

Brown Gold? Reconciling existing practices and new innovations for shit re-use

Lyla Mehta (Institute of Development Studies) and Tanvi Bhatkal (Institute of Development Studies), et al.

ABSTRACT: The concept of the 'circular economy' has gained significant traction in recent years, emerging as a powerful force in policy narratives on sustainable development across sectors, including sanitation. However, what does this mean in terms of delivering sustainable and socially just outcomes, and what are the barriers to implementing equitable interventions that can be scaled up and out? This paper moves beyond a techno-centric lens of the 'circular economy' towards a wider interpretation of diverse circular pathways to address the socio-cultural-political dimensions of circularity in sanitation.

Our research in Ghana, India, Nepal and Tigray reveals that various communities engage in shit reuse practices, including biogas for cooking and as fertiliser. These (often informal) practices in some cases safely produce value from waste; in others pose varying health and safety risks. We trace experiences of shit reuse across different contexts of the urbanising global South and examine processes shaping perceptions and narratives of value and risk in circular economy practices and innovations. Drawing on the lessons from existing community practices and emerging experiments around shit reuse, this paper reconciles different perspectives on circularity and calls for a move beyond binaries of formal / informal, centralised / decentralised. By analysing perspectives of existing practices and new innovations together, we propose the notion of 'brown gold' and outline an integrated approach for policy innovations that address the physical, socio-cultural, economic, political, environmental, institutional and technical processes along the sanitation chain to unlock the full potential of safely (re)using shit and wastewater.

CV:

Professor Lyla Mehta is a Professorial Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. She is a sociologist working on sustainability, resource politics, gender, water and sanitation, climate change and uncertainty. Steering committee member of the Bretton Woods Project (2002-11) and Mistra Urban Future (2016 -). Team leader of the UN High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition on Water and Food Security. Involved in advocacy in Europe and India with social movements and NGOs on water, sanitation, displacement and development issues. Editor of *Environment and Planning E* (Nature and Space).

Dr Tanvi Bhatkal is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Currently, she is currently working on the project '[Towards Brown Gold](#)' which seeks to reimagine off-grid sanitation and address challenges of marginality and faecal sludge/wastewater reuse in urbanizing Asia and Africa. Her research takes an intersectional approach to examine the political economy, cultural politics and everyday lived experiences of urban infrastructure. Her doctoral

research at the University of Cambridge examined everyday gendered politics of urban belonging at the intersection of gendered and minority rights in Mumbai, India.

E-mails:

L.Mehta@ids.ac.uk

T.Bhatkal@ids.ac.uk