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Short-Term Lecturing and Research Fellowship

Narrative Report

The Short Term Lecturing and Research Fellowship has allowed me to develop my dissertation in many ways. Prior to receiving the fellowship, I was researching the historical development and current reform of Lahore waste disposal system. This involved accompanying field staff (sanitation workers and supervisors) in the current solid waste management department and research at various archives throughout Lahore with a focus on sanitation and public health in colonial Lahore and Punjab. This fellowship broadened this research in the following ways. My dissertation examines how governance reform and privatization have targeted the bureaucratic department that oversees waste disposal as well as recycling as an essential component of waste disposal.

Though my research with field staff had finished before the fellowship commenced, I continued to carry out targeted interviews with bureaucrats, members of civil society, and other employees of the privatized municipal department (Lahore Waste Management Company, LWMC). These interviews were directed first at the use of Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) interventions within the Government of Punjab and the LWMC and second, how these interventions work alongside governance reform being carried out throughout Punjab, especially to reduce corruption and improve service delivery and the efficiency and performance of local government. These interviews also clarified the workings of the previous municipal department and the LWMC and the privatization of the waste management system more generally. Other interviews were with civil society members working on issues related to the urban environment.

I also carried out fieldwork with distinct groups and in different spaces. “Informal” waste collectors remove waste from residential and commercial establishments and bring it back to their “informal” settlements. These settlements consist of semi-permanent tents built on private or governmental land and are a major space where waste is deposited temporarily. I also conducted fieldwork with those who work in and own junkyards, warehouses, and shops – each of which becomes spaces where waste is bought, sorted, and sold forward as potentially recyclable. After being sorted waste can then be exchanged for money between different actors within this recycling network. These exchanges, based on the expectation of receiving money and sorting of this material, allow for a market to emerge around recyclables.

My dissertation research contributes to the field of Pakistan Studies. Considerable scholarly work has already been done on sanitation and public health in colonial cities throughout South Asia. My own archival work has highlighted first how local or municipal government was imagined as a central means by which sanitation and public health interventions would transform individuals and environments, and second, how this connection between local government, sanitation, and public health was reworked in the post-colonial period, especially more recently through governance reform, privatization, and ICT4D interventions. Additionally, my research on recycling examines the role of work, money, debt, and social relations in what is usually termed the “informal” network. It details how an entire market for waste emerges within this network, where recyclables are sorted, bought, and sold and money in different form (cash, debt, checks, and bank transfers) circulate across the various actors connected to each other within this network. At the same time, this trade in waste is not entirely separate from other markets, such as those of plastics, paper, and metal goods. This contributes to scholarship on development, informality, and markets in contemporary Pakistan.