

Shedding some light on the national garbage crisis

By J. B. Muller

GARBAGE: There's been a tremendous amount of pure heat generated over the issue of garbage disposal, sometimes grandiosely described as 'waste management,' and very little light, if at all, on the crisis. Yes, indeed, this is a problem that has been neglected to the extent that it has spiraled out of control and become a national crisis of colossal proportions.

What are the actual dimensions of the problem? What are the viable solutions available to us all? Who is going to do the job? And how? Without beating about the bush, this paper will attempt to answer these questions and contribute to the discussions leading to a resolution of the crisis that would satisfy all stakeholders.

Most, if not all, urban local authorities and some semi-urban local authorities are weighed down with the problem of what to do with the rapidly increasing piles of garbage and other types of waste that must be disposed off in a safe and sanitary way that will not endanger human life or health.

Therefore, the crisis is nationwide and the most heavily populated districts contributing most of the waste are Colombo, Gampaha, and Kalutara that go to make up the Western Province.

The problem is also one of different kinds of waste: 1. Solid waste, and 2. Wastewater. These two categories could be subdivided into: Biodegradable; recyclable; potentially dangerous biomedical waste; sewage + excreta, and hazardous or toxic waste.

1. Kitchen wastes, leftover food, offal, animal blood, muck, and raw sewage and excreta are all **BIODEGRADABLE** and could be processed, some of it domestically, to make humus or fertilizer for plants;

2. Glass, plastic, polypropylene, metals of various kinds, wood, paper off cuts, newspaper, paper & cardboard, rubber, textile waste, and technological waste [cellular phones, computer hardware and electronic items] and similar materials are **RECYCLABLE** and could be processed into reusable raw material for small industries.

3. Material from demolished

buildings [i.e. construction or demolition debris] made of brick or various types of stone and concrete may be recyclable or used in sanitary landfills including sea dumping to create breakwaters or arrest sea erosion in endangered areas along the coast.

4. The stuff that is generated in hospitals, dispensaries and veterinary clinics that might or may contain various medications and dangerous bacteria needs to be treated separately [and there should be a distinction between infectious and non-infectious waste] along with toxic waste and here I would include motor oils, greases, fuels, detergents, lead, mercury and other potentially dangerous chemical substances that, if not treated or processed, could enter the water table, polluting it beyond reclamation. The aspect of hazard to public health and well-being has to be looked into carefully and realistic recommendations made.

5. Industrial waste is also a separate category composed of a host of sub-categories relating to the main industries in the country such as the plantation sector, the apparel

industry, the hotel sector and all other active sub-sectors generating specific toxic and non-toxic wastes where the quantities are huge in comparison to domestic or commercial waste in either the solid waste or wastewater categories.

The roles of the central government, provincial councils, and the various local authorities-municipal, urban, and pradeshiya sabhas, should be clearly demarcated so that these parties exercising administrative and financial control may know who is responsible for what and where and when and how without any vagueness or room for finger pointing and the national pastime of passing the buck. Both awareness of the dimensions and implications of the crisis and capacity building are important factors that should be considered.

Primarily, the crisis has to be viewed holistically in order that a multi-pronged strategy be devised to attack it from all possible angles with the 'Big Picture' constantly in focus, that is, a lasting solution to solving the crisis and managing the problem. For example, if several appropriate technologies are

found, evaluated and selected for implementation, that would involve taking sound decisions on:

- * Operation and maintenance
- * Advantages
- * Disadvantages
- * Relative cost
- * Cultural acceptability and
- * Suitability

Those steps would, quite logically, lead to:

- * Collection and transportation
- * Composting and recycling
- * Treatment and disposal
- * Handling of special wastes

The public or ratepayers, almost five million families throughout Sri Lanka, should be educated about waste and what it entails; and that is a job for the public sector to do, right away without bureaucratic gobbledygook and double-talk. The private sector, particularly manufacturers engaged in packaging and their professional organization should also take a long, hard look at packaging and then design packaging to be non-toxic, non-hazardous, biodegradable and/or recyclable. The school going population, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Cadets, Service Clubs, Rural Devel-

opment Societies, Women's Societies, and other voluntary, community-based organizations and Non Governmental Organizations, too, should participate in the overall effort at local level throughout the country.

Legislation should be drafted and passed, at all levels, and in the public interest, to ban materials that cannot be recycled or transformed biologically into a harmless substance. The ban should then be enforced and strictly policed in the public interest to prevent violation or infringement and the penalties prescribed should act as deterrents. Indeed, the Private Sector has a major role to play in managing this crisis and whittling it down to manageable proportions.

Dr. A.C. Visvalingam, chairman of CIMOGG has proposed public interest litigation through amendment of the law as it now stands to allow third parties to go to court in the public interest similar to what is done in both India and in the US. This should strengthen the hand of concerned citizens vis-à-vis errant public bodies and officials and contribute towards finding solutions.