

Drowning in a Rising Sea of Waste

Governments like to have us believe they are always in control. It is, therefore, unusual for them to cry out for help. Yet when the Hong Kong government tried warning us in 1998 of a looming crisis – that we would be buried by our own waste by 2015 – Hongkongers were not listening.

In a natural ecosystem there is a balance, whereby the waste from one process becomes the resources for other processes. Nothing is wasted. In a consumer society, waste is an accepted part of life. Yet even for a high-income city like Hong Kong, the luxury of dumping our waste on other people's doorsteps does not exist. We have to bear the consequences of what we produce.

By any measure, Hong Kong is a wasteful society. In 2001, we produced more than 18 million tonnes of waste, including 3.4 million tonnes of municipal solid waste and 14.2 million tonnes of construction and demolition waste. If this trend continues, the equivalent of Sha Tin – 860 hectares – will be needed for waste disposal over the next 20 years. Other options of disposal, such as incineration, are unlikely to be acceptable to the public because of the potential health and environmental risks. This explains why the government took the unusual step of ringing alarm bells by drawing up a Waste Reduction Framework Plan in 1998.

Unfortunately, all is not well with the plan. Contrary to what was intended, Hong Kong produces more waste now than five years ago. For instance, per capita domestic waste requiring disposal increased by 10 per cent, from 1.02kg per day in 1998 to 1.13kg per day in 2001. Total quantities of solid waste requiring disposal at landfill sites and public fill areas have increased by 16.5 per cent.

What has gone wrong? Should each of us be blamed for being wasteful? We can hardly deny the blame since everyone produces waste. But a more fundamental answer lies in Hong Kong's archaic institution, which was not designed to cope with the growing problems of urban modernity. The responsibility for waste management is split largely between the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and the Environmental Protection Department. The former is responsible for refuse collection, the latter for policy development, planning, legislative enforcement and, rather oddly, management of private contractors operating waste transfer stations, treatment plants and landfill sites. Although waste is often a marketable resource, no government department has any clear mandate for resource conservation, waste reuse or the nurturing of a recycling industry – despite all the talk of job creation.

This institutional weakness costs us dearly. The three strategic landfills cost more than \$14 billion in 1989 and yet their useful life will be cut short by five to 10 years because of the failure to contain the waste increase. The annual cost for handling domestic waste alone is about \$1.75 billion. With Financial Secretary Antony Leung Kam-chung crying out for extreme measures to tackle the budget deficit, one would think that cost recovery based on the "polluter pays" principle must be at the top of the agenda. Yet a landfill

charge scheme, or plans for a tipping fee, common in most developed countries, has yet to be decided, even though Legco adopted such a concept eight years ago.

Another problem under this institutional setup is a complete neglect of ecoefficiency. Waste is wasteful. This is a simple, yet difficult, concept to grasp in a consumption-based society like ours, despite the fact the assimilative capacity of our land has been stretched beyond limits. By contrast, Canberra, Australia's capital, has set an objective of transforming itself to a waste-free society by 2010. Although ambitious, this is backed by a waste-management strategy and the rationale that waste goes against the principle of ecologically sustainable development.

To tackle these problems head on, we need a strong institution empowered to develop a waste strategy from the perspective of ecological sustainability, to deliver efficient service without departmental fragmentation, and to use financial instruments conducive to resource conservation and cost-effective operations.

The answer is a separate waste authority, which would take up all the waste management responsibilities of the Environmental Protection Department and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department. Control and enforcement with regard to contamination of the environment by individuals, private contractors and the authority itself should, however, stay with the Environmental Protection Department, which should get rid of any role conflict by becoming an independent regulator.

While it is not essential for the waste authority to be self-financing at the outset, subsidies should be set out in detail – the first step in persuading the public that waste is costly. As soon as the full cost is understood, there will be more support for the “polluter pays” principle and a stronger political will to deal with vested interests.

User charges also allow the invisible hand of the market to work for a more efficient economy. When a waste-charging scheme was implemented in South Korea in 1995, there was a 30 per cent reduction in waste disposal in Seoul and 40 per cent in small municipalities. One major benefit of removing the hidden, perverse subsidies to waste producers is to give the recycling industry a chance to flourish.

As Hong Kong wakes up to the failure of its environmental hygiene system in the midst of the Sars outbreak, we ignore the institutional weakness of the waste-management system at our peril. Without an empowered waste authority, we are putting our future at risk.

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