

Our garbage menace - a sticky problem

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GARBAGE: Mounds of garbage adorning all streets and street corners of our big cities and even the rural areas is today a nauseating problem to the entire population. Even in spite of the media highlighting the ugly state of our streets quite frequently, nobody appears to have evolved a permanent and practical remedy for this menace.

It is more an insult than an excuse for the local government institutions which have failed in the performance of their legitimate duty. Recently public agitation reached a climax, warranting the President to intervene and set targets to clean up our cities. Is there any bigger insult than this to our city fathers?

Anyway short term remedies of shifting garbage from one mound to another land fill will only create further problems.

The local government Institutions, surviving on the poor tax payers money have miserably failed in fulfilling its duties and therefore some rethinking on the future of these institutions is most imperative. After all these are relics of our imperial masters. Cannot we formulate a better system of village governance to make local administration more meaningful, in the light of our present provincial administration?

Stench

Surveys have revealed that respiratory diseases are on the increase and lung impairment and cardiac problems will continue to be a serious threat not only to the present generation but also for the generations to follow. Research work by environmentalists in certain countries has revealed that even I.Q levels of children could drop with continued inhalation of polluted air. The worst affected are the slum dwellers of the big cities.

One cannot deny the fact, the sole reason for this ugly state is the total ignorance and incapability of those entrusted with this task. Therefore the only way out is to establish a separate National Pollution Control Authority to handle this important task of garbage collection, removal and disposal and also control all forms of pollution to our water resources. Professionally qualified personnel should be in charge of this Authority functioning under the ministry of environment.

The total volume of solid waste handled by all the local government institutions is established to be around 3000M tons and 50% of this volume is contributed within the Western Province.

Organic waste

Another survey claims the total volume of garbage in Colombo city alone, as 40M tons per day. However the redeeming factor is that nearly 80-85% of the total garbage is organic waste. Presuming these statistics as reasonably accurate the problem is not that formidable. All what we

need is an efficient, professional institution to tackle this task. One may question why create another institution, when we already have a Central Environmental Authority with a whole set of administrative and legal powers. The argument sounds reasonable, but what is the impact the ordinary man has experienced from the activities of this Authority? May be they have limitations in exercising their authority due to reasons better known to them. The ordinary man on the street is not interested in project reports. He desires visible action on the control of pollution, degradation of all natural resources and protection of the natural eco system to ensure healthy living for all, without fear of natural disasters.

Ban on polythene

Sri Lanka is a signatory to all international agreements and con-

ventions, on the protection of the environment but, to what degree have we progressed in this sector? One glaring example is the so called ban on polythene. The use of polythene "sili sili" bags was 2kg per person during 1980 and it has risen to 4.5kg per person during 2005. Regulations to ban the use of polythene bags and all polythene material; a non degradable material and further a positive cause of frequent floods in the cities, were drafted a few years ago, and dates for implementation announced on a few occasions, but still collecting dust in the record

rooms. What is the reason for this long delay? Could it be that a total ban on polythene does not match the political agenda of our leaders? It is in this context, we call upon everybody genuinely concerned about environmental protection, to harness all vested powers and both collectively and sincerely execute all environment protection programmes without fear or favour. The Central Environmental Authority should take over all environment protection functions under their wings. Deploy adequate field staff and engage on a rapid clean up programme. All other government institutions concerned should work under the professional advice and directives of the Central Environmental Authority.

We are quite convinced that a large percentage of our garbage is garden waste and kitchen waste including left overs. A profitable solution will be composting all organic waste. The

balance which is even less than a quarter of the total garbage will be paper, paper cartons, various categories of packing material, glass and building construction debris.

Composting organic waste is not a difficult operation. What is important is to muster the cooperation of residents to separate their garbage into specific categories and deliver the different categories in separate bins supplied free. Residents who have small garden space could convert all organic waste into compost and utilize same for their flower plants etc.



Garbage on our streetss - an eyesore

These residents could be provided with the necessary equipment and advice free. This practice will further reduce the organic waste available for transport. Compost making centers could also be set up at selected places in the district where organic waste will be turned into compost and sold to the farmers. Organic manure will cut down use of chemical fertilizers and reduce overall production cost, fetching a premium price for the produce. Equipment required for compost making on small and medium scale is inexpensive and could be fabricated locally.

Small scale compost making could also be a source of extra income for Samurddhi Recipients.

Recycling of paper etc

All waste paper collected from residents could be stocked in a central warehouse, in the district and transported periodically to the paper fac-

tory, for use. In the event of available volumes being small for transport to the factory, production of hand made paper could be encouraged in the villages as self-employment projects. Hand made paper fetches a premium price.

It is normal to expect few glass bottles or broken glass and empty tins in every house. Tins have to be separated and delivered to the collection trucks to be handled separately for disposal to recycling plants.

In the case of glass containers, all manufactures using glass containers for packing should be required to collect and reuse these containers. A glass bottle could easily do 15 to 20 runs when reused cost of production could be reduced and this cost benefit passed on to the consumer. Cost of rewashing and sterilizing bottles will definitely be lower than using new bottles for daily production. Use of plastic containers should be banned. And importers should be heavily taxed.

Land fill

This is what we are presently following; dumping all waste without separating, and ignoring normal recommendations for such filling. Once the organic waste is separated, the balance not recyclable items can be dumped at land fills and every week or fortnight, rolled and levelled using compactors and bulldozers.

This practice will keep the site neat and will also enhance the volume of intake. While speaking of land fills our Central Environment Authority could also examine the feasibility of building an offshore landfill as adopted in Singapore. Construction of an off shore land fill will definitely help to enhance available land areas for more profitable utilization.

This is another method of waste disposal even in some Asian countries. Besides the high initial investment, the cost of energy for operation and the fumes from these incinerators could be problematic. In any case landfills are also required to dump the ash. It is therefore better to confine the use of incinerators to hospitals.

To plan and operate these suggestions a separate pollution control authority is a must.

The faster this is implemented the better. This authority will function at district level deploying one field officer for each Grama Niladri division, who will be directly responsible to

the district office for the efficient performance of all stipulated duties.

The district office will appoint private transport contractors for collection and transport of garbage from the residents to stipulated sites handling recycling, or direct to landfills. An advance transport schedule will be drawn up and delivered to the transport contractor, as well as the residents of the particular areas. Residents should be instructed to deliver their garbage separately in different bins supplied to them. Organic waste could be collected twice a week and all other solid waste once in two weeks. Dropping garbage bags on the road sides should be strictly prohibited and offenders be liable to heavy fines. Similarly when the transport contractor fails to collect garbage on the stipulated dates, he too should be liable to pay a fine in respect of every day skipped.

The field officers should play an important role in establishing a good rapport with the residents and educate them on the importance of their assistance and cooperation in maintaining a clean and healthy environment.

Residents who have loppings and building construction debris should be instructed to contact the field officer of their division for special transport which should be provided for a reasonable fee. Such waste could go direct to land fills. In the event of any resident heaping such refuse on the road side, he should be liable to legal action and heavy penalty.

The field officers should carry out daily visits to their areas, check on defaulters and report to the district office seeking instructions for guidance.

The district manager should also undertake unannounced visits to selected areas to keep the field officers alert.

While awaiting the establishment of the proposed authority, all local institutions should be instructed to have all landfills approved by the Central Environmental Authority, and recruit adequate field staff to supervise the collection and removal of garbage in their areas of jurisdiction. The additional staff recruited could be transferred to the new authority once established.

May we hope that the new Minister of Environment will consider these proposals and initiate quick action to eradicate the garbage menace and protect the health of the nation.