

Civic Solid Waste Management as a Luxury Element

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Editorial

Is safe and environmentally sound waste management a luxury that only a small percentage of the world's population can expect to enjoy? One would obviously hope that this was not the case. Ideally, everyone should expect basic services such as clean water, adequate sanitation and reliable household waste removal. The reality is of course very different. Very large numbers of people in the developing world have very limited access to these services. When it comes to municipal solid waste management, the solution to addressing the poor quality of service in developing countries is a complex mixture of lack of resources, lack of expertise, lack of political will and inadequate legislation. There is no simple or single solution to this complex web of interlinked shortcomings. Needless to say, there will always be a service provider on hand to sell a quick-fix solution to these problems, but these supposed solutions are invariably doomed to failure as they can only address one aspect of the problem. This discussion does not propose a solution that will single-handedly address this problem. Rather, it is suggested that an aspect that is often neglected is that of the competencies and abilities of those members of local, state and national government departments that are responsible for implementing and managing environmental legislation in developing countries. It is usually not the environmental legislation itself that is at the heart of the problem. Indeed, some developing countries may well have more refined and visionary legislation than many developed countries. In South Africa, the relatively recent National Water Act makes explicit provision for water allocations to the environmental reserve ahead of that allocated to industry.

Whilst providing a focal point for debates concerning potential contamination of water resources from a variety of sources, including waste disposal sites, it does not guarantee that issues of water quality will be adequately catered for because this demands levels of expertise in water sampling, analytical testing and interpretation of results that is not readily available in most government departments. What use is world-class environmental legislation, when it is impossible to enforce the legislation because the necessary testing facilities and skilled personnel to interpret the results simply do not exist? A lack of skilled personnel in government departments can also result in totally inappropriate environmental legislation being adopted simply because a particular pressure group or lobby group secures an inside track to the decision making process. An example would be the adoption of legislation completely banning the option of incineration of all waste, including medical waste, without first ensuring viable alternatives are in place. The inevitable result is the disastrous situation that now exists in many developing countries. Lack of

enforcement of legislation also places unfair responsibility and pressure on municipal officers. An example could be the Head of the Municipal Sanitation Office in Bandung, Indonesia, who was charged with mismanagement and negligence, including violation of environmental legislation, in the aftermath of the failure of the Leuwigajah municipal dump in February 2005.

This failure, which resulted in the deaths of at least 143 residents, caused the closure of the dump, indirectly causing the proliferation of illegal or temporary dumps which, according to the Jakarta Post of 20th May 2006, number on the order of 190.

One can only speculate on the minimal resources available to the above-mentioned Bandung municipal officer in trying to improve conditions at the dumpsite, or move illegal residents from the site, obtain information regarding methane concentrations and volumes within the dump, etc. Is there a solution to this issue? One avenue could be the provision of scholarships for promising environmental officers from developing countries to attend universities in the developed world and obtain skills that would be invaluable in their home country. This solution has the almost inevitable consequence that many graduates of such programmes would not return home, opting for the enticing career options available in developed countries. A variation could be the provision of in-service training to municipal and environmental officers in developing countries [1-5].

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How to cite this article: Wang, Cheng. "Civic Solid Waste Management as a Luxury Element." *Adv Recycling Waste Manag* 7 (2022): 207.

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Received 06 January, 2022, Manuscript No. arwm-22-54828; **Editor assigned:** 07 January, 2022, PreQC No. P-54828; **Reviewed:** 11 January, 2022, QC No. Q-54828; **Revised:** 16 January, 2022, Manuscript No. R-54828; **Published:** 21 January, 2022, DOI: 10.37421/arwm.2022.7.207