

Waste management in Brazil – it is time to focus on waste as a resource

Brazil as a country is the 5th biggest producer of waste in the world. Even though major progress has been made in the past few years, Brazil faces many challenges when it comes to waste management. 42% of all waste collected still goes to improper and unsafe destinations, the infrastructure needs major improvements and public buy-in to new regulations is low. The solution? A stronger focus on resource management.

In 2011 approximately 198,000 tons of municipal solid waste were produced in Brazil every day. This equals 62 million tons per year. Of the total waste produced in the country, 90%, (about 180,000 tons a day) is collected. Approximately 58% of this is disposed of in sanitary landfills, 24% in controlled landfills, and 17% end up in various dumpsites. This means that some 75,000 tons of the waste collected every day (27 billion tons per year) are deposited in sites that lack the systems and procedures necessary to protect the environment against damage and degradation. Despite all legal determinations and efforts, improper disposal continues to be common practice in all Brazilian states.

“The impact this has on public health, and on the environment, is nothing short of disastrous. This trend needs to be reversed urgently. Especially since more and more waste per capita is currently being produced,” says Carlos Silva Filho, president of ABRELPE and the chairman of this year’s ISWA world congress in Sao Paulo.

ABRELPE (Brazilian Association of Waste Management Companies) is a non profit NGO created in 1976 to represent, develop and promote the professional waste sector in Brazil. ABRELPE also supports science through research and publishes reports such as “Panorama of solid waste in Brazil” which includes a detailed presentation of waste management in Brazil and comparative benchmarking year by year.

“The attention given to solid waste management in developing countries is growing, but not fast enough. Despite the steps taken in Brazil, it is still un-proportional in relation to population growth and inadequate for industrial development,” says Carlos Silva Filho who was one of the speakers at the “*Health aspects, the initial driving force behind sustainable waste management*” a workshop on the future of waste at the ISWA World Congress.

In 2010, Brazil finalized its National Solid Waste Policy. This law aims to decrease the total volume of waste produced nationally as well as to increase the sustainability of solid waste management. Public, domestic, industrial, mining, agroforestry, transportation, construction, and health waste are all covered, and much of the responsibility for paying for or providing management of waste now falls to its producers.

“The Waste Law is under implementation. Several steps have been taken in order to put the Law into practice (master plans, reverse logistics, separate collection and waste hierarchy for example). However, the way we deal with waste and how we behave are historical and it takes time to change everything that has been done badly for many years.”

Public-private partnerships play an important role in improving recycling availability and rates, managing the reverse logistics stream, and ensuring social inclusion. The law also makes special provisions to accommodate waste pickers, who have traditionally played a central role in the waste sorting and disposal system in Brazil.

“I think the most important issue now is to increase social awareness. Before the law most people did not pay any attention to waste related items. Now we see new attitudes and behaviours, but it is happening very slowly and we still have a long way to go. Public buy-in to and compliance with the new regulations are too low. The average person simply does not seem to see the connection between their individual behaviour and Brazil’s waste problem as a whole. There is a need for more information campaigns focusing on the enormous importance proper waste management has, not only for the environment but also for improving public health and to use our resources wisely,” says Carlos Silva Filho.

Simply put, it is time to start to talk more about waste and how we use it. Carlos Silva Filho feels that waste management needs to be brought further to the forefront of public discussion in Brazil. He also feels the discussion must focus more on waste’s potential as a resource, instead of something we just need to get rid of.

“Waste management is about so much more than transporting trash from one place to another. The waste industry needs to become more transparent and show how complicated and involved the process actually is. And we need to show how we can contribute to the reuse of valuable resources.”

The proper managing, reusing, recycling and ultimate disposal of waste costs money. Today, the Brazilian budget on waste is the equivalent of 3 euros per month per capita. The equivalent investment in Tokyo is 43 euros, in London 10 euros and in Barcelona 19 euros. These figures should be seen in the light that major infrastructure investments that are still needed in Brazil have already been made and paid for.

"If we want to progress and develop we will need a lot more money than what is available at the moment. And that money must come from somewhere. Producers will bear a lot of the cost, but some of it must be carried by the inhabitants as well, and we see strong resistance against this."

Mr Silva's personal view is that the huge objections against charging for waste disposal come from ignorance on how complex and involved the waste handling process is as well as from a lack of understanding that waste is an important resource.

"We know we need electricity, food and water. So we are willing to pay for that. Now we have to understand that we will not survive if we do not handle our waste properly. And we also need to see that there is a huge untapped potential in waste. In Brazil we tend to see waste as something to simply be put at the side of the street and thrown away. But it is a big economic resource for the future. Not just because of the raw materials that can be reused over and over and, but also in improved public health and subsequent lower costs for health care. There is a triple benefit here: more resources, cleaner environment and better health.

Hosting this years ISWA world congress is one way to get these subjects into the headlines. Trash is a global problem, and all countries must play their part if a solution is to be found.

"We have much to learn from other countries," says Mr Silva. "And it is my hope that by being part of this conference we can start to raise awareness that the waste industry is of major importance to create a cleaner and healthier Brazil."

Carlos Silva Filho:

- CEO of ABRELPE, the Brazilian Association of Waste Management and Urban Services Companies
- ISWA Board Member
- Author of the book "PNRS: What the Law says"
- Member of the Waste Management and Research Editorial Board