

Say no to Colombo garbage!

The saga of unending recyclomania and more stinking city garbage dumps

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At last, polythene products thinner than 20 microns are to be banned. But manufacturers started producing 21 microns polythene sheets and bags adding more volumes of plastic to the environment. What can we do now?

I don't claim Colombo is the most polluted city in Asia. But, while many cities are becoming more environmentally friendly Colombo is moving in the other direction. Sri Lanka city limits are marked with stinking garbage dumps. Without sign boards anyone can know one is entering the city. This is the case throughout the country. City environment is totally neglected in Colombo. Sri Lanka does have a garbage disposal problem. But it is largely caused by Municipal inefficiency rather than the volume of the garbage. In recent years Western-style supermarkets, packaging and consumerism have aggravated the problem. A range of imported products, dressed up in their layers of attractive, colourful packaging end up in garbage dumps, making their disposal a duty of the Municipalities and the garbage collector.

While it shouldn't be the case, garbage has become part of politics. Every local authority up to the highest level talks about garbage. This is very high in the agenda during elections but slowly goes down after. New commissions and committees are appointed overnight to solve the problem.

The Western Provincial Council has its waste management authority too. However, we see garbage piles at all roadsides and every corner of the city. All local authorities struggle to find dumping grounds. The recent strike on garbage collection showed the seriousness of the problem.

Lanka's biggest garbage dump

Sri Lanka's biggest garbage dump is located at Bloemendhal Road, in the midst of the city. This is an unsegregated garbage mountain from all sources collected by the Colombo Municipal Council. There are an estimated 58 unmanaged waste dumps in the Western Province, most of which are almost filled to capacity. As these dumps continue burning it creates many health problems too. Seven hundred metric tonnes generated in the early 90s in the Colombo metropolitan area has now tripled. At the national level, more than 40,000 tons of hazardous waste is being produced per annum. Solid and hazardous waste is unloaded into open dumps causing serious health hazards and burnt in the open air where they cause land and water pollution. During the last two decades dumping destroyed almost all the wetlands around Colombo.

The poor sanitary conditions thus created kill animals foraging for food. Sri Lanka could be the only example where wild animals too die after consuming garbage. This is common in Polonnaruwa, Trincomalee



The perennial problem of increasing garbage in cities

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and many other dry zone areas and even in the Horton Plains similar cases were reported.

In certain places concrete bins are available. But they are poorly designed and garbage is dumped alongside and not in them. Many drains are blocked with garbage

adding to the health problems. Treatment of hospital waste too is often not done properly and they also end up in common dumps.

The newest waste is used electronic items imported from Western countries. So far there is no law and standards available to regulate this



The better way of disposing waste - by separation

waste. Sri Lanka has become a dumping ground for these cheap and substandard products.

Ours is the most literate country in the region. However, unlike in many developed countries, Sri Lanka's have no discipline where litter is concerned. Although there are some anti-litter laws and legislations, most are unaware of them.

But most people talk about polythene, mostly shopping bags. Tea, coconut oil and even illegal brew are now transported in shopping bags.

The recent ban on thin polythene sheets and bags is a minor step forward. However, it needs a huge effort to implement the ban. Although a ban was proposed by all previous regimes, none were able to implement it. The initial regulation was drafted in 1996. But they failed to introduce any policies or legislation to limit the use, production and import of these materials. They were

just worried about the employment of a few hundred people in the polythene factories forgetting the fact that the shopping bag industry has destroyed more than 20,000 jobs of those who were involved in the paper bag business.

Missed opportunities

I have been involved in the garbage debate since the early 90's. We brought a number of lawsuits against several Municipalities and the Central Environmental Authority. Since the early 90's Environmental groups and people brought law suits against waste dumping in Bellanwila-Attidiya sanctuary, the wetlands around Kotte and many other places. The lawsuits compelled the CEA and all local authorities to present their garbage disposal plans to the Court of Appeal. We have had hundreds of seminars, workshops and published letters and articles. But nothing solved the problem.

Most Municipalities started their own composting facilities with the support of EAIP project of the Environment Ministry which was a loan from the World Bank. Non-Governmental Organizations were also involved. Although the capacity was very small (less than 5%) some of them were very effective and well

managed. But with the end of project for some reasons, they just disappeared.

The sanitary fill proposed at the peak of the garbage debate had to be abandoned due to public protests. The site moved from Ragama to Alupotha in Meepe. It was proposed to establish a few collection stations and bring the refuse to the sanitary fill. The scientific and environmental debate on the best site and best waste management mechanism was transformed into a political game in certain areas. The slogan "No to Colombo garbage" was a creation of this political game. Although it was not the best solution, abandoning of this sanitary fill was the biggest mistake. I feel ashamed because I too was part of this debate.

It doesn't stop there. Although a waste management policy has been in the hands of the Environment Ministry since 1996, it is yet on hold. Due to this failure no systematic waste collection is available in Sri Lanka. Those who collect material for re-use have been discouraged by the government as there is no policy implementation. Even newspaper is being imported as wrapping paper. Except for a few items, there is no glass bottle collection in the country. All glass bottles in the bottling industry have been converted to Plastic (PET) bottles. Metal collection is comparatively better. Paper or cement bags are not collected as there is no market for them due to the use of shopping bags.

Dormant regulations

The Hazardous Waste Regulation approved in the 90s has still not seen the light of day. Burning of hazardous waste in cement kiln is becoming a solution. However, it is another dormant policy since it was suspended due to the lack of a sanitary landfill. Further there are no regulations or standards for disposal of used electronic items and waste. Local authorities claim they have no money. In its budget for 2003, the Colombo Municipality expected a government grant of Rs. 640.77 million. But the actual amount received was just Rs. 398.71 million. Other local authorities face similar budgetary issues. The recent committee appointed for solving the problem ended up by proposing a larger incinerator. This will create further controversy.

'Reduce! Re-use! Recycle!' Don't use all those plastic bags! Don't choke fruit and vegetables with plastic! Buy loose! Compost them! Burning pollutes! We have heard enough of these slogans for many years. When other countries are heading for the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) regulations, we cannot even sort and collect our own garbage. All our reusable material ends up in the city dump. Hazardous waste pollutes every inch of the land and every drop of water. Ecological waste management is a long delayed dream for Sri Lanka. Reduce, reuse, recycle are just words. Let us be responsible for all our thoughts, words and actions.