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PlastiCorona: who cares about *that* waste?

Garbage piles up in the capital of Cambodia; it lies around in corners, on streets, in fields. COVID-19, which has led to a global reduction in the production of greenhouse gases considered utopian, has had little if any significant impact within this country, where garbage is produced in the same amounts, likewise burned and buried, or dumped into the rivers. The smelly sewage channels of Phnom Penh run as brown as usual, patterned with flip-flops, shampoo packaging, diverse plastic particles, and undefinable fragments of rubbish, travelling south-eastwards into the morning glory fields; passing by buzzing, still active markets, passing urban poor areas, where children play in the thick mud, passing citizens in facemasks. On 10 April, the Cambodian government counted some 120 official cases of COVID-19 infection among its populace.

That the virus has found entrance to the country is undoubted, and it has hit the poorest the most. As in other countries of the Global South, it is a double burden to waste pickers here, who daily handle plastic, aluminium and other recyclables, all of which could be contaminated by the COVID-19 virus. The contamination of so-called 'inanimate' surfaces by the virus can last some nine days (Kampf et al. 2020). Although transnational NGOs have already provided helpful protection guidelines



A waste picker at work in Phnom Penh [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

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for waste pickers, Cambodia has so far remained politically silent in many senses. As waste pickers in Phnom Penh belong to the poorest groups within Cambodian society, they lack internet access and are often illiterate, making reading or even printing out guidelines practically impossible. Even with access, waste pickers would be unable to implement the recommended guidelines due to their lack of constant access to running water, sanitation gel or any protective clothing, as well as it being unthinkable that they stay at home and avoid work since they are often the only wage earner. As a particularly vulnerable group, they are defenceless and completely at the mercy of the virus, which naturally also does not stop at them but rather currently connects the whole world.

The world's garbage dumps have the chance to be placed under the world's spotlight once more. This time, the focus may not only be on the global waste crisis as an environmental issue, but also on questions as to (working) health standards, global inequalities and a global working class often unseen and unrecognised, although it cares for and maintains the infrastructures of our capitalistic, consumer-oriented systems. Their repair work, normally done silently, now becomes visible through the breakdowns of the interrelated infrastructures of our daily life, resulting in animated, induced infrastructural inversions. Anthropology in combination with multispecies approaches and molecular and biological science is now able to cross stiff disciplinary boundaries in order to unravel tug-of-wars and commensurabilities between the virus and the poor, and to elicit as to how and where the tragedy of the world takes actually place, highlighting the essential work and practices that uphold the system in which we live. It is better for this to be done before COVID-19's present becomes past, humanity's past: discarded, forgotten and finally waste.

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