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Strong Cities Brief

Waste management and awareness raising in cities

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As many cities continue to experience high levels of urbanisation, waste management has become an increasing challenge due to high consumerism.

Challenges and context

The challenges many cities are experiencing are increasing urbanisation coupled with high level consumerism. This has led to high levels of pollution, which particularly leads to the destruction of natural ecosystems such as rivers, wetlands, and marine ecosystems. Levels of waste in general are increasing faster than cities can come up with innovative solutions to manage it. Not all waste materials can be recycled nor turned into alternative economic solutions. Most waste ends up in the marine ecosystems, which threatens food security. Particularly to economies that rely on these systems both in terms of the livelihoods of their citizens and regarding Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Waste management is not seen as everybody's problem but rather the responsibility of sub-national governments, which struggle to cope it given a lack of resources, human resources skills, and capacity to manage this challenge effectively. There is a high lack of understanding of how pollution caused by humans impacts natural ecosystems. Countries that can afford to do so, collect waste and ship it to other countries for processing, which creates a false narrative regarding waste management. It also continues to increase indifference among citizens, cities, and their governments. An unbalanced approach to waste management, for example, in poorer suburbs/ townships versus high-end suburbs leads to the

destruction of wetlands and rivers in these communities. The latter often have no other options but to dump their waste in the nearest flowing streams or wetlands.

How can the challenge be tackled?

Tackling waste is a challenging task. The authors recommend the following solutions, which we believe are the fundamentals of waste management.

All citizens should be made aware of the impact of waste on critical economic and natural resources. There should be continuous education and awareness programmes to ensure citizens are conscious of their actions. Waste management should be presented as everyone's problem.

Platforms that bring different stakeholders together to share ideas on how to tackle waste should be created. Wherever they exist, they should be supported. Wherever legislation is already in place, compliance monitoring and law enforcement should be increased especially when it is coupled with education and awareness.

Wherever possible, there should be increased waste taxes for high waste producers following the "polluter pays" principle. In certain instances, cities should implement suitable fines for non-compliance to waste management approaches. Although this is not a preferred option, as often the natural ecosystems will be on the losing end,

the solution should be used to deter recklessness in waste management rather than focusing on curbing waste pollution.

With so much waste in circulation, cities should introduce “waste for cash” initiatives that involve everyone by locating “waste for cash” centres in all strategic locations that feature technology to weigh waste materials, calculate refunds due, and transfer these amounts through smart technologies that can be redeemed at any retail outlet. This could be made possible with an app created specifically to deal with waste for cash initiatives. Doing this would encourage not just the poor but anyone who generates waste. Another step would be to establish swap shop centres that deal only with waste exchange programmes where citizens can exchange waste for pet food, clothing, basic food items, toiletries, toys, et cetera.

Examples

Currently, various waste for cash examples exist in some countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Austria, or cities such as Cape Town among others. In some cities in Indonesia, some local governments have a programme in which people can swap their waste for a transport ticket or for basic needs such as rice and cooking

oil, et cetera. In other places, such programmes have been initiated by local start-ups. There are also start-ups in the business of collecting non-organic waste from commercial buildings and offices. Such programmes help local governments to deal with waste, while reducing their expenses at the same time.

Policy recommendations

There are a number of policy recommendations, including:

- Introducing waste management as part of environmental education and awareness programmes at schools;
- Introducing waste taxes according to the amount of waste generated per household, particularly high waste producers;
- Ring-fencing revenues from the waste taxes for continuous research and development of new technologies toward smart waste management technologies; and
- Creating advertising space for industries dealing with waste management at heavily subsidised rates.

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