

Conclusion

The solid waste management crisis in the global South is clear. Landfills and dumpsites are overflowing, tempting many local governments to embrace incineration as a way to address disposal needs. These incinerators threaten to overwhelm municipal budgets, pollute the environment, and put the informal recycling sector and many people's livelihoods at risk. Clearly communities need to build adequate discard management systems. The key to healthy communities is to redirect the millions of dollars in investments slated for incineration systems into waste prevention and reduction and zero waste systems that maximize both return on investments and economic development opportunities.

Incinerators do not magically make municipal discards disappear. Rather they are the most costly of all discard management options, result in air and water pollution, waste raw materials, engage communities in contentious siting battles, and still need to be supplemented by landfills. With incineration, communities also lose the opportunity to move wastepickers from their dangerous, poverty-stricken lifestyles into safe, secure, long-term employment.

Moving toward 50% and higher waste diversion requires a paradigm change from our traditional waste management systems. Communities wishing to reduce disposal and save money and material resources must develop separate handling systems for discarded materials and put in place policies to support waste avoidance and recovery. Achieving maximum recovery of discarded materials and reducing the need for disposal is a huge task. It requires action and cooperation by individuals, businesses, and government at all levels. Sweeping change cannot be expected to occur overnight. Nor can it be accomplished without substantial investment and leadership. As long as waste planners focus on short-term, "black box" solutions, no real change can result. Furthermore, experience has shown that sustainable resource conservation systems cannot be decreed from above. Government and planners must involve businesses, community-based enterprises, the informal recycling sector, and individuals in the planning process, an involvement that is generally lacking wherever incinerators are proposed.

Many communities in the global South are faced with making a choice between pollution prevention and discard management versus selecting a waste disposal option that will have long-term negative impacts on the environment and drain money and resources from the local economy. The "pollution prevention" option requires thought, skill, planning, new technologies, capital investment, a commitment to a long-term future and to social values that reach beyond the next quarterly profit-and-loss statement. The "burn it up" or "bury it" options require only a contractor willing to reap profit and a government agency willing to toss money away while overlooking serious health hazards created by facilities. On the other hand, aiming for zero waste will protect the environment, create jobs, and strengthen local and regional economies. But if solid waste planners simply pay lip service to the ideas, make minimal investments, and abandon the effort at first difficulty, our communities will continue to suffer under mountains of trash. Let us not send our resources — human, material, and financial — up in flames.

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