

Waste Management and Territorial Vulnerability in Mayotte: Evidence from Tsingoni¹.

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This paper examines waste management in Mayotte through an ongoing research-action project conducted in the municipality of Tsingoni, with a focus on territorial vulnerability and institutional capacity in peripheral island regions. As a French outermost region characterized by rapid demographic growth and structural development gaps, Mayotte faces increasing ecological pressures combined with limited waste treatment capacity: in 2021, less than 1% of collected household waste was recycled, while landfill sites are approaching saturation.

Rather than interpreting these dynamics solely as infrastructure deficits, the paper conceptualizes waste management as an indicator of territorial vulnerability in a structurally dependent regional economy. From this perspective, waste governance reveals structural constraints in the region's capacity to internalize environmental externalities. Environmental and sanitary costs are unevenly borne by the most precarious populations, often concentrated in informal settlements exposed to pollution and health risks. Waste thus emerges as a synthetic indicator of territorial vulnerability, reflecting both institutional fragility—limited coordination capacity, fragmented governance, and difficulties in adapting policy instruments to local configurations—and persistent socio-spatial inequality.

Based on ongoing qualitative fieldwork conducted in Tsingoni (68 semi-structured interviews and field observations), the paper presents preliminary findings on the social construction of waste. The analysis reveals a central semantic distinction between “*Tzama*”, referring to a form of dirt perceived as natural and “*Plastiki*”, associated with sanitary threat, contamination, and mosquito-borne diseases. In addition, preliminary results indicate that the symbolic roles of the river and fire are central to local waste practices: the river is perceived simultaneously as a sacred living entity and a site of disposal, while fire operates as a means of purification and elimination. These symbolic dimensions structure everyday waste practices and reinforce territorially embedded patterns of vulnerability.

In a peripheral island economy characterized by structural dependence and limited institutional capacity, waste is not merely a technical externality but a socially embedded category shaped by lived conditions and exposure to risk. The case of Mayotte contributes to regional science debates by questioning the territorial adaptability of ecological transition models and by emphasizing the need to account for vulnerability, institutional capacity, locally embedded representations of environmental risk.

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