Public jobs and capabilities: 
the case of the Italian waste sector

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Abstract:
In Italy, employment in waste collection has been widely used to reduce unemployment and create political consensus (especially in the South). Having secure jobs allows people to achieve income stability. But, income is just a means to an end and the goods and services or ‘commodities’ it buys are simply particular ways of achieving the freedom or valuable opportunities (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives the people want to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be. The aim of this paper is evaluate employment in waste collection as policy able to expand the quality and the quantity of people’s opportunities (capabilities). We present qualitative empirical evidence that public jobs in waste collection lead to the expansion of the capability sets improving people well-being. On the other hand, health problems related to physically demanding jobs can limit the capability sets. Moreover, workers experience limitations in the quality and the quantity of opportunities they face; but, they do not perceive such limitations since their aspirations are also limited and, therefore, they do not have stimulus to improve the negative aspects of their life.

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1. Introduction

Public employment is often used for reasons which have little to do with providing efficiently public goods and services (i.e. Alesina et al., 1999; Gregory and Borland, 1999; Rodrik, 1997; Ehrenberd and Schwarz, 1986; Cameron, 1978). Many governments use public employment for other goals, for example as a way of reducing unemployment and, therefore, to correct labor market imperfections and react to adverse economic conditions. Italy is a particularly good example of country where public employment has been used to achieve many purposes including reducing unemployment (Alesina et al., 1999). The inefficiency of the Italian welfare system regarding unemployment protection creates additional incentives to use public jobs as a form of permanent unemployment subsidy. In this context, also employment in waste collection has been widely used to reduce unemployment and create political consensus (especially in the South).

By providing a large number of secure jobs in waste collection, the government counteracts the income and consumption risk faced by the households in the economy. People facing relative poor opportunities in the private sector can, finally, achieve income stability. But, income is just a means to an end and the goods and services or ‘commodities’ it buys are simply particular ways of achieving the freedom or valuable opportunities (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives the people want to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be (Sen, 1985a, 1992, 1999). The aim of this paper is evaluate employment in waste collection as policy able to remove obstacles in the people lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life that they have reasons to value. In particular, we aim to point out at which extent jobs in waste collection can expand the quality and the quantity of people’s opportunities (capabilities).

Our results are striking. We present qualitative empirical evidence obtained interviewing 26 workers of three Italian representative companies operating in waste collection (two in the North and one in the South) showing as follows. First, public jobs in waste collection lead to the expansion of the capability sets improving people well-being. Second, health problems related to physically demanding jobs can limit the capability sets. Third, workers in waste collection experience limitations in the quality and the quantity of opportunities they face; but, they do not perceive such limitations since their aspirations are also limited and, therefore, they do not have stimulus to improve the negative aspects of their life.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discussed the capability approach and how it can be used to evaluate policies. Section 3 presents our data and the methodology used to collect them. Section 4 discusses the empirical evidence. The last section concludes.
2. The capability approach, policies and aspirations

Over the last decade Amartya Sen’s capability approach has emerged as leading alternative to mainstream economic frameworks for conceptualizing and assessing human well-being and development (Clark, 2009). According to the capability approach, development involves the expansion of human capabilities (Dreze and Sen, 1989; Sen, 1999); that is, people’s opportunities to undertake actions and activities that they want to engage in, and be whom they want to be (Robeyns, 2005). These being and doing, which Sen calls functionings, constitute what make a life valuable. Sen distinguished between functionings and capabilities (Sen, 1985; 1992; 1999): the former is an achievement of a person (what she manages to do or to be) while the latter reflect a person’s real opportunities or freedom of choice between possible life-styles (alternative combination of functionings). What is ultimately important is that people have the freedoms or valuable opportunities (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do and to be the person they want to be (Robeyns, 2005).

The capabilities approach evaluates policies according to their impact on people’s capabilities (Robeyns, 2005). According to Sen, policies should focus on what people are able to do and to be, on the quality of their life, and on removing obstacles in their lives so that they have more freedom to live the life that they reason to value. The capability approach, therefore, entails a critique of other evaluative approach as welfare approach. Happiness or desire fulfillment represents only one aspect of human existence (Sen, 1984). There are many other things of intrinsic value (notably rights and positive freedoms) that are neglected by welfare approach (Sen, 1987; 1992; 1999). The goodness of the capability approach is that consider these “other things” judging policies in terms of the quality as well as the quantity of available opportunities (Sen, 1985, Crocker, 1998).

The capability approach is able, therefore, to evaluate policies taking into consideration the adaptation argument. That is, the possibility that people’s aspirations and desires are malleable and can adapt in various way to the straitened circumstances in which they live (Qizilbash, 2006). According to Sen (1990), “in situations of longstanding deprivation, the victims do not go on weeping all the time, and very often make great efforts to take pleasure in small mercies and cut down personal desires to modest – ‘realistic’ – proportions. The person’s deprivation then, may not at all show up in the metric of pleasure, desire fulfillment, ect., even though he or she may be quite unable to be adequately nourished, decent clothed, minimally educated and so on” (Sen, 1990, p.45). For example, the broken unemployed “may have the courage to desire little, but the fulfillment of those disciplined desired is not a sign of great success and cannot be treated in the same way as the fulfillment of the confident and demanding

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1 There is a vast literature on adaptation in economics, social psychology and philosophy. Therefore, there are many different notions of adaptation. We refer only to the notions as normally used in the capability approach and human development movement (Clark, 2009)
desires of better placed” (Sen, 1987b, p.11). In other words, disadvantaged are satisfied with less than more advantaged, so standard utilitarian ethics cannot be applied in this context unless we want to discriminate in favor of those better placed (Clark, 2009; Sen 1980; Cohen, 1993; Sen, 1993a). Capability approach is a better framework of analysis since it compares differences in capabilities rather than utilities.

The process of adjusting aspirations (to what is seen as possible) can occur mainly in two different ways (Clark, 2009): adjusting aspirations downwards to reflect disadvantaged circumstances and/or adjusting aspirations upwards to reflect new opportunities and what others have managed to achieve. Obviously, downwards aspirations adjustments are more problematic than upwards adjustments. In general, the adaptation process is considered a bad thing insofar as it decreases individuals’ autonomy to make rational choices (e.g. Elster, 1983). In other words, the adaptation problem emerges when adjusting aspirations leads in human limitations in terms of the capacity to acquire, retain and process relevant information from making informed judgments and rational choices (Qizilbash, 2006).² At the end, these human limitations can lead to low quality and limited quantity of available opportunities. Therefore, policies should be also valued according to their ability on removing negative effects resulting from the adaptation process.

Empirical evidence supporting the aspirations argument is mixed and sometimes difficult to interpret (Diener et al 1999; Frederick and Loewensteing, 1999). There is evidence that people adapt to changes in some circumstances, but not to changes in other circumstances (e.g. Sen, 1984; Nussbaum, 2000; Clark, 2002; Clark and Qizilbash, 2008). Empirical studies show the existence of a weak positive correlation between income and satisfaction consistent with adaptation (Frey and Stutzer, 2000; Easterlin, 2001; Kingdon and Knight, 2006). For example, Stutzer (2004) finds that higher income aspirations reduce subjective well-being. He also finds that income aspirations increase with previous income and relative income. Burchardt (2005) provides an econometric analysis of adaptation linked to the capability approach pointing out the correlation existing between working trajectories and satisfaction. Poggi (2011) shows evidence of the existence of both downwards aspirations adjustment and upwards aspiration adjustments.

3. The data

We interviewed 26 workers of three Italian representative companies. We selected large companies providing the waste collection service to three big Italian cities (two in the North and

² Another kind of adaptation discussed by Sen involves varios types of social conditioning (e.g. Nussbaum and Sen, 1989). But, we do not focus on this kind of adaptation in this paper.
These companies are characterized by different organizational and management conditions. Two of them are public monou tilities companies. The third is a multiutilities operator. All of them are joint stock companies, created by municipalities and whose workers are company’s employees (not public servants).

The method of data collection was semi-structured in-depth interviews, during which the entire conversation was recorded. We selected a sample of interviewees as representative as possible of the heterogeneity of the manual workers in the Italian waste sector in order to capture the variation of experiences and views on quality of work and life. In particular, we wanted to involve workers of different ages, gender, ethnicity, education, region, employment duration, employment contract and tasks (see Appendix I for details).

Interviews were conducted either at the company’s main premises or at local detachments in a closed room environment and without any interference from managers and chiefs. Interviews generally lasted one hour or one hour and a half, were tape recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Memos and notes were written about questions, impressions, and feelings the researcher had during the interviews. Questions were open-ended in order to provide participants with the opportunity to fully explain their experiences. The atmosphere was informal and the interviewees have been made to feel progressively at ease.

Participants were made aware of the recording and transcribing procedures before their involvement in the study. In order to maintain the confidentiality of all recorded material, appropriate safeguards were taken to ensure that this material is protected. The anonymity of each participant was protected by referring to each participant only as a participant and indicating each participant with a numerical code.

The interview transcriptions have then been studied and divided into sections which have been coded, tagged and labelled according to the research questions of the study. Where necessary, such sections have been completed with a few comments from the researcher so that the context of the speech is not lost. All the sections have been collected in a database. This allows their recall by label and tag and thus helped us to identify and saturate the topics of the study. The interviews have been analyzed by topic and across personal and environmental characteristics of the workers.

4. Empirical evidence

Jobs in waste collection can be only partially defined decent jobs. Indeed, they involve opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income; provide social protection for workers and their families; encourage social integration; give people the freedom to express their concerns, to organize and to participate in decisions that affect their lives; and guarantee
equal opportunities and equal treatment for all. But, employment in waste collection has often negative impacts on workers’ health, and security is not always provided. Indeed, employment in waste collection expands the workers’ capability sets improving people well-being, but only to a certain point.

Contracts and wages are bargained at national level ensuring workers rights. Employment protection is high. Workers are often hired with fixed term or training-at-work contracts. After a while, their contracts are normally transformed to permanent contracts ensuring economic stability to the workers. Economic stability is a mean that permits to expand people’s opportunities. Thanks to economic stability, individuals can undertake actions and activities that they want to engage in, and be whom they want to be. Therefore, the first goal is to achieve economic stability. The latter is percept as compulsory step for living the life that workers reason to value.

“Main main goal is security... I want a job, that’s all; I can do any job... I want to find stability for me and my family” (male street sweeper operator)

Employment in waste companies represents, therefore, a way to escape poverty and social exclusion. This is particularly true in the South (where unemployment and poverty rates are particularly high) and for unskilled and/or elderly workers. Since workers have no other employment options, losing employment in waste collection will likely lead people to poverty and social exclusion.

“I was unemployed...I changed many jobs... fortunately, I got this chance, fortunately I got this opportunity, I’m enjoying it serenely because I felt excluded from society, even if I had a job until two years ago, [without a job] I felt excluded from society” (male street sweeper operator)

Employment in waste collection allows workers to live what they call “satisfactory life”: both wages and working times allows workers to take care of their children. Moreover, having permanent contracts allow access to mortgages (and, therefore, having their own flats) and ensure recognized social statuses.

“I like my job. I do home renovation, I raise my children, I have vacations” (female street sweeper operator)

“The working hours are ok, I have children and I succeed in balancing work and family life” (female collector)

From one side, work in waste collection reduces income risks enhancing capabilities sets. From
the other side, we observe an increase in health and safety risks. This can lead to a contraction of the capabilities sets. In particular, workers complain about noise, crime, risk of road accidents, risk of injury associated with moving collection vehicles, poor hygiene and the smell of the vehicles, risk of infection, risk of incurring in hazardous waste, and risks related to bad weather.

In the South, a further issue emerges. Drivers spend many hours on the landfills breathing in large concentrations of bioaerosols (microbes suspended in the air by dust particles). This can lead to infections and breathing problems.

“There are problems at the disposal sites especially in the summer, I’m there 6-7-8 hours [it’s hard, as a consequence] I had a virus… also the collectors have problems, it happens a lot: pierced by a syringe or cut by a piece of glass in a bag” (male driver)

With regard to psychosocial factors, workers concerns are mainly of stress. Drivers experience stress due to high responsibilities and road accident risks. Stress is also due to the existence of relationship problems with the public and vice versa.

“A driver, there is too much pressure, too much responsibility”. (female collector)

“Yes, we have daily disagreements [with the citizens]. We don’t get rewards [from the citizens]. This creates stress” (male street sweeper operator)

Health and safety risks may be reduced using appropriate safety equipment. For example, risk of infections can be reduced adopting preventive measures such as good hygiene, wearing protective clothing, bandage cuts and grazes, and clean up any wounds quickly and apply antiseptic. Worker injuries can be reduced using high safety standards in the design and construction of the collection vehicles. Also training courses, which address the safe operation and use of the equipment and includes recommendations for drivers, can reduce the risk of injury. In fact, safety practices, contain detailed procedures for reversing safely, acting as a spotter during reversing, and working around mobile equipment, need to be adopted by all workers. All companies in our sample offer safety equipment and training courses to the workers.

“We attend training courses when any new vehicles are employed. One day training courses in the working hours. Also we do safety courses …” (male driver)

Even if safety equipment and training courses reduces health and safety risks, the work remains physically demanding (i.e. heavy lifting) and may lead to fatigue and musculoskeletal disorders.

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3 Hazardous wastes include products that contain corrosive, toxic, ignitable, or reactive constituents. Examples are medical waste, used oil, paint, cleaners, batteries, pesticides and light bulbs
Workers could start to have health problems and not be able to continue to work until retirement age losing their only income source. If this happens, they will be at risk of unemployment and likely poverty. Career options are regarded as very limited. Their achieved “satisfactory life” could be at risk. This is the main concern of the workers. The latter are not concern that health problems may limit their other daily activities.

“I’m fine, I can see many unemployed people around... [I’m worried about] losing my job; I have a problem with my back...I cannot do other jobs... If they fire me, what is going to happen to me?” (male street sweeper operator)

“My concerns are about to lose my job, [to have enough to live on.] What could I do? Go to Caritas? What could I do at the Caritas? [It would be] a very big humiliation: you worked hard, you worked yours ass off and then you come to the Caritas!” (male street sweeper operator)

We observed workers having problems in aspiring to better lives or to imagine different jobs and life styles. This is especially true in the South, where high unemployment rates are registered (especially, among low skilled workers). Low education levels are seen as an obstacle to improve life situations. The only aspiration seems to maintain the economic security reached with jobs in waste collection.

Lack of aspirations may be correlated to past employment trajectories. Employment in waste collection was not the first choice for any of the interviewed workers. Most of the respondents either failed to find the desired job and/or experienced unsatisfactory working conditions in previous jobs (i.e. low wages; job instability). Many of them have past work experiences in different sectors and occupation (i.e. jobs in hotels and restaurants; plant and machine operator; dressmaker; shop assistant; clerk; career), but they did not succeed in obtaining permanent contracts in such sector or occupations. In general, the respondents experienced complex past career trajectories characterized by temporary employment, informal work and spells of unemployment.

“When I started this job, I was 36. In this town, it is difficult to start early. Before I was a shop assistant but I didn’t have enough money to take care of my family. I wanted more but I needed a contract...I finished compulsory education and when I was 36 I registered with the employment agency, I was called for a job in waste collection.” (male driver)

“I went to school until the third year of primary school. My family was large and needy: we were 10 brothers. My first job was in a glassware, then I moved to the special unemployment program, [subsequently] to paid community services and then to this
If the aspiration adaptation argument holds, past negative employment experiences (i.e. temporary contracts, informal work and unemployment spells) have negatively impacted on workers’ aspirations and perceptions of their life. Secure jobs in waste collection allowed workers to achieve “satisfactory life”: to take care of their children, have their own flats and lyhave achieved these goals and they simply aspire to maintain their jobs until their retirement. But, adjusted aspirations lead to not ask for better working conditions that could improve life opportunities (i.e. more safety and better health procedures at work could decrease health problems that limit daily activities). Also as consequences of adjusted aspirations, workers have no incentives to improve their employability for having alternative career options and reducing their unemployment (and poverty) risks. Therefore, we can conclude that adjusted aspirations lead to low quality and limited quantity of available opportunities. Public employment policies fail to address this issue.

5. Conclusions
In Italy, employment in waste collection has been widely used to reduce unemployment and create politically consensus (especially in the South). Having secure jobs allows people to achieve income stability and, therefore, impacts on the quality and the quantity of people opportunities to live the kind of life that they have reasons to value. We present qualitative empirical evidence that having secure jobs in waste collection impacts on people capabilities. Income stability permits to extend capabilities sets: workers can achieve what they call a “satisfactory life” (i.e. taking care of children, having a flat, having a recognized social status, etc.). But, jobs in waste collection are physically demanding jobs and they often lead to health problems that, at the end, can lead to limitations in daily activities constraining the workers’ capabilities sets. Furthermore, workers present difficulty to aspire. This can be due to the negative impact on workers’ aspirations and perception of their life of past bad employment experiences. There is some evidence in favor of the aspiration adaptation argument.
According to the above results, evaluation of employment policies in waste collection cannot be fully positive. Provision of secure jobs should be integrated with policies reducing health and safety risk and policies aimed to incentivize workers to always aspire to opportunities that they have reason to aspire. About the former policies, we observe that appropriate safety equipment and training courses are offered. But safety procedures can be improved, especially in the South. About policies aimed to help the workers to correctly aspire, there are clearly problems in design and implement such type of policies. But, the issue needs to be addressed.
References


Appendix I. The sample

We interviewed waste district supervisors, collectors, drivers and street sweeper operators. Our sample is composed of 8 women and 18 men aged 25-63 (see Table A1).

Table A1: Interviewees’ characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Supervisors</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Drivers</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 25-40 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Collectors</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 41-65 years</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Street sweeper</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Warehouse keeper</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tenure: &lt;1 year</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tenure: 2-5 year</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Tenure: 6-10 year</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-medium education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tenure: 11-24 year</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low education</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Tenure: &gt;25 year</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missing in education and tenure

Waste district supervisors plan, coordinate and direct the staff in providing customer service for the collection and disposal of residential refuse and recyclables from the households to materials recovery facilities, transfer stations and local landfills. Responsibilities may include providing timely and efficient solid waste service delivery; evaluating collection routes and operating costs; promoting environmentally-sound solid waste activities, including recycling, through education and enforcement; monitoring and ensuring that employees are performing their functions safely and productively. Customer service and interaction with employees is considerable.

Drivers drive automated residential trucks to provide prompt, courteous and complete waste removal for residential customers. Their duties can vary. However, we can summarise their possible duties as follows: drives heavy diesel truck along residential routes and to disposal areas; moves waste bin to a position accessible by the truck arm, as necessary; lift, carry and push/pull heavy bins repeatedly throughout the workday; climb into and out of truck repeatedly throughout the workday; courteously interacts with customers, dispatchers and supervisors; writes labels and tags unsatisfactory waste containers and/or refuse; cleans up the area around an accidental waste spill; cleans waste from the packer blade and truck body on each landfill or
transfer station run; reads route sheet, follows map and services for each customer as identified on the route sheet or as assigned by dispatcher and/or supervisor; completes required route/productivity sheets, vehicle condition reports and/or other forms; performs driver check-in procedures upon returning to the facility at the end of the day; follows all safety policies and procedures; performs other job-related duties as assigned. This is a physically demanding role. Drivers can work in a team or alone. They are also responsible for any road accidents and the related responsibilities are a source of stress. Drivers have at minimum second level positions and having a driving licence is a requirement for any further career advancement.

Waste collectors work on the back of the garbage truck, manually dump residential garbage into the back of the truck, and perform other related duties as assigned. They work in team picking up solid waste and recyclables along designated routes. They are responsible for the collection and hand loading of residential waste, but they are not responsible for the transporting of the waste by a front-load or rear-load truck to a landfill site. They also perform labour-intensive tasks in all weather conditions and interact with customers.

A street sweeper operator is normally an entry position. These operators normally work alone.