matter of fact they spend a larger proportion of their days on dumpsites. The long run effect of these actions, no doubt have effects on the scavengers, their families and on the society at large.

Reports and findings have argued in support of scavenging as an income generating business for unskilled workers<sup>[9]</sup>. A Critical assessment of the scavengers in this part of the globe might make it difficult to accept the claim. This is because the scavengers still appear to be economically unbalanced compared to their counterparts in other unskilled trade. One hardly sees these scavengers display some measure of affluence as they are always scavenging on everyday of the week.

Aside this, the reaction of the policy makers and the general public is negative in relation to scavengers. This might be as economic and other social problems the government is battling with; also the social importance

attached to different professions here in Nigeria do not make the people encourage such means of livelihood. People usually frown at the scavengers, as they are perceived as the underclass of the society. Members of their immediate society usually want to avoid any form of contact with them as they are regarded as destitute. Also, the efforts of the government in assisting them are not encouraging. It appears the government considers them as destitute that should be rehabilitated or neglected. Based on this it becomes important to want to find out how these scavengers react and cope with the perception of the society on them and their profession.

The aforementioned points become important for this study considering the need to attract the attention of the policy makers on the need to assist the scavengers improve their trade. Presently, scavenging is the activity of the third world countries<sup>[4]</sup>. Much of their vulnerability has to do with their low level of organisation coupled with their lack of knowledge on the effective ways of handling the trade<sup>[4]</sup>. Therefore all these become relevant in this study in order to help these professionals meet up with their counterparts in the developed world and also to improve their conditions of work as they stand the risks from the environment, health and the society<sup>[10]</sup>.

Based on the discussions above, the following therefore becomes the questions for this study;

#### **Research questions:**

- Why do people scavenge?
- Do they make gains or profits?
- Is their income proportionate to their input?
- Why have they not improved?
- Are they aware of the social and health implications of their actions?
- Does it in any way affect them?
- What is the source of encouragement?
- Does their socio-economic status have impact on scavenging?
- Does the awareness of health implications of scavenging discourage them from the profession?

**Objectives of the study:** The general objective of the study is to examine scavenging as a means of livelihood. The specific objectives are to

- Understand the socio-economic characteristics of scavengers
- Examine the level of economic gains of scavenging
- Understand whether the scavengers know the health and social implication of their actions

- Assess the impact of social and health factors on the performance of their trade
- Suggest ways of improving scavenging as a means of livelihood.

#### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study was conducted in Akure, Ondo State, (Southwest Nigeria). The area was selected due to the high level of waste disposal in the area, which has also attracted scavengers to the state capital.

In conducting this study, a total number of two hundred well-designed questionnaires containing open-ended and close-ended questions were distributed to the respondents. The selection process was purposive. This was because the researcher had to look for these scavengers where they could be found. In depth interview was also used to complement this study in order to have an indepth understanding of the issues that bother the research. Question asked bothered on the respondents; Socio-economic background, the circumstances leading to their entry into the trade and their beliefs and perception of waste scavenging. The data were analysed using simple percentage distribution and chi-square statistical method to test the hypotheses formulated. The qualitative data were quoted where necessary to support the findings.

#### **RESULTS**

The findings on sex revealed that a large proportion of the scavengers are males. The population is over two-third of the entire respondents. This might not be surprising considering the stress involved in scavenging. The few percentage distribution of females in the study pick old bottles and bags.

On age distribution, an overwhelming majority, (93.8%) of the respondents falls between ages 25 and 45 years. This also is an indication of the stress involved in the business. Only able-bodied individuals will be able to withstand the stress of scavenging, which involves walking about for days looking for waste products that are of interest to them. Also, the reason might be attributed to the fact that these age groups are still agile and economically active who could easily be motivated by the economic gains of the trade.

Findings on religion reveals that over four-fifth of the respondents are Christian (80.5%) while 15.5% of the respondents are Muslim. The remaining 4.0% are traditional worshippers. The reason for this distribution is

because the indigenes in this area are predominantly Christians. Also, Islam seems not to encourage professions like scavenging, as they believe it can be a hindrance to true worship.

The data on the marital status of the respondents show that thirty seven percent of the respondents are single. Forty three percent of the respondents are also married while 19.5% of the remaining respondents are divorced or separated as at the time of collecting the data. The distribution on divorced respondents is quite revealing. They were divorced before they moved into this trade. Some of the respondents attributed the cause to economic problem while others were not willing to open up on the cause of their separation. The data on the family size also reveals that close to 60% of the respondents have family size ranging between 3 and 5. This shows that each of these respondents has family responsibilities, which lured them into the profession. Little wonder they defied all the social constraints attached to this kind of trade/business.

The findings on education reveals that close to 50% of the respondents had secondary school education. This might not be strange, because the state is notable for its academic achievements. The unemployment situation in the country coupled with the high cost of education, no doubt has impacted negatively on these scavengers. Therefore, it may not be strange that there are secondary school leavers in the trade. Less than one-fifth (6.5%) of the respondents also claim they have been to one tertiary institution or the other. Equally, this may not be surprising. The problem of unemployment is high in this country 43% claimed that they went to primary school while 2.0% did not go to school.

On ethnic background of the respondents, 48% of the respondents were Yoruba's, (south westerners) 5.5% of them were Hausa, (northerners) 32.5% of the respondents were Igbos (easterners) while the remaining 14% were foreigners especially from Ghana. The percentage of the respondents from Yoruba ethnic group is interesting. This is because Yoruba's are always ashamed of doing jobs that are socially degrading. But with this finding, it appears things are changing especially if they (Yoruba's) could still engage in this kind of job even in a Yoruba state. The percentage number of Igbos is in this business is not surprising. This is because the Igbos is known for engaging in all sorts of business that could bring in money. Equally, Hausas are also known for their efforts and desires to make money. Thus, like the Igbos, they also engage in different types of jobs that could fetch them money. This finding partially supports the findings of Medina<sup>[11]</sup>, that majority of scavengers are migrants or

foreigners. A large percentage of scavengers interviewed in this study were Nigerians. This might be as a result of the persistent economic hardship in the country.

On the number of years spent on the job, over two third of the respondents (62.2%) have spent close to ten years in the business. The remaining one third of the respondents were less than five years in the business. There is every indication that the business may collapse in the nearest future, as there are very few new entrants into the business. The same old people who have been in the business for a long time still constituted the larger percentage of the people in the business. The reason might be because of the nature of the job and the emergence of easy, convenient and less risky or hazardous jobs as phone call services etc, which attract money.

The findings on the approximate income of the respondents' revealed that the high-income earners in the business constitute 24% with a monthly income between ten and fifteen thousand naira (less than \$80). The largest group in the distribution earned income ranging between seven and ten thousand naira per month followed by another 27% earning income between three and seven thousand naira monthly (less than \$60). This shows that the business did not bring in much money that can cater for the needs of the workers. This might be one of the reasons why new people are not trooping into this business. The old ones could not move out because of the fact that they have no place to go while the few ones that were just joining were in the business because they were desperate to get means of livelihood. The data on the types of waste scavenged by the respondents revealed that 25% of the respondents picked plastics, twelve point five (12.5%) looked for metals and iron, another 17% of the respondents looked for electronics spare parts while about 22% scavenged used bottles. Another group of respondents scavenged for rubbers (2.0%), while about 13% of the respondents looked for cartons. Twenty percent of the respondent remaining scavenged bags, sacks and other types of containers.

The data on the perception of the respondents on their job shows that about majority of the respondents (90%) saw the job as pleasant. This is surprising because the risks involved in the job are high. A very few respondents in the distribution (10%) see it as unpleasant. This group of respondents could give such opinions based on the fact that they are used to the business; thus, they may not see anything unpleasant about the trade. Also, the respondents might be afraid to share their genuine feelings to outsiders thinking such statement

could be used against them. At the same time, the opinions of the respondents could be genuine because any business that fetches income for livelihood much be perceived as very pleasant.

The respondents' interview reports relating to this question are as follows:

Actually I don't like what I'm doing. A person of my caliber should not be seen doing this type of job but one must thank god in any condition one finds oneself I'm going to leave the business for my former trade immediately I get enough money. My siblings must not even know that I'm involved in this kind of job.

The respondents were asked whether they know the health implications of their actions. Over two-third of the respondents said they know. Some attributed the effects to cholera, tuberculosis etc. However, this might not be surprising considering the educational background of the respondents. On the reason on why they still go ahead with the job, they argued that since there is no other available means of livelihood, it is better to continue with it. Their opinion is that if they sit at home death could still strike them. But if they work, they might be lucky and may even have money to care for themselves. Some even claim to use preventive medicine.

The respondents interviewed have these to say:

Yes, I have been hearing that one can be infected with diseases in these kinds of profession. But is it only in scavenging that you can catch diseases? Other jobs are risky as well.

Another respondent:

I know one can be infected but I have no option than to do the business. I have to survive and feed my dependants as well. If I leave this job where will I get money to feed my dependants and myself?

Other respondent commented:

Look, whether you work here or elsewhere, you will still die of a particular ailment. So why don't you work and die honorably than been killed of hunger.

On the environmental implications of their actions, the respondents (85.3%) claimed that they assist the Government or the private bodies in charge to clean up the environment. Thus, they believe that their actions do not constitute any environmental problem. A respondent commented thus:

The government should appreciate us for helping them clean their environment. We do not constitute any harm or havoc to the environment. After all, we are only dealing with waste.

The data on respondents' perception of causes of scavenging revealed that 50.6% of the respondents attributed the cause to poverty and joblessness; surprisingly an appreciable number of respondents attributed the cause to industrial development. Their

argument is that when there is development, there is bound to be innovations and new ideas. A respondent interviewed has this comment to make on perceived causes of scavenging:

In this country, it is difficult to get a descent job. Where there are limited vacancies, godfatherism and connection come to play. Only the privileged and highly connected few eventually get such jobs. People like us go back disappointed.

On the research questions asked, it was discovered that people scavenged because of joblessness and poverty, more so the trade itself is not yielding the expected income. They have not been able to improve in the trade because of the non-chalant attitude of the government towards the business. Furthermore they are aware of the health implications of their actions and they are not capable of changing the situation due to the economic problem on ground show in appendix.

## APPENDIX

Tables Showing Some of the Percentage Distribution of the Respondents Opinion on the Questions Asked Percentage Distribution of the Respondents' Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Sex		
Male	180	90
Female	20	10
Total	200	100.0

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Age		
Below 25	39	19.5
26-35	56	28
36-45	39	19.5
46-55	60	30
56 and above	6	0.003
Total	200	100.0

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Religion		
Christianity	161	80.5
Islam	31	15.5
Traditional	5	2.5
Others	3	1.5
Total	200	100.0

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Marital Status		
Single	74	37
Married	86	43
Divorced	21	10.5
Others	19	9.5
Total	200	100.0

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Family size of Respondents	60	30
Between 3 and 5	96	48
Between 5 and 10	22	11
10 and above	22	11
Total	200	100.0

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Education		
Primary	86	43
Secondary	97	48.5
Tertiary	13	6.5
No education	4	2.0
Total	200	100.0

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Ethnicity		
Yoruba	96	48
Hausa	11	5.5
Igbo	65	32.5
Others (Ghanaian)	28	14
Total	200	100.0

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Occupation		
Full time Scavenging	114	57.0
Student/Scavenging	29	14.5
Trading/Scavenging	57	28.5
Total	200	100.0

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Income reduce/month		
Below N3,000	48	24
N3,000-N7,000	54	27
N7,000-N10,000	76	38
N10,000-N15,000	13	6.5
N15,000 and above	29	14.5
Total	200	100.0

Percentage distribution of respondents' number of years spent on the job		
Characteristics	Number	Percentage
No of Years spent on the job		
1-5 years	45	22.5
6-10 years	99	49.5
10 years and above	36	18
How Respondents see	20	10
Total	200	100.0

Percentage distribution of respondents' perception of scavenging		
Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Perception of Scavenging		
Very pleasant	20	10
Pleasant	60	30
Patently pleasant	100	50
Unpleasant	20	10
Total	200	100.0

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Belief/perception of the role of waste scavenging		
Cleans up the environment	136	68
Does not clean up the environment	64	32
Total	200	100.0

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Causes of scavenging		
Unemployment	40	20
Economic depression	72	36
Industrial development	52	26
Others	36	18
Total	200	100.0

Percentage distribution of areas scavenged by respondents		
Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Areas usually scavenged		
Oba Adesida	120	60
Isikan	48	24
Oke Aro	32	16
Total	200	100.0

Percentage distribution of respondents' knowledge of health implications of scavenging		
Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Whether they know the health implications		
Yes	162	81
No	38	19
Total	200	100.0

Percentage distribution of types of product scavenged		
Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Plastics	50	25
Metals/iron	25	12.5
Nylon	20	10
Electronics	34	17
Bottles	22	11
Rubbers	4	2.0
Cartons	5	2.5
Bags, sacks etc	40	20
Total	200	100.0

## CONCLUSION

The issue of scavenging, no doubt has contributed a social problem to the society. However, if proper measures are taken, these scavengers could still earn a descent means of livelihood and still be useful in the recycle business. But we need to categorically state here that if they continue at the pace they are going presently, they may constitute a great risk for themselves and the society at large. For instance, it is surprising to discover that this trade is also practiced by the underage. This has serious implications for our youths in this nation especially on child labour. The study also revealed that majority of the respondents involved in scavenging was not foreign migrants but Nigerians. Aside this, it was discovered that majority of these scavengers were involved in taking drugs, or stimulants, according to them, that is their way of 'suppressing' the odor emanating from waste and the stigmatization from the society. On the health implications of their actions surprisingly, they are aware of the implication, but the need to survive has made them to ignore this. This corroborates the reports that scavengers in the developing world do not follow the basic principles of health when carrying out their business<sup>[12]</sup>. All the above points to the fact that the risks associated with this trade are enormous. If these workers continue without taking appropriate measures, they may be psychologically and mentally impaired. This may have

a serious effect for the Nigerian society. From the respondents' opinions it appears that they are also considered unfavourably by the members of the public. We need to argue that this, on the long run tend to fix a negative social label on the scavengers who may see themselves as 'rejected' or 'never-do well' in the society. This may become breeding grounds for criminals and notorious people in the society. However, if the public and the policy makers put proper measures in place, this trade could serve as decent means of livelihood for Nigerians, especially considering the economic problem prevalent in the country presently.

Based on the above and all the discussion so far, the need to urgently address the issue of scavenging becomes important. The following recommendations are therefore made.

- It is suggested that the government change its attitude in relation to scavenging. They should set up machineries in motion aimed at assisting them. This could be in form of education, loan and safety gadgets that could be used in improving their trade.
- It is also suggested that awareness programme should be set-up to change the attitude of the people in relation to scavenging. People must be made to understand that people who struggle to make ends meet in the society must be respected.
- The attitudes of the scavengers also need to change. They need to be properly educated on the need to dress well, be organized like their counterparts in other trade and elsewhere in the world. Also, they must take all the precautionary steps involved in waste collection and disposal.
- The country's Ministry of Environment should set up regulatory agencies aimed at monitoring the people whether they take to the information and warnings on waste. This will make the scavengers to be up and doing in matters relating to decent and organized ways of scavenging. With the above issues well attended to, it is believed that this trade could be made decent and better organized like other unskilled jobs in country. This, it is believed will generate positive reactions from the society while at the same time guarantee the health and safety of the scavengers.

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