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Co-Producing Clean Cities: Community Participation in Solid Waste Management in Urban Harare

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Abstract

The study examined community participation in solid waste management (SWM) in Hatfield, a suburb of Harare, Zimbabwe, using co-production theory, participatory governance and political ecology as analytical frameworks. Data was collected from 140 participants comprising Harare City Council officials, informal waste pickers, community-based groups, non-governmental organisations and residents. The study employed semi-structured interviews, household surveys, participant observation and document analysis. Findings revealed a fragmented, yet active participatory landscape characterised by informal recycling networks, neighbourhood clean-up initiatives and limited household-level composting practices. Economic necessity emerges as the dominant driver of participation, particularly among informal actors, while environmental awareness and civic responsibility play secondary roles. Major constraints to effective participation included inadequate resources, institutional mistrust, weak coordination between stakeholders and limited public education on waste management. Application of the co-production and political ecology frameworks demonstrated that participation was shaped not only by community willingness but also by structural inequalities and uneven municipal service delivery. Most residents continued to perceive the City Council as the principal actor in SWM, reflecting a prevailing top-down governance approach. Nevertheless, respondents indicated a willingness to engage in future initiatives if supported through incentives, capacity-building and improved institutional collaboration. The study concluded that sustainable urban solid waste management in Harare requires inclusive, co-produced governance models that integrate informal actors, strengthen institutional capacity and promoted shared responsibility among stakeholders.

Keywords: Community participation, Solid waste management, informal economy, urban governance, Harare

Introduction

Rapid urbanisation, economic transformation and population growth have placed increasing pressure on municipal infrastructure in many African cities, particularly in solid waste management. (Hove et al., 2013). As cities expanded, so did the volume and complexity of waste generated. Inadequate and inconsistent waste collection services not only undermined the aesthetics and liveability of urban spaces but also posed serious threats to public health and environmental sustainability. Consequently, the development of effective and inclusive waste management systems became a critical concern for urban governance and service delivery across the continent.

Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, exemplified these challenges. Like many cities in sub-Saharan Africa, Harare struggles with poor waste collection coverage, illegal dumping, inadequate landfill infrastructure and low compliance with waste disposal regulations. These challenges were exacerbated by persistent financial constraints, weak enforcement mechanisms and a predominantly top-down approach to service delivery. (Marumahoko, 2023, 2024; Marumahoko et al., 2025). As a result, solid waste frequently accumulated in residential neighbourhoods, open spaces and waterways, contributing to environmental degradation and increasing the risk of communicable diseases such as cholera and typhoid.

Conventional approaches to solid waste management largely relied on the technical and administrative capacity of local authorities. (Okot-Okumu, 2011). However, growing evidence suggest that such state-centric models are insufficient in contexts characterised by resource constraints and rapid urban growth. In response, scholars and practitioners increasingly advocated for more inclusive and collaborative approaches to service delivery, commonly conceptualised as co-production. Co-production refers to the joint provision of public services by state and non-state actors, including citizens, community groups, non-governmental organisations and the private sector. This approach recognised both the limitations of formal institutions and the potential of residents to contribute meaningfully to the design, implementation and monitoring of services that directly affect their daily lives.

Community participation is a central component of co-produced waste management systems. (Ezeudu, 2021). In Harare, various forms of citizen engagement have emerged in response to persistent service delivery gaps, ranging from informal waste collection and sorting to neighbourhood-led clean-up campaigns. Despite the visibility of these grassroots initiatives, there remained limited academic and policy-oriented analysis of how communities participated in solid waste management, what motivates or constrains their involvement and how their efforts intersect with formal governance structures. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing responsive, resilient and inclusive urban waste management strategies.

Existing studies on solid waste management in Zimbabwe have tended to emphasise institutional weaknesses, privatisation initiatives, or environmental and public health impacts. Far fewer studies examine communities as active agents in the co-production of urban cleanliness. Moreover, the lived experiences of residents across different socio-economic contexts within Harare remain underexplored. This study addressed these gaps by examining the nature, extent and effectiveness of community participation in solid waste management in urban Harare, with particular attention to both formal and informal modes of engagement and the socio-political, economic and institutional factors that shape them.

The study was anchored in three interrelated theoretical perspectives: co-production, participatory governance and political ecology. The concept of co-production emerged as a critique of hierarchical, top-down models of service delivery that marginalised citizen agency in the governance of public goods. It refers to processes through which service users and providers collaborated in the design, delivery and evaluation of public services. (Bovaird, 2007; Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006). Elinor Ostrom's foundational work emphasised that public services, particularly those involving common-pool resources, are more effective and sustainable when citizens were actively involved in their provision. (Ostrom, 1996; 1999). Importantly, co-production extends beyond consultation or voluntary labour; it represented a reconfiguration of state–citizen relations in which both were recognised as co-creators of public value. In urban governance, this approach was applied to sectors such as healthcare, water

provision and increasingly, solid waste management, (Joshi & Moore, 2004), though outcomes remain highly context-dependent.

Participatory governance complements the co-production framework by emphasising citizen inclusion in decision-making processes related to public service delivery. Proponents argued that meaningful co-production requires institutional arrangements that allow communities not only to implement services but also to influence policy formulation and operational decisions (Fung, 2006; Cornwall, 2008). This perspective is particularly relevant in Harare, where gaps frequently exist between municipal policy intentions and on-the-ground implementation. Examining the openness and responsiveness of local governance structures is therefore critical for understanding why some community-based waste initiatives endure while others fail.

The study also drew on political ecology to interrogate how waste generation, disposal and exposure were shaped by power relations, socio-economic inequalities and spatial injustices. (Bryant, 1998; Robbins, 2012). From this perspective, solid waste is not merely a technical or environmental issue but a deeply political one. In many cities, low-income communities disproportionately bear the burden of waste accumulation and informal waste management, while wealthier neighbourhoods benefit from private collection services. Political ecology helped explain variations in participation, highlighting how necessity, exclusion and marginalisation—rather than civic idealism alone—often drove community engagement, particularly among informal waste pickers and residents of underserved areas.

Comparative experiences from other regions of the Global South further illustrated both the potential and limitations of co-produced waste management systems. In Latin America, waste picker cooperatives in countries such as Colombia and Brazil were formally integrated into municipal waste systems following sustained grassroots mobilisation and supportive policy reforms. (Medina, 2000; Dias, 2016a; Dias, 2016b). In Asia, hybrid arrangements combining formal municipal oversight and informal labour are evident. Notably, Pune's SWaCH cooperative demonstrates a successful model of co-managed waste services between waste pickers and local authorities. (Chikarmane & Narayan, 2005a; 2005b). Nonetheless, in many cities, informal actors remain marginalised and vulnerable due to weak legal recognition.
African cities exhibit similar contradictions. In Nairobi, for example, community-based organisations provide waste collection services in informal settlements, often with support from NGOs (Rotich et al., 2006a; 2006b). However, legal ambiguity, competition over service territories and contested authority frequently generate tensions between informal actors and municipal authorities. These dynamics underscored a central insight of both co-production and political ecology: community participation in waste management occurs within complex and contested institutional and socio-political environments.

Despite the growing international literature on co-produced solid waste management, there remains limited empirical research on how these dynamics unfold in Zimbabwe, particularly in Harare. Few studies explicitly apply co-production or participatory governance frameworks to the city's waste challenges and even fewer interrogate the political and spatial inequalities highlighted by political ecology. This study addresses these gaps by applying a multi-theoretical lens to examine how and why communities participate in solid waste management in urban Harare and what this revealed about the prospects for co-produced urban services in contexts of institutional fragility and citizen innovation.

The primary objective of this research was to assess how community participation contributed to solid waste management outcomes in Harare and to identify the conditions that enabled or constrained such participation. To achieve this, the study explored residents lived experiences, documents existing models of co-production and examined their interaction with formal governance structures. In doing so, it generated policy-relevant insights for strengthening collaborative urban environmental governance. The paper was organised as follows: the next section outlines the research methodology; the subsequent section presents and discusses the findings and the final section concludes with key implications and recommendations.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods case study design to examine the nature and dynamics of community participation in solid waste management in Hatfield, a suburb of Harare. Hatfield was selected as the study site due to the presence of diverse waste management actors, including municipal authorities, community-based organisations, non-governmental organisations and informal waste pickers. To capture both institutional perspectives and lived experiences across formal and informal sectors, data were collected from a range of stakeholder groups.

A total of 140 participants were involved in the study. These included five officials from Harare City Council, 40 representatives of community-based organisations, 60 informal waste pickers and 15 staff members from NGOs engaged in environmental and waste-related work. In addition, household-level surveys were administered to 20 residents to assess public awareness, perceptions and levels of participation in solid waste management practices within Hatfield.

Sampling strategies were tailored to the characteristics of each stakeholder group. Purposive sampling was used to select institutional actors and organised community groups based on their direct relevance to the research objectives and their roles in waste governance. Informal waste pickers—often marginalised and difficult to access—were recruited through snowball sampling, drawing on peer networks to engage this hard-to-reach population. For the household survey, stratified random sampling was employed to ensure representation across different socio-economic segments of Hatfield.

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, structured questionnaires, participant observation and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews facilitated in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives, while structured questionnaires generated standardised data on household waste practices and participation. Participant observation was conducted in residential areas, informal dumping sites and local recycling hubs to document everyday waste management practices that were not easily captured through self-reported data. Document analysis drew on sources such as Harare's Solid Waste Management Strategy (2019), municipal by-laws, budget statements and NGO publications to situate the findings within the broader institutional and policy context.

All research activities adhered to established ethical protocols. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality and anonymity and participated voluntarily, with the option to withdraw at any stage without consequence. By triangulating multiple data sources and stakeholder perspectives, the study provided a nuanced understanding of how formal governance arrangements and informal community practices intersected in the everyday management of urban solid waste.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings of the study and interpreted them through the lenses of co-production theory, participatory governance and political ecology. It examined how various stakeholders—including residents, informal waste collectors, NGOs, community groups and Harare City Council—interacted within the urban solid waste management system in Hatfield. The focus was on the nature and quality of community participation, institutional support and the role of informal economies.

The analysis drew from a robust mixed-methods dataset, including household surveys, interviews, field observations and document analysis. By integrating quantitative trends with qualitative insights, the section unpacked both structural patterns and lived experiences related to urban waste practices. These findings were framed within co-production theory, which highlighted collaborative service delivery in contexts of state limitations (Ostrom, 1996) and participatory governance, which emphasised the need for institutional inclusivity and citizen voice (Fung, 2006). Additionally, political ecology provided a lens to interrogate how access, power and inequality shaped environmental outcomes and community agency.

To enhance clarity, the section was organised thematically in line with the study's objectives. Each theme incorporated descriptive statistics (for example, tables and pie charts), supported by narratives and quotations from participants, offering a multi-layered perspective. The five thematic areas covered were:

1. Typologies of community participation
2. Motivations and barriers to participation
3. Role of government and institutional support
4. Informal waste economy and recycling networks
5. Community knowledge, attitudes and perceptions

Typologies of Community Participation

This section examined the various forms of community participation in solid waste management observed in Hatfield. Drawing from semi-structured interviews, household surveys and participant observation, the analysis identified a wide range of engagement practices—from organised community clean-ups to informal, survival-driven recycling initiatives. These participation forms varied in intensity, visibility and sustainability, but all emerged as local responses to chronic municipal service delivery gaps. Table 1 summarises five dominant types of participation: neighbourhood clean-up campaigns, informal collection and resale of recyclables, household waste separation, composting and community awareness programs.

The diversity of participation reflected a dynamic, if uneven, landscape of engagement. Informal waste pickers represented the most sustained form of participation, often collecting recyclables daily and forming loose but effective networks with residents and middlemen. Their efforts, while rarely acknowledged by formal institutions, contributed significantly to Harare's urban recycling ecosystem. One waste picker explained, "We don't beg. We work. This is our job and we know every bottle in this neighbourhood." This quote underscored the legitimacy and economic value of their labour. These diverse participation types illustrated co-production in practice, where residents and informal actors jointly engaged in service delivery roles traditionally reserved for the municipality. (Ostrom, 1996). However, the largely informal and ad hoc nature of participation also reflected the absence of structured, institutional

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support—aligning with concerns raised in participatory governance theory regarding the lack of formal inclusion in decision-making. (Fung, 2006).

Neighbourhood clean-up campaigns, although more formalised and often supported by NGOs or local councillors, tended to be episodic and lacked sustainability. Their impact was often symbolic rather than structural, constrained by limited follow-up and resource shortages. Household waste separation and composting—though less widespread—signalled a growing awareness among some residents about the environmental value of proper waste management. These practices were particularly visible among low-income households with garden space, who found composting to be a pragmatic solution for both waste reduction and food production. Yet, without supportive infrastructure or municipal endorsement, such innovations remained isolated and underutilised.

Overall, the findings highlighted a fragmented participation landscape shaped more by necessity than civic engagement, particularly in lower-income zones. While some residents acted out of environmental concern or social responsibility, the most consistent forms of participation—such as informal recycling—were survival strategies rooted in economic marginalisation. This reinforced insights from political ecology, which emphasised how power and inequality shaped who managed waste and under what conditions. (Robbins, 2012). The contrast between episodic civic participation and continuous informal labour underscored a central tension in urban service delivery: participation thrived not in formal plans, but in the everyday practices of those excluded from them.

Table 1: Typologies of Community Participation

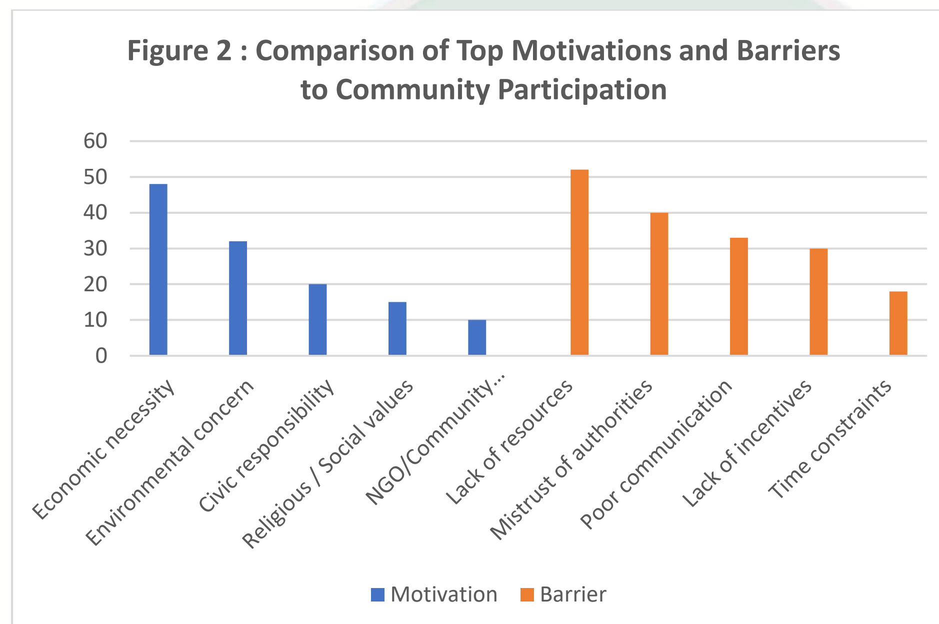
Participation Types	Description	Key Actors
Neighbourhood clean-up campaigns	Occasional, usually NGO-supported, community-led efforts to clear waste	Residents, NGOs, community groups
Informal waste collection and resale	Daily collection of recyclables for resale	Informal waste pickers
Household waste separation	Sorting of waste into organic/inorganic at home	Small number of residents
Composting of organic waste	Backyard compost pits or gardens	Some low-income households
Community waste awareness programs	Education and sensitisation, often NGO-initiated	NGOs, schools, churches

Motivations and Barriers to Participation

Understanding what drives or hinders community participation in solid waste management was crucial for designing inclusive and effective urban environmental strategies. In this study, participants were asked the reasons they chose to engage—or not engage—in waste management initiatives. Responses from surveys and interviews were analysed and grouped into two main categories: motivations and barriers to participation.

Motivations included factors such as economic necessity, environmental concern and civic responsibility, which reflected both personal and collective incentives. Barriers, on the other hand, included challenges such as a lack of resources, mistrust of local authorities and poor communication, which often reflected broader structural issues in urban governance. To

visualise these findings, a comparative bar graph (Figure 2) was developed to illustrate the frequency of top motivations and barriers mentioned by participants. The figure below provides a snapshot of the most influential factors shaping engagement in Hatfield's solid waste management landscape.



Source: Research Data (2026)

Figure 2 clearly shows that economic necessity was the most frequently cited reason for participating in waste-related activities, mentioned by 48 respondents across all participant groups. This was especially prominent among informal waste pickers and low-income households, many of whom relied on recyclable waste as a source of livelihood. This highlighted the instrumental nature of participation, where engagement was not primarily driven by environmental or civic values, but by the need to survive in a challenging urban economy. One informal waste picker was quoted as saying, *"I don't have a job. Collecting bottles and cans is how I feed my children."*

The second most common motivator was environmental concern, cited by 32 participants. This group included middle-income residents, NGO representatives and school-based community actors. While this showed that environmental awareness was present within the community, it was less dominant compared to economic drivers. Civic responsibility and religious or social values were also mentioned, although at significantly lower frequencies, indicating that intrinsic or moral motivations played a secondary role in most residents' decisions to engage.

On the other hand, lack of resources emerged as the most significant barrier to participation, reported by 52 respondents. Participants cited the absence of basic tools such as gloves, waste bins and protective gear as a major deterrent, particularly during community clean-ups. This barrier reflected systemic underinvestment in grassroots waste initiatives. Another resident, a community group member, was quoted saying, '"We want to help clean, but we don't even have brooms or gloves. It's dangerous."

Closely related was mistrust of authorities, with 40 respondents expressing scepticism about the city council's commitment to waste management. Some believed their efforts would go unnoticed or be undermined by inconsistent municipal services. Additional barriers included poor communication between the city council and communities (33 mentions) and a lack of incentives (30 mentions), suggesting that even willing participants often felt unsupported or unrecognised. Time constraints, especially among working residents and caregivers, were also highlighted but were less frequently cited.

Overall, this analysis showed that while there was a strong willingness to engage, it was frequently outweighed by practical and institutional limitations. The predominance of necessity-based motivation, coupled with widespread barriers rooted in structural deficiencies, points to a participation landscape that was reactive rather than proactive and shaped more by survival strategies than by shared civic visions.

3.4 Role of Government and Institutional Support

This section assessed the role of the Harare City Council and other institutional actors in supporting community participation in solid waste management. Drawing from interviews with city officials and community members, document analysis and field observations, the analysis examined the presence, effectiveness and visibility of formal support structures and evaluated the disconnect between policy commitments and on-the-ground realities. Special attention was given to contrasting perceptions between institutional actors and residents.

3.4.1 Institutional Commitments vs. Community Experience

A central finding from this study was the clear mismatch between the commitments made by municipal authorities and the realities experienced by residents in Hatfield. Interviews with both Harare City Council officials and community members revealed a disconnect between policy rhetoric and actual practice. One city council official candidly admitted, "We have community officers, but they have no budget or authority." This sentiment was echoed by a community leader who shared, "They said they'd help with clean-ups, but we haven't seen anyone from council in months." These statements underscored a broader pattern of unfulfilled institutional promises and minimal engagement with grassroots waste management actors.

A review of policy documents such as the Harare Solid Waste Management Strategy (2019) and relevant municipal by-laws confirmed the existence of well-meaning commitments on paper. Terms such as "strengthening ward-based clean-up campaigns" and "engaging informal waste actors" appeared throughout strategic plans. However, these policy frameworks lacked clear operational guidelines, timelines, or designated budgets. Budget reports from 2022 to 2024, for example, showed a decline in allocations to community engagement, while administrative and enforcement budgets remained stable or grew. These findings revealed significant gaps in participatory governance: although policies existed in principle, their failure to be implemented meaningfully limited true co-production. Without enabling structures—such as funding, communication channels and delegated authority—community participation risks being tokenistic rather than transformational. (Cornwall, 2008; Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006).

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Observed institutional actions in Hatfield suggested a largely reactive and fragmented governance approach. Waste collection services were sporadic, outreach officers lacked resources and collaboration with local NGOs or informal actors was mostly informal or absent. Table 1 illustrates this clearly by comparing selected policy promises against community-reported and observed realities. This implementation gap reflected not only logistical or financial constraints, but also a deeper failure to institutionalise participatory waste governance. Without consistent and credible follow-through, even the most inclusive policies risked losing legitimacy among the very communities they aimed to empower.

From a theoretical perspective, these dynamics reaffirmed key insights from co-production theory: sustainable service delivery required more than citizen involvement—it demanded reciprocal commitment from the state (Ostrom, 1996). The inability or unwillingness of Harare's municipal structures to empower local actors undermined collaborative potential and entrenched dependence on informal systems. In parallel, participatory governance theory warned of precisely this outcome—where the language of inclusion masked the persistence of centralised control and bureaucratic inertia. (Fung, 2006). For community participation in solid waste management to move from symbolic to substantive, institutional actors must provide not only policy direction, but also the resources, legitimacy and space for grassroot action.

Table 2: Promised vs. Observed Institutional Actions

Institutional Promise	Observed Reality
Establishment of functional community outreach programs	Irregular or inactive; no sustained presence in most neighbourhoods
Regular provision of waste collection services	Inconsistent collection; in some areas, weeks without service
Training and support for community clean-up initiatives	Minimal to no training provided; few materials or logistics offered
Collaboration with local NGOs and informal actors	Limited coordination; no formal recognition of informal waste pickers
Deployment of community environmental officers	Officers exist but lack the authority and resources to act effectively

Source: Research Data (2026)

Informal Waste Economy and Recycling Networks

This section explores the structure, routines and socio-economic dynamics of the informal waste economy in Hatfield. Informal waste pickers—often overlooked in formal policy frameworks—played a critical role in waste diversion, material recovery and local environmental upkeep. Drawing from interviews, participant observation and photo documentation, this section illustrated how these actors operated, their relationships with residents, recyclers and NGOs and the challenges they faced, particularly around economic marginalisation and social stigma.

The informal waste economy in Hatfield operated through a decentralised but remarkably organised system that connected households, informal waste pickers, middlemen and, eventually, formal recycling facilities. While it functioned outside of official municipal

structures, this network played a vital role in waste recovery, livelihood generation and informal environmental management.

At the starting point were the residential areas, where informal waste pickers began their early morning rounds. They typically followed set routes—often on foot or with handcarts—collecting valuable recyclables such as plastic bottles, aluminium cans, cardboard, scrap metal and occasionally electronic waste. These items were either retrieved directly from open bins, illegal dumpsites, or left out by residents who had informal arrangements with pickers. In some cases, households intentionally saved recyclables for specific waste pickers, creating silent but mutually beneficial relationships. According to one waste picker, "Some people keep bottles for us. They know we come every week and they help us that way."

After collection, pickers sorted their materials in temporary holding areas. Sorting was done manually, usually with little to no protective gear. Once enough material was gathered, it was sold to middlemen, who served as the main link between informal pickers and larger recycling companies. These buyers typically operated out of small depots or roadside weigh stations and they offer a set price per kilogram of each material type.

Despite the economic importance of these transactions, pickers often had little power in setting prices, as they relied entirely on the middlemen for market access. There were no standard weighing systems and pricing was opaque and inconsistent. Another informal waste picker said, "We don't have scales, so they just tell us how much it is. If we refuse, they say they won't buy from us again." In some areas, NGOs and community-based organisations have tried to intervene by providing gloves, pushcarts, or training sessions on safe handling and sorting. However, these interventions are sporadic and limited in reach. Most waste pickers continued to operate in isolation, navigating health risks, social stigma and unreliable incomes with little institutional support.

This structure, though informal and unregulated, was a critical waste recovery system—highly flexible, rooted in local knowledge and filling gaps left by the city council's often irregular waste collection services. Waste pickers not only reduced the volume of waste headed to landfills but also enabled the circulation of materials back into the economy, demonstrating a resourcefulness that remained largely unrecognised by official waste management systems.

Community Knowledge, Attitudes and Perceptions

This section evaluated the level of awareness, prevailing attitudes and willingness to act among residents of Hatfield regarding solid waste management. Drawing from household surveys and follow-up interviews, the findings demonstrated that while many residents expressed concern about waste-related issues, there remained significant gaps in both knowledge and perceived responsibility. These insights were vital for understanding how public attitudes shaped participation and for designing more inclusive and sustainable community-based waste initiatives.

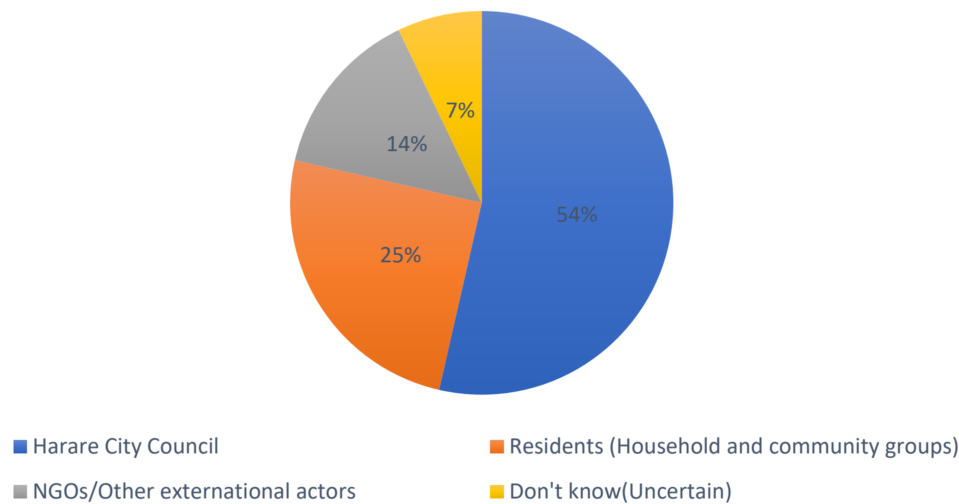
Survey results revealed that basic awareness about solid waste management existed, but deeper knowledge—such as composting techniques, recycling protocols, or the role of informal waste collectors—was limited. Only 22% of respondents knew that kitchen waste could be composted, while 68% routinely burned both organic and inorganic waste. This practice persisted despite its environmental and health hazards. One respondent remarked, "I didn't know you could compost kitchen waste. We just burn it." These knowledge gaps were

symptomatic of the absence of structured, ongoing public education initiatives by either the city council or supporting NGOs. From a co-production perspective, this signalled a lost opportunity: without investing in citizen capacity-building, the state limited the potential for meaningful shared responsibility (Bovaird, 2007).

When asked who they believed was primarily responsible for managing community waste, 54% of residents pointed to the Harare City Council (see Figure 2). This dominant perception reflected a top-down understanding of service delivery, where waste management was viewed as a municipal duty rather than a co-managed function. Only 25% of respondents believed that residents or community groups should take the lead. This low figure indicated that the idea of civic ownership and collaboration in waste governance had not been fully internalised. According to participatory governance theory, this disconnect was not simply about willingness—it was about whether citizens felt empowered and supported to take on governance roles. (Fung, 2006). In the absence of institutional recognition or reliable engagement, community ownership struggled to move beyond isolated efforts.

Interestingly, 14% of respondents viewed NGOs or other external actors as the main drivers of waste management, while 7% were uncertain or disengaged. This growing reliance on non-state actors reflected both a pragmatic shift—toward whichever actors appear most effective—and a deeper disillusionment with state institutions. From a political ecology standpoint, such reliance could also be read as an indicator of how institutional failure disproportionately affected marginalised communities, pushing them toward informal or donor-dependent solutions. (Robbins, 2012). While these actors filled critical gaps, their involvement was often project-based and unsustainable without policy support.

Despite these challenges, there remained a notable degree of latent public willingness. Approximately 63% of residents expressed openness to participating in future clean-up campaigns, recycling initiatives, or environmental awareness programs, provided they were well-organised and included basic incentives such as equipment, refreshments, or public recognition. Yet, recurring scepticism was evident. One resident involved in a previous initiative commented, “They come once, take photos and disappear. So why should we bother again?” This tension between hope and hesitation highlighted a crucial insight: citizen participation could not thrive on goodwill alone—it required trust, institutional consistency and visible follow-through. As co-production theory suggests, effective collaboration must be underpinned by mutual responsibility and adequate resources. (Ostrom, 1996). Without these, community engagement risks remained symbolic rather than transformative.



Source: Research Data (2026)

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to examine the nature and dynamics of community participation in solid waste management (SWM) in Hatfield, Harare. Guided by co-production theory, participatory governance and political ecology, the research demonstrated that while various forms of participation existed—ranging from informal recycling and neighbourhood clean-ups to occasional awareness campaigns—they were largely fragmented, reactive and driven more by economic necessity than by civic or environmental ideals. These findings challenge top-down governance models that assumed passive citizen roles and instead highlighted the agency of communities operating within structural constraints.

The gap between policy promises and practical implementation, coupled with limited institutional support, echoed key concerns in participatory governance theory: namely, that inclusion on paper did not always translate into meaningful empowerment. Meanwhile, political ecology helped to contextualise the exclusion of informal actors, showing how urban inequalities and governance failures shaped who participated, how and under what conditions. Co-production in this context remained partial and precarious, often occurring in spite of—not because of—formal systems.

Several recommendations emerged to advance more inclusive and sustainable SWM in urban Zimbabwe. These include establishing participatory planning platforms at ward level; formally recognising and supporting informal waste pickers through training and integration; incentivising household waste sorting through material rewards and investing in continuous public education to shift attitudes toward shared responsibility. Improved communication and funding mechanisms were also essential for bridging the policy-practice divide. Future research could explore the role of youth and digital tools in strengthening waste co-production, particularly how mobile technologies and social media platforms might enhance community mobilisation, data reporting and real-time feedback between citizens and municipal authorities.

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