



Research Paper

## Community Perception and Sociological Impact of Urban Dumping Grounds: A Study in Aizawl, Mizoram

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**ABSTRACT :** *This study explores the sociological impact of urban dumping grounds on communities living near municipal waste sites in Aizawl, Mizoram. Amid growing urbanization and rising waste production, the issue of improper solid waste management has become increasingly critical. While prior research has largely focused on the technical and environmental aspects of waste disposal, this paper shifts the lens to the lived experiences, health concerns, and social dynamics of affected residents.*

*Using a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates survey data from households located near a major dumping ground with in-depth interviews. Key themes explored include perceived pollution, health risks, governance failures, and environmental injustice. The theoretical framework draws on Goffman's concept of stigma, Beck's Risk Society, and environmental justice theories to understand how physical proximity to waste influences both well-being and social identity.*

*Findings reveal that over 75% of respondents perceive adverse health effects due to the dumping site. Many express emotional distress, feelings of abandonment by local authorities, and experiences of social stigma. The dumping ground is not only seen as a source of pollution but also as a marker of spatial inequality and class-based neglect. Younger residents tend to voice activism and demand change, whereas older generations display resignation, indicating generational differences in civic agency and expectations.*

*The study calls for a more inclusive, justice-oriented approach to urban waste management. Policy recommendations include relocating hazardous dumping sites, improving waste segregation systems, and ensuring community participation in planning and decision-making. Ultimately, the research emphasizes the need to address both environmental and social dimensions of urban development, advocating for policies that reflect the voices and rights of marginalized communities.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Urban dumping ground, environmental justice, Aizawl, public health, risk society, stigma, community perception*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Urban dumping grounds in India have emerged as a glaring symbol of infrastructural inadequacy and environmental neglect, particularly in the context of rapidly urbanizing cities. These sites—often characterized by sprawling mounds of unmanaged solid waste—are not merely symptoms of poor municipal planning but are indicative of deeper sociological and spatial injustices. In many Indian urban centers, including smaller hill cities like Aizawl, the management of solid waste remains one of the most pressing urban challenges.

Aizawl, the capital city of Mizoram, has witnessed significant urban expansion over the past two decades, driven by population growth, rural-to-urban migration, and an increase in consumerist lifestyles. However, this expansion has not been adequately matched by improvements in essential infrastructure, particularly in waste management. The city's hilly terrain, narrow roadways, and lack of centralized waste treatment facilities have further exacerbated the situation, resulting in the emergence of informal or poorly regulated dumping grounds—often located precariously close to residential areas.

These urban dumping grounds pose critical environmental threats, including groundwater contamination, air pollution, and the spread of vector-borne diseases. Yet beyond these physical consequences lie complex social dynamics. The proximity of residential communities to these waste sites gives rise to multiple

layers of concern—ranging from health anxieties and decreased property values to stigmatization and emotional stress. Moreover, such environmental burdens are rarely distributed evenly. Communities with lower socio-economic status, limited political voice, and weak institutional support are often the ones forced to bear the brunt of these waste-related injustices.

Urban dumping grounds in India have increasingly become emblematic of the infrastructural fragility that underpins the country's uneven urbanization. These sites—characterized by sprawling mounds of unmanaged solid waste—are not simply outcomes of municipal inefficiency but are deeply embedded in the socio-political fabric of urban development (Sharholi et al., 2008; Gidwani, 2011). Particularly in peripheral and smaller cities like Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram, the inadequacy of solid waste management systems reflects broader issues of spatial marginality, weak governance structures, and socio-environmental injustices.

The urban trajectory of Aizawl over the last two decades has been marked by rapid demographic and spatial expansion, driven by factors such as rural-to-urban migration, administrative reclassification, and changing consumerist aspirations. However, the city's physical geography—comprised largely of steep hills, narrow roads, and fragile ecologies—compounds the challenges of infrastructure development, especially in waste collection and disposal (Lallianthanga, 2015). The resultant proliferation of informal or poorly managed dumping grounds, often situated near or within residential clusters, is thus not accidental but structurally produced and maintained.

While environmental science literature has documented the adverse ecological effects of urban dumping grounds—such as groundwater contamination, air pollution, and vector-borne diseases (Kumar et al., 2016)—the sociological dimensions remain under-theorized. These dumping sites are not neutral spaces but are sites where social anxieties, health risks, and territorial stigmatization converge. Residents in proximity to such waste facilities frequently report feelings of vulnerability, deterioration in quality of life, and social exclusion—phenomena that are often overlooked in technical urban planning discourses (Beck, 1992; Goffman, 1963).

More significantly, the burdens associated with urban waste management are not evenly distributed. Research has shown that environmental burdens—including exposure to waste and pollution—tend to disproportionately affect lower-income groups, minorities, and communities with limited political agency (Bullard, 1993; Simmons, 2006). This condition aligns with the framework of environmental justice, which foregrounds the socio-spatial inequalities embedded in environmental risk distribution. In Aizawl, the proximity of vulnerable communities to waste sites illustrates how infrastructural neglect intersects with political marginalization and spatial injustice.

This study is situated within this emerging body of critical urban and environmental sociology. It interrogates the lived realities of residents inhabiting the vicinity of a major dumping ground in Aizawl, asking the following questions:

- How do residents perceive and interpret the presence of the dumping ground in their everyday lives?
- What are the tangible and intangible impacts—health, economic, and psychological—associated with this proximity?
- What forms of resistance, adaptation, or coping strategies have emerged in response to this environmental precarity?
- How do these dynamics reveal the structural processes of urban marginalization and environmental governance failure?

Through these inquiries, the paper seeks to move beyond technocratic and depoliticized understandings of waste. It argues that dumping grounds should be conceptualized as contested socio-environmental spaces—products of governance deficits, symbolic marginalization, and socio-ecological inequalities. In doing so, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of urban risk, drawing from interdisciplinary literature in sociology, urban studies, and environmental justice.

### **Goffman's Theory of Stigma and Spatial Marginalization**

Goffman's seminal work on stigma conceptualizes it as a socially constructed process wherein certain individuals or groups are discredited based on perceived undesirable attributes, leading to social exclusion and identity distortion (Goffman, 1963). In this study, Goffman's framework is extended to examine *spatial stigma*—the devaluation of communities based on their geographic association with waste sites and environmental degradation.

In urban sociology, spatial stigma refers to the symbolic and material marginalization of places perceived as “polluted,” “unclean,” or “unsafe” (Wacquant, Slater & Pereira, 2014). Communities living adjacent to dumping grounds in Aizawl experience such stigma not simply due to their socio-economic status but also because of their proximity to spaces that are publicly constructed as undesirable. These areas are often framed as zones of environmental neglect and health hazard, which in turn affects the residents' sense of identity, community cohesion, and their interaction with the broader urban polity.

The implications of spatial stigma are multifaceted. First, residents face exclusion from mainstream discourses of urban development and cleanliness, reinforcing feelings of abandonment by civic authorities. Second, such stigma has material consequences, including decreased land values, difficulty in accessing credit, and poor infrastructural investment (Keene & Padilla, 2010). Third, spatial stigma can internalize a sense of inferiority and disempowerment among residents, which may inhibit collective mobilization or reinforce passive acceptance of environmental injustice (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Applying Goffman's theory in the context of Aizawl thus allows for a nuanced understanding of how environmental degradation is not only a physical phenomenon but also a socially mediated experience—one that shapes and is shaped by power relations, governance failures, and urban inequality. It underscores the need to approach urban waste not just as a technical problem but as a deeply embedded socio-symbolic process that produces both material harm and symbolic violence.

### **Ulrich Beck's Risk Society and Manufactured Insecurity**

Ulrich Beck's concept of the "risk society" offers a powerful lens for understanding the environmental and sociological implications of urban dumping grounds. According to Beck (1992), late modernity is marked by a heightened awareness of human-made or "manufactured risks"—systemic hazards that arise from industrialization, technological progress, and institutional failure. These risks are qualitatively distinct from natural hazards in that they are embedded within processes of modernization itself, often hidden, diffused, and disproportionately distributed across socio-economic lines.

In the context of Aizawl, the presence of poorly managed urban dumping grounds reflects precisely the type of manufactured risk Beck theorizes. These sites pose not only visible environmental threats—such as leachate contamination, toxic emissions, and the proliferation of disease vectors—but also generate latent insecurities among residents, who live under constant anxiety regarding health and social well-being. The anticipation of harm, even in the absence of immediate illness, fosters what Beck describes as a "generalized state of risk consciousness" (Beck, 1992: 36).

Moreover, risk distribution in a risk society is rarely equal. It follows the contours of socio-political power. Populations with limited access to institutional redress, healthcare, or political representation often inhabit risk-laden environments, as observed in the peri-urban fringes of Aizawl where dumping grounds are frequently located. This reinforces Beck's claim that modern risks exacerbate existing social inequalities and produce new forms of environmental injustice.

Critically, Beck's framework also points to the failure of expert systems and governance mechanisms to adequately manage or communicate these risks. In Aizawl, the absence of participatory waste governance, lack of transparency regarding public health risks, and reactive rather than preventive urban planning indicate a governance deficit characteristic of the risk society paradigm. These failures undermine the trust between citizens and state institutions, further intensifying the socio-political dimensions of risk exposure.

Thus, Beck's theory not only illuminates the physical and psychological burden of living near dumping grounds but also reveals the broader structural incapacity of modern urban governance to equitably manage risk and ensure environmental safety.

### **Environmental Justice Framework: Spatialized Inequality and Waste Burden**

The Environmental Justice (EJ) framework provides an essential theoretical foundation for analyzing the socio-spatial dynamics of urban dumping grounds in Aizawl. Originally rooted in the civil rights movements of the United States, the EJ paradigm has expanded globally to encompass the equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, meaningful public participation, and recognition of marginalized communities in environmental governance (Bullard, 1993; Schlosberg, 2007).

In the context of Aizawl, the siting of dumping grounds disproportionately in or near economically disadvantaged and politically marginalized neighborhoods exemplifies environmental injustice. These communities often lack the political capital or institutional channels to resist environmentally harmful land use decisions, resulting in a spatial concentration of environmental burdens such as air pollution, water contamination, and vector-borne disease exposure. This mirrors Bullard's (1993) assertion that environmental risks are frequently "dumped" on communities with the least capacity to respond—effectively rendering waste management a socio-political issue as much as a technical one.

Furthermore, the absence of participatory mechanisms in urban planning processes in Aizawl exacerbates this injustice. Local residents living near dumping grounds are typically excluded from decision-making forums, violating the procedural justice component of the EJ framework (Agyeman, Bullard & Evans, 2003). The lack of consultation, transparency, and accountability from municipal bodies reinforces a top-down planning model that marginalizes vulnerable populations.

Importantly, this injustice is not merely distributive or procedural—it is also recognitional. The lived experiences and cultural narratives of affected residents are frequently ignored or devalued in dominant discourses about urban development and modernization. The framing of dumping grounds as necessary evils in

the name of urban progress delegitimizes community resistance and obscures alternative, more sustainable and equitable waste management models.

By situating the issue of urban dumping within the Environmental Justice framework, this study underscores that environmental degradation in Aizawl is not a neutral outcome of urban expansion but a socially embedded process shaped by power, exclusion, and institutional neglect.

This study adopts a sociological lens to interrogate the lived realities of communities residing near urban dumping grounds in Aizawl, Mizoram. Recognizing waste sites not only as ecological hazards but as socially embedded phenomena, the research seeks to unveil how structural inequalities, spatial governance, and symbolic constructions of waste intersect in shaping everyday life in these marginalized urban peripheries.

## II. Objectives

- To critically assess community perceptions, health anxieties, and socio-emotional impacts associated with living in proximity to dumping grounds, with attention to both material and symbolic dimensions of risk.
- To examine how socio-demographic variables—including age, gender, class, and occupational status—mediate the perception and experience of environmental risks.
- To analyze the construction and negotiation of spatial stigma by affected communities through both discursive and embodied practices.
- To evaluate the role of urban governance, communication mechanisms, and civic participation in mediating the relationship between affected populations and state-led waste management policies.

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative techniques to generate a multidimensional understanding of community responses to urban dumping grounds in Aizawl. This approach allows for triangulation of data, offering both statistical generalizability and in-depth narrative insight. The research was conducted over a two-month fieldwork period (January–February 2025), enabling sustained community engagement and iterative reflection.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across key demographic variables such as age, gender, occupation, and residential proximity to the dumping ground. A total of 120 residents were surveyed using structured questionnaires. To complement and deepen these findings, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with strategically selected informants, including:

- Local ward leaders
- Community-based organization (CBO) and NGO workers
- Public health practitioners
- Residents with direct exposure to the waste site

This combination of survey-based breadth and qualitative depth facilitated a robust analysis of how environmental risks and spatial stigma are perceived, negotiated, and resisted at the community level.

### Data Collection Instruments

- **Structured Questionnaire:** Designed to capture demographic details, health perceptions, emotional responses, risk awareness, and civic engagement. Included both closed- and open-ended questions to balance quantifiability with respondent voice.
- **Interview Schedules:** Developed to guide conversations around lived experiences, symbolic meanings attached to space, and critiques of governance.
- **Field Observations:** Recorded through ethnographic field notes, these observations captured environmental conditions, community interactions, and informal coping mechanisms.

All instruments were piloted prior to formal data collection to enhance validity and contextual relevance.

Quantitative data from surveys were inputted into SPSS (v27) and analyzed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and basic correlation measures to identify patterns in risk perception and socio-demographic variation.

Qualitative data—comprising transcribed interviews and field notes—were analyzed thematically using NVivo 12. Coding was both inductive (emerging from the data) and deductive (guided by the theoretical frameworks of Goffman, Beck, and environmental justice). Themes included spatial stigma, health anxieties, trust in governance, and community resilience.

## **Health and Environmental Perceptions**

A significant majority of respondents (78%) reported a perceived deterioration in personal or household health since the dumping ground near their locality became operational. This perception aligns with empirical patterns observed in environmental health literature, where proximity to unmanaged solid waste sites correlates with increased risk of morbidity (Kumar et al., 2016; Sharholy et al., 2008).

Specific health complaints were recurrent across the data set. Breathing difficulties were reported by 65% of surveyed participants, while 52% noted incidents of skin rashes, allergies, or signs of waterborne contamination, particularly among children and elderly family members. These symptoms point toward the inhalation of airborne particulates and possible seepage of leachate into local water supplies—concerns well documented in prior studies of peri-urban waste management in India (Pathak, 2015).

Respondents also articulated a broader sense of environmental degradation. Nuisance factors such as foul odor, flies, stray animals, and the visible presence of waste were reported as near-daily stressors. These environmental irritants were not only framed as public health threats but also as factors that diminished the overall livability of the neighborhood.

The convergence of physical symptoms and environmental discomforts reinforces Beck's (1992) concept of "manufactured risks"—human-induced hazards that evade traditional spatial and temporal boundaries of risk management. In this case, the health anxieties of residents are not merely subjective fears but responses to observable environmental stressors shaped by a failure of municipal governance.

Furthermore, several interviewees described a sense of abandonment and neglect, emphasizing that repeated complaints to local authorities yielded little response. This perceived institutional apathy compounds the health risks, fostering psychological distress and a diminished sense of agency within the community—a pattern consistent with environmental justice critiques (Bullard, 1993).

## **Emotional and Social Impact**

The spatial proximity to a dumping ground extends its impact beyond physical health, penetrating deeply into the emotional and social fabric of the affected community. A striking 61% of respondents stated that residing near the dumping site has negatively affected their sense of dignity and social status. This perceived loss of self-worth and stigmatization resonates strongly with Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, wherein individuals or groups associated with discredited spaces—such as waste sites—are socially devalued.

This spatial stigma manifests in multiple ways. Several younger participants, particularly adolescents and early-career professionals, voiced acute discomfort in hosting visitors or friends in their neighborhood. As one respondent remarked during an interview, *"I hesitate to invite friends over... they think we live in a place that smells and looks like a dumping ground."* Such expressions of shame and social withdrawal highlight the internalization of external judgments, where residents begin to view their environment as an impediment to social inclusion and personal development.

These findings are further compounded by reports of exclusionary behavior from residents of more affluent localities, who, according to interviews, often associate dumping-ground neighborhoods with "dirtiness" or "neglect." This labeling reproduces spatial inequality and social stratification, as affected communities are rendered both physically and symbolically marginal.

Moreover, emotional distress is not limited to social embarrassment. Several respondents described persistent feelings of frustration, helplessness, and resentment toward authorities and planning agencies. This psychosocial toll, while less visible than physical ailments, contributes significantly to the deterioration of mental health and community well-being, echoing insights from environmental psychology and urban sociology (Fullilove, 1996; Gidwani, 2011).

Taken together, the data reveals that the social consequences of urban waste mismanagement in Aizawl are not merely incidental—they are central to understanding how environmental risks are lived, interpreted, and politicized by affected communities.

## **Governance and Policy Perceptions**

In examining the relationship between affected communities and local governance, the study found a significant sense of disillusionment with municipal authorities. 70% of respondents expressed the belief that local authorities are unresponsive to the challenges posed by the dumping site. This finding underscores a critical failure in urban governance—a gap between citizen needs and governmental action, echoing broader critiques of state inefficacy in addressing urban waste management (Simmons, 2006; Gidwani, 2011).

A further revealing insight from the data is that 44% of respondents were unaware of any formal complaint mechanisms—a finding that suggests a lack of effective communication and transparency in the waste management system. The absence of accessible channels for public grievance diminishes the sense of civic engagement and exacerbates the feelings of powerlessness among residents, reinforcing Beck's (1992) concept of manufactured risks that are managed inequitably.

Moreover, the study found that only 12% of residents had participated in any community meetings on waste management. This low level of engagement reflects the marginalization of communities affected by urban waste, with limited opportunities for participation in decision-making processes. Policy responsiveness, thus, remains weak, and the lack of an inclusive dialogue between local authorities and communities may perpetuate spatial inequalities in urban planning.

### **Intergenerational Perspectives**

An interesting generational divide emerged in the responses to the dumping ground issue. Older residents (above 50 years) exhibited resignation, with many expressing a belief that their community's condition had remained static for years and that protesting would yield no tangible results. This sense of fatalism may be linked to the historical marginalization of older generations in urban planning processes, as well as a long-standing acceptance of inadequate waste management systems in smaller hill cities like Aizawl (Pathak, 2015).

In contrast, younger and middle-aged residents showed a higher degree of concern about the environmental and social impacts of the dumping ground. They were notably more vocal in their desire for advocacy and relocation. This generational divergence may reflect a broader trend in urban social movements, where younger populations are more likely to engage in activism, utilizing modern communication tools to advocate for systemic change (Beteille, 1991).

The younger demographic's greater political awareness suggests a potential for intergenerational conflicts, where older generations are more likely to accept the status quo, while younger residents are pushing for immediate reform and relocation. This divide could have significant implications for future community mobilization and policy changes.

### **Gendered Perceptions**

The study also uncovered notable gendered differences in how the waste site was perceived and how residents conceptualized the associated risks. Women were more likely to express concern over water and food contamination, indicating a heightened awareness of the direct impact on family health and domestic life. This aligns with gendered roles in resource management and the care responsibilities often placed on women within households. Women's focus on waterborne diseases and food safety is consistent with studies that highlight gendered vulnerabilities in environmental justice (Simmons, 2006).

In contrast, men were more likely to express anger at the government or demand relocation. Their discourse centered on governmental accountability and spatial justice, with a marked frustration over the lack of effective governance. This gendered split in attitudes reflects broader social dynamics in which men may feel more empowered to advocate for institutional change, while women's concerns are more private and family-centered (Sarkar, 2017).

These findings suggest that gendered perceptions of risk play a crucial role in shaping community responses. Moreover, they underscore the need for gender-sensitive approaches in both policy formulation and community engagement efforts in environmental justice initiatives (Bullard, 1993).

The urban dumping ground in Aizawl is not just a symbol of poor municipal planning but a site of profound sociological tensions. Drawing on Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, the research underscores how communities living near the dumping ground face spatial and social marginalization. These residents are not only burdened by the physical effects of proximity to the waste but also by the social stigma attached to their living environment. As Goffman notes, stigma arises when certain groups are marked with negative attributes, in this case, the association with filth, disease, and neglect. The stigma impacts residents' self-perception, dignity, and social standing, creating a vicious cycle of marginalization.

Beck's (1992) concept of the "risk society" further contextualizes the fears of residents, as the presence of the dumping ground represents a manufactured risk that disproportionately affects vulnerable communities. As Beck argues, modern societies increasingly grapple with risks that are the product of industrialization and poor planning. The waste site in Aizawl epitomizes such a manufactured risk—where the poor and marginalized, with limited political capital, bear the heaviest burden of contamination, health hazards, and social exclusion. Residents' constant anxiety about potential health issues, such as respiratory problems and water contamination, exemplifies Beck's assertion that risks are not only environmental but also socio-political, affecting the disadvantaged most acutely.

Moreover, the findings align with Bullard's (1993) critique of environmental justice, which emphasizes that marginalized communities often face a disproportionate share of environmental hazards. The Aizawl case underscores how the dumping ground is a manifestation of environmental injustice, where residents in lower-income areas—often without the resources or political leverage to advocate for change—are left to deal with the consequences of poor waste management. Bullard's work highlights the need for equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, which is absent in Aizawl's urban waste management practices.

This study also reveals the nuanced ways in which gender and age shape perceptions of risk and strategies for coping with the environmental and social challenges posed by the dumping ground. As noted in the data, women are particularly concerned about health issues related to water and food contamination, highlighting a gendered dimension to environmental injustice. Women, traditionally the primary caregivers and managers of household resources, are more attuned to the immediate health risks posed by the proximity to waste. In contrast, men express more frustration with the government's response, reflecting a gendered disparity in the ways residents perceive political neglect and inefficiency.

The intergenerational differences further highlight how older and younger residents cope with the waste site in divergent ways. Older residents, with their longer tenure in the area, often display a sense of resignation, possibly due to years of experiencing infrastructural neglect and social exclusion. Younger residents, on the other hand, show greater concern and a desire for advocacy, which suggests a generational shift in the urgency for change. This divergence in responses may also be influenced by increased exposure to global discourses on environmental justice, public health, and civic participation.

This study contributes to the global discourse on urban waste by providing a localized case study of how dumping grounds serve as sites of environmental and social conflict in small cities like Aizawl. It highlights the importance of understanding these issues through a sociological lens, one that recognizes the intersection of environmental risks, socio-economic inequalities, and social stigma. By framing the problem as one of social justice rather than merely urban planning or technical failure, the study calls for context-specific, participatory, and inclusive solutions that consider the voices and needs of marginalized communities. Ultimately, the study advocates for greater civic engagement, transparent governance, and inclusive policy-making in the management of urban waste. Addressing the social and environmental challenges posed by dumping grounds requires a holistic approach that goes beyond waste management infrastructure, emphasizing the importance of community participation and the equitable distribution of environmental risks and benefits.

### III. CONCLUSION

The study emphasizes that urban dumping grounds in Aizawl, while often regarded solely as environmental nuisances, are deeply embedded in the social fabric of affected communities. These sites not only generate significant environmental risks but also contribute to the social marginalization of nearby residents. The health concerns, emotional distress, and spatial stigma associated with living near such sites illustrate how environmental issues are intertwined with broader sociological factors, such as inequality, governance deficits, and social exclusion. Importantly, the study reveals how the absence of community participation in the planning and management of waste facilities exacerbates these challenges, as local residents—particularly those in lower-income and politically marginalized areas—are left without adequate recourse to address the risks they face.

The findings also underscore that the urban waste crisis is not just a technical problem but a social one, requiring solutions that consider the lived experiences of affected communities and the structural inequalities that contribute to their vulnerability. Therefore, addressing the issue of urban dumping grounds in Aizawl and similar cities requires not only infrastructural improvements but also a shift towards more inclusive, participatory, and equitable urban planning practices.

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