

Where does waste actually start?

By Muna Lakhani

Perhaps it is time to help clear up some confusion around Cape Town waste, and chart some possible ways forward. Much has been written recently, ranging from selective information, defensive responses and the continued focus on already failed non-solutions.

So, where does waste actually start? At the design stage, where companies are not required to have any environmental, economic or social/health plans for any of the waste they choose to manufacture - packaging, for example, if needed at all, is neither required to be re-usable for its original purpose (best design), nor for recyclability or compostability.

Citizens at local government level subsidise profits of the value chain (waste manufacturers, packers, wholesalers and retailers), get fewer jobs and bear the brunt of negative health impacts of the "hump and dump" option. Consider the bizarre notion that the product belongs to the company until you hold it in your hand - then it is suddenly "your waste" after the profit has been made! (For a brilliant expose of myths around plastics, see "Get plastic out of your diet" at www.mindfully.org).

The environmental racism inherent in the waste industry is apparent, where nearly all "landfill sites" (a mild term for waste dumps, guaranteed to leak, no matter what we are told) are either in or near poor areas, and almost all the people affected are black.

This, despite the fact that wealthier areas generate 13 times more waste per person than poor areas, with over 90 percent of waste being generated before the product even hits the shelves.

This indicates why "recycling" is doomed - statistics confirm 100 percent household recycling would only solve 2 percent of the total waste stream.

There is a place for recycling, but only after all upstream possibilities are exhausted. These have

not even begun, and are unlikely to soon, given the additional profits wasting makes.

After some 20 years, it is clear that both the government and the consumer are victims of "received wisdoms" - myths which include "packaging is a health issue", while ignoring toxicity in many forms of packaging, and in its production.

This disguises the fact that industry needs to package food so that it appears fresh and attractive until sale. Ever wondered why fresh products seem to rot quickly once opened? Partially because argon gas, among others, is used in many packaged "fresh" products, which only start to rot once exposed to air.

And the myth of litter being a "public" responsibility? Or complaints about people not separating waste for recycling? These misdirections indicate how additional profits are protected, for the litter and recycling saga (themselves a legally acknowledged focus on the wrong end of the waste chain) could be solved quickly if only government had courage enough to impose a decent deposit on all packaging, and force the value chain making profits to cover the actual cost of waste reclamation, ideally for re-use in its original form. Failing which, unsustainable products and packaging must be phased out.

Transport packaging, a large portion of the waste stream, is deliberately rendered unusable - perfectly good containers thrown away, bottles broken, or chips boxes deliberately "holed" after the product is unpacked.

These should be criminal acts, but no one notices, checks or inspects. And before the cry starts, "what about the poor cardboard collector?", integrating such poor people into returning the whole box or other packaging is not only simple, but creates more decent jobs.

A value chain deposit system is a deposit on

products and packaging from manufacturer to consumer or "end-user", much like VAT. Of course, the cry will be, "but it will cost too much", but never mind what it costs in public and environmental health, pollution impacts and inflating profits for polluters by not making them pay.

So, insisting on (less-than-perfect) full life cycle analyses makes sense for all existing and future products and packaging.

Such systems could reduce waste to dumps by nearly 50 percent (almost all the balance being organic) and reduce littering to almost zero.

"Recycling" would be close to 100 percent, as poor people will gladly collect and move waste through industry-funded local buy-back centres.

An added bonus is that unsustainable materials, products or packaging can be easily identified and phased out, or alternatives found.

While it sounds unlikely, according to both the US Environmental Protection Agency and the Product Policy Institute, products and packaging generate about 40 percent of all greenhouse gases in the USA, so these will make a substantial contribution to helping solve climate chaos, too.

No indications exist that the government will implement real solutions, despite many years of "progressive" legislation.

Good initiatives are stifled at birth by vested interests, as anyone who cares to look at various iterations of waste policies will find.

For example, well known and globally acknowledged definitions of extended producer responsibility are bastardised, watered down to vague statements where the minister may ask a company to take some responsibility for a vague possible future education and recycling drive - and nothing about mandatory reductions in volume and toxicity, or physical or financial responsibility for the waste profited by.

All this leads to repeated failure, as evidenced over some 30 years of "recycling".

This then creates the perfect gap for wasters to promote "waste to energy" under various fancy-sounding guises, such as incineration, pyrolysis, advanced thermal treatment, gasification, plasma arc and other hypertoxic non-solutions.

The latest trick that wasters, possibly with bureaucratic and political complicity, wish to impose on the city is the R800-million "landfill gas-to-electricity" option.

This so-called "green energy" disguises the fact that over 1 000 other gases are also burnt in the process (including mercury and at least 20 more known or suspected cancer-causing elements - thorough testing has yet to be carried out), or that only a fraction of the total methane can ever be captured in this way.

All current government "solutions" generate a demand for more waste, accelerate the extraction of raw materials from the environment, increase both volume and toxicity of pollution and greenhouse gases and dramatically reduce the numbers of decent jobs possible in safe recovery and economic reintegration of sustainable materials - all the exact opposite of the supposed intent of our laws.

Even a simple ban on organic waste at dumps will result in a diversion rate of (generally) over 50 percent, which can then be safely returned to the soil, helping issues such as soil depletion from chemical farming, reducing carbon footprints and supporting local food security.

The simplest research shows that the currently favoured options increase the negative impacts on people and planet, and are the worst possible options for waste and genuinely sustainable development, especially in the light of global climate chaos.

So, exactly what can be done now?

Provinces could be stricter than national law (as allowed, with environment being a concurrent competency) and implement genuine extended producer responsibility, cradle to cradle systems, and insist on life cycle analyses encompassing the entire chain with regard to social, economic (especially externalised costs) and environmental impacts.

Many changes can be insisted on by the city, within its mandate - by-laws, for example, that ban dumping of certain materials (organics, for starters), auditing and implementing "polluter pays for volume generators" (no, this will not increase illegal dumping, as the volumes are quantifiable, especially those claiming ISO certification, and

auditing will help solve problems).

Other ideas: build resource recovery parks - not subsidised buy-back centres, stop buying compactor trucks, which make materials recovery expensive, if not impossible, and, importantly, move education and responsibility to the waste generators, not the victims of waste, namely the poor and our children. Lastly, stop wasting money on slave child labour for "clean-ups" that never stay clean.

Many more options exist. The city controls charges, rates and taxes, and says it is committed to job creation and sustainable development. A good body of local knowledge is available.

No excuse exists.

Surely it has dawned on the government that "business as usual" is simply not working, and we are no nearer "solving" the Cape Town waste

problem than we were 10 years ago? The city only claims a diversion rate of less than 6 percent, whereas other world-class cities are reaching well into 70 percent and more.

Why don't we? Stupidity? Incompetence? Ignorance? Corruption? Arrogance? Or shall we simply get used to the idea that the government has lost its spine, refuses to challenge and confront vested commercial interests on our behalf and is simply not interested in the health and well-being of the majority of our citizens?

Perhaps we should make a "zero waste" approach a key election issue.

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