Clean Public Spaces:
More Than A Matter Of Bins?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since early days local authorities are legally responsible for clean public spaces. In fact it was Napoleon who first obliged municipalities to keep the streets clean and to collect waste on sites at a distance from the city centre. This was the start of waste collection as we know it today. We must remember that in that period all waste was thrown on the streets.

Nowadays, local authorities still fulfil this legal obligation. As times have changed and waste collection has become common property, we could suppose that we would not find waste on the streets any more. Unfortunately, local authorities have to conclude otherwise. They still have to clean public places, but now they find that waste originating from specific products is more present in litter.

Although they do not cause litter themselves, local authorities are always blamed when public spaces are not clean. They undertake a lot of efforts, but they are not the only ones who have an impact. Yet, the idea still exists that placing more bins and sweeping the streets more often is the solution for littering.

The association of Flemish towns and municipalities (VVSG) pleads for a global solution together with all stakeholders: consumers, industry, governments and organizations. All have to make substantial practical and financial efforts to keep the environment clean. Clear agreements have to be made about the implementation and financing of a total package of actions. A set of instruments must be used continuously in order to attain a lasting solution. It is our opinion that the cost of litter management must be related to production and consumption by means of internalization of the costs.

To stimulate her members to opt for a global approach, VVSG has developed guidelines and good practices of litter management for local authorities. These guidelines include a whole range of possible actions starting from identifying problems, prevention of litter (designing public spaces, specific communication, collection infrastructure, well-thought waste fees), community work, to well-considered cleaning and law enforcement. It is now the right time for local authorities to consolidate their efforts and to optimise actions from ‘just’ sweeping streets and emptying bins to a professional and modern local litter management.

In litter we find mainly cigarette ends, chewing gums and packaging waste. Producers of those waste streams must realise they have a responsibility to prevent their products to become littered. This can already be done in the designing phase of products. Producers can also promote collection systems that give a positive market value to specific waste streams found in litter. Promoting the throwing of waste on public spaces in advertisements is certainly not done.
Governments must support the different stakeholders creating appropriate preconditions, so everyone can do his job effectively and efficiently. Therefore, it is essential to create clear and appropriate legislation and to support qualitative and quantitative research about littering. As not all spaces accessible for the public fall under the responsibility of local authorities, it is also necessary to involve other stakeholders who manage those spaces e.g. shopping areas, parking lots, railway stations. We conclude that clean public spaces are much more than a matter of bins. A clean and tidy environment can only be realised when everyone works together and does his job, taking into account the consequences of his actions.

INTRODUCTION

Local authorities are confronted with the litter problem in different ways. On one hand citizens expect a clean environment. On the other hand some of those citizens cause litter. Besides this, the impression exists that more products for immediate and single use are put on the market. Also consuming of food in public spaces is promoted. Local authorities are legally responsible for the neatness of public spaces. Sweeping of the streets more regularly and placing of bins is often referred to as the easiest solution for littering. But this approach is only a small part of a sustainable solution. In this presentation we go more deeply into some aspects.

PRODUCERS HAVE A CLEAR RESPONSIBILITY

Producers do not always (want to) realise that their products are related to the litter problem. Producers do not cause litter directly, but neither do local authorities. Nevertheless, it is a fact that in litter the waste of a number of specific products is more present e.g. chewing gum, packaging waste, cigarette ends.

The Flemish Waste Agency (OVAM) analysed the composition of litter in Flanders in 2006. 100 pieces of litter contain on average:

- 50 cigarette ends
- 11 chewing gums
- 12 mixed packaging
- 15 plastic bottles
- 4 cans
- 1.5 paper and cardboard
- 0.2 tetra packaging

When we do not take into account the cigarette ends and chewing gum, 60% of litter is packaging waste of which 10% packaging for beverages.

100 kilograms of litter contain on average:

- 28 kg metals, from which 25 kg cans
- 19 kg paper and cardboard
- 15 kg plastics, from which 12 kg packaging
- 13.5 kg mixed waste
- 7 kg smoking packaging
- 5 kg textiles
- 5 kg residual waste
- 5 kg glass
- 2 kg kitchen and garden waste
- 0.5 tetra packaging

54% of litter is packaging waste, from which 33% is packaging for beverages.
In Flanders, as in many other countries, the efforts of producers in the past were limited to specific communication campaigns. The message is to throw waste in the bin. Also in other countries this message has been spread for years, but is it effective? In the Netherlands, studies already have proven that it is not useful to only communicate in that way. But it is of course the easiest way to avoid responsibility.

Producers can and must do much more than only communicate about the necessity to throw waste in the bin. A real challenge for producers is to find ways to prevent waste that originates from their products. After all, they create a demand for products with an impact on the quality of the environment.

Producers are in an excellent position to think about their products in the light of avoiding litter when designing the product. They can also set up collection systems that give certain products found in litter a positive market value and they have an important role in advertising. Advertisements should avoid promoting unwanted behaviour.

**ONLY BINS AND SWEEPING IS NOT AN OPTION**

A good litter management does not only consist of placing enough bins in public spaces and sweep the streets. Bins placed at random can even increase litter. Besides, sweeping streets is often a choice between frequent sweeping and accepting that streets will be filthy again the next morning or less frequent sweeping and letting people realise that litter does not disappear on its own. Local authorities have many more possibilities to improve the neatness of public spaces. Several preconditions have to be taken into account. To stimulate a global approach, the Association of Flemish Towns and Municipalities (VVSG) has developed guidelines and good practices of litter management for local authorities. These guidelines include identifying problems, prevention (designing public spaces, specific communication, collection infrastructure, waste fees), community work, well-considered cleaning and law enforcement. Cooperation between municipalities can offer added value.

**More Bins Everywhere**

Bins deliver a service to passers-by and not to people living in the neighbourhood. Bins should only be placed at specific places where there is food consumption outside or where specific waste streams are released e.g. tickets for festivals, for public transport.

We give some examples where placing bins is justified:
- places where a lot of people pass by every day e.g. shopping areas, city centre;
- places where a lot of people come together e.g. bus stops, parking lots;
- strategic places e.g. walking and biking routes;

Often placing bins is a choice between collecting litter and attracting waste in general. The kind of bins and the management of emptying the bins also has to be well considered.

**More Sweeping**

Cleansing plans should reflect the perception of people. Monitoring the cleanliness of streets is therefore necessary. Cleansing plans are established in relation to how fast places become littered. Politicians have to agree upon an acceptable degree of filthiness, so cleansing plans can be adjusted to that. Nowadays, the use of technical equipment with high standard is a reality. Well considered use of sweeping machines and manual sweeping is a key issue. When we look at the cost per kilometre, using sweeping machines is more expensive than sweeping manually. Sweeping machines on the other hand clean much faster. Often manual sweeping is preferred due to specific spatial situations as small streets in city centres. In most cases sweeping machines can not reach their targets. Sweeping machines have another disadvantage. Sweepings contains mainly sand and water and are therefore very expensive to dispose off (recycle).

**Role Of Other Stakeholders**
Regional and federal authorities have to support cities and municipalities by creating appropriate preconditions, so everyone can do his job effectively and efficiently. In the first place it requires clear and appropriate legislation. For example, in Flanders this would mean that local authorities can fine offenders in an administrative way instead of going to court when offenders are caught. Authorities can support and do research on certain aspects in order to acquire more information on quantities, composition, cost and perception of the litter problem.

Often it is forgotten that local authorities have no direct responsibility (and no access to) for all public areas. Approximately 50% of spaces accessible by the public do not fall under the responsibility of local authorities e.g. recreation areas, shopping centres, railway stations. These parties should also be involved. The role of producers has already been addressed in the first part of this text.

**ENFORCEMENT IS NOT POPULAR BUT EFFECTIVE**

Only a small percentage of people drops litter; those people have to be dealt with. Of course it is not pleasant to get a fine. But it is important to set an example.

Law enforcement should be easy in practice. Legislation should allow local authorities to enforce efficiently and effectively. The main problem is to catch the person in the very act of disposing litter. However, sometimes it is possible to discover the identity of the disposer by investigating the litter. And local authorities can not have policemen or public servants who are entitled to give fines, on every corner of the street. Most of all, it is important to stay aware constantly.

**WHO HAS TO PAY?**

It is calculated that cleaning streets with sweeping machines costs about € 115 per kilometre in a city environment. This is quite expensive for municipalities, who in fact have no direct impact on what is produced and what is thrown away.

In our opinion the instrument of producer responsibility has to be applied for the financing of the cleansing of streets. More specifically, the cost of sweeping has to be related to the waste that is found in litter. This is also called internalization of the costs. Producers calculate costs to consumers who cause litter with their products.

**CONCLUSION**

Placing bins and sweeping streets can only be part of a global litter approach. Local authorities choose for a lasting solution in collaboration with other parties that have an effect: consumers, industry, other authorities and organisations. All partners have to make substantial practical and financial efforts. Clear agreements have to be made about implementation and financing. A set of instruments must be used continuously to get a lasting solution. Financing must be related to production and consumption by means of internalization of the costs.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank our members for the exchange of information and expertise.

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