

## **THE MANAGEMENT OF URBAN WASTE IN KENYA**

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The management of urban waste in Kenya is becoming headline news these days. With the change of administration in many counties, the 'new brooms' are trying to tackle the perennial problem of what to do with the mountains of waste produced in our urban areas.

However, when thinking about the proposed solutions to the urban waste problem, there are two questions that we need urgently to ask ourselves: (1) Whose responsibility is the management of waste? (2) Are we looking for short-term or long-term solutions?

Before suggesting answers to these two questions, it may be helpful to give some examples of how waste is treated in other countries.

The city of Rome has found an ingenious solution: they ship the waste they don't know what to do with (their landfills are overflowing) to Austria. Three times a week trains carrying rubbish are sent 1000 km north to a town not far from Vienna. At a thermal waste utilization plant it is converted into hot flue gas and sent to a power station nearby. Here it is converted into electricity and used to provide power for 170,000 homes.

Other countries have also adopted such waste into energy schemes. Norway receives waste from European countries (such as the U.K.) and together with the waste produced in its own country, converts it, using some of the electricity generated by this process for vehicular urban transport.

On the other hand, a number of developing countries continue to use the same procedure as we do in Kenya: transporting the waste to dumpsites. However, as we will see from the example given below, the dumping of waste cannot be a long-term solution for a country like Kenya. It causes serious health problems and may even lead to disasters like the one that occurred in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Just before Easter this year (2017) a landslide occurred at this dumpsite. The 90- meter mountain of rubbish caused not only the destruction of more than 140 homes situated near the site; it also occasioned the death of at least 23 people. The dump contained some 23 million tons of rubbish!

Therefore, dumping our waste does not appear to be a very good solution, not only because of its attendant health and disaster hazards but also because it is short-sighted. It removes the responsibility for the handling of waste from one class of people (the better off) to those of another class (the disadvantaged – who simply are not asked for their views on the matter).

Should we then go for the high-tech solutions adopted by countries like Italy? Reflecting a bit more on this solution we must conclude that this also is not the answer. The

reasons for this are obvious: (1) it again removes the responsibility for waste handling from its producers and (2) it is not a long-term solution.

Many years ago, when working for the United Nations, I first came across this saying: "Waste is a resource in the wrong place." In connection with waste pollution there is another maxim that is being suggested these days: it is called "the polluter pays principle."

If we take these two phrases seriously, the solutions to our waste problem easily come to mind.

Therefore, (1) let us look at the waste all of us produce as a resource to be used in its appropriate places and (2) let us put the responsibility for the waste problem at the doorstep of those who produce it, in other words: all of us.

So, what are the practical consequences of these two suggestions. For one, separation of waste at its source. According to a fairly recent report (*The Star*, 12 December 2016) the waste produced by the city of Nairobi consists for the most part, over 60 percent, of food waste (which is a much larger percentage than that produced by developed countries and one reason why we should not follow their solutions). Therefore, we need to introduce a system of waste separation at household and food service levels and convert the food waste into compost. True, this requires some thinking 'outside the box' and presupposes a serious effort at public education and participation. But this way we do put "the polluter pays principle" in its proper niche and at the same time make appropriate use of this resource, instead of dumping it.

Reuse and recycle. What to do with the rest of the waste? Reuse (for example, glass bottles) and recycle. This is already happening to a certain extent but it needs to be made into a permanent policy.

Changing the way we look at our waste and introducing appropriate policies countrywide needs thinking outside the box but it will certainly be worth the effort.

I suggest that we imitate and even surpass by some percentage points the example of Curitiba in Brazil (See <http://wwf.panda.org/?204414/Curitiba-waste-as-resource>). The originators of Curitiba's approach to waste management chose a concept called 'eco-citizenship', a way of integrating functions and different social groups in this process. The concept had several objectives: it made both the city's residents as well as visitors aware of their responsibilities to achieve the city's sustainability goals; among them are recycling and choosing public over private transport. Communication is key to this concept. Curitiba has electronic displays in public places showing the results of the citizens' efforts in figures. The methods chosen have produced several positive effects: it not only increased employment but also contributed to education, environmental cleanup, food security and social inclusion. The outcome of these efforts in Curitiba is laudable: 70 percent of the city's waste generated is recycled, one of the highest rates in the world.