PRESS RELEASE
Where ships go to die: phoenix from the flames

Three quarters of the world's merchant ships, that are the grease of global trade, end their lives on beaches in South Asia. And as demand for goods in Europe falls, the number of ships heading for the beaches has increased by around 50%. They are run onto the beaches and broken up using little more than handheld cutting torches and winches by workers paid little more than $2 a day, with minimal safety equipment. Workers are regularly injured by falling material and there are regular deaths – averaging one a month. The ships often contain toxic materials that contaminate the environment and expose the workers to unknown long term health risks. NGOs have long campaigned that this amounts to dumping Western toxic waste on poor people and countries – which is banned under the Basel Convention on the trade in Toxic Wastes. That convention is part of EU and UK law making the trade illegal. The question is why breaking has continued to be located in South Asia.

Work just published by researchers at Durham University from the Waste of the World project looks at the effects of shipbreaking at Chittagong, in Bangladesh. Based on 4 years of study it suggests that we need to understand not only why Western shipping lines send their end-of-life ships to be broken in poor countries, but also why Bangladesh has allowed and encouraged the trade. It has done so because what are waste ships in the west are valuable raw materials for a host of recycling industries in South Asia that compensate for a lack of indigenous production.

Their research published this month in the peer reviewed journal 'Economic Geography' highlights the significance of the breaking industry to Bangladesh.

> The value of the ships imported to Bangladesh in 2009 was estimated to be U.S.$1 billion, doubled that in 2007
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> In 2009 it represented some 25% of all the ships scrapped in the world and 38% of the volume by tonnage.

This breaking is concentrated on a 20km stretch of shoreline just north of Chittagong. The reason it is so concentrated is because the industry provides the resources for a host of recycling industries clustered in a symbiotically linked system, so that virtually all the ship is reprocessed as secondary resources.
This contributed:

- Estimated 3 million tonnes of steel to >500 rerolling mills that compensate for the absence of primary steel production in the country
- Marine equipment for the Bangladeshi coastal shipping fleet of 8,000 registered vessels
- Generators and power equipment for small and medium companies, especially start ups in the garment making sector
- 72 furniture producing firms, reconditioning and remanufacturing household goods for up to 40% of the country

This represents one of the most successful clusters of firms recycling and reprocessing materials wastes. It suggests more than dumping by the West, there is a story of Bangladeshi ingenuity and innovation creating new products from things that have no economic value in the west. If we want to close the loop and reuse materials we ned to think through the potentials and problems of similar recycling clusters in the global south.

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NGO Platform on shipbreaking release list of 'Toxic Ships sent to Alang' to be broken up in 2011

Sources

Gregson, N., M. Crang, et al. (2012). "Territorial Agglomeration and Industrial Symbiosis: Sitakunda-Bhatiary, Bangladesh, as a Secondary Processing Complex." Economic Geography 88(1): 37-58.

Photo essay on Facebook 'Search Waste of the World'

Exhibition Jan 20-22nd, Everything Must Go, The Bargehouse, London www.thewasteoftheworld.org

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