



Briefing Paper 524

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The National Waste Management Strategy 2020

1. Introduction

Waste continues to be a significant global challenge, as increasing volumes are being generated due to the rise in living standards and the growing culture of consumerism. The essence of global economic prosperity and competence is often built at the expense of the environment and at the cost of natural resource depletion. Although more goods are produced, basic human necessities for all are never fully met. A typical example is that of food production, where more and more food is produced and wasted throughout the distribution value chain, while a large percentage of the world's population remains hungry. Moreover, the amount of global general waste generated annually increasingly exceeds the amount of waste that is being treated or recycled.

According to the World Bank, about 2.1 billion tonnes of municipal solid waste is generated in the world every year, and 33% of it is not properly managed. This number is expected to increase to around 3.4 billion tonnes by 2050.¹ Most of the waste ends up in landfills in developing countries, often close to poorer communities, causing health-related problems amongst many other issues. Studies also show that higher income levels and urbanization contribute to more waste generation, as consumption levels increase with the rise in disposable incomes.² Moreover, the market continues to encourage consumerism through

convenient and easy to use products that exacerbate the single-use and throw-away culture.

2. Environment, Climate, People and Waste

The disposal and treatment of increased amounts of waste affects the environment in various ways. It contributes to the worsening of climate change; has a negative impact on wildlife and nature; and also impacts human public health. Most of the waste disposed of in open landfills produces methane gas, which is poisonous and makes a significant contribution to climate change. Additionally, the waste that is burnt in efforts to clear open dumping sites generates increased amounts of carbon dioxide, which poses a direct risk to the atmosphere, and to people and animals living in close proximity to the dumping sites.

Another detrimental effect caused by global waste problems is on ocean life. Plastic waste poses a huge risk to aquatic animals, and to coastal people's livelihoods as a result. It is estimated that millions of seabirds suffer as a consequence of plastic that ends up in oceans;³ they die on a daily basis from either entanglement or ingestion of plastic. Plastics take between 20 and 500 years to decompose, depending on their structure,⁴ which means that marine species that survive plastic ingestion still contain toxic plastic fragments that pose a risk to them and to human health if

they are caught and consumed. Although the most affected are the people dependent on marine life for their livelihoods, the effects are far-reaching and have a great impact on wider society.

South Africa is not spared from these detrimental global waste problems. Like most developing countries, it generates significant amounts of waste in proportion to its population. An estimated 59 million tonnes of general waste is generated annually, of which 90% ends up in landfills, while only 10% is recycled.⁵ Considering the rate of growth in solid waste generation, this will mean, on the one hand, that South Africa will quickly run out of space for waste disposal; and, on the other hand, that the paramount challenge of illegal and unregulated waste disposal will intensify. Statistics reflect only waste that is disposed of in properly licensed and regulated landfills, and do not necessarily consider illegally dumped waste, which is commonly not accounted for. Illegal and unregulated waste dumping is mostly observed in highly concentrated townships and informal settlements, where the general lack of regular basic service provision and other socio-economic problems remain prevalent.

3. Compliance and the Regulatory Framework

'Waste management' is the sum of all activities and actions required to manage waste from its inception to its disposal. This includes collection, transport, treatment, and disposal of waste. Monitoring and regulation are the most crucial aspects of waste management processes, in order to ensure compliance. There are three R's in globally accepted principles of waste management: *reduce* – cutting back on the amount of waste generated; *re-use* – finding new ways to use things that would otherwise have been thrown away; and *recycle* – turning old and useless items into new and useful ones. These three R's are a clear indication of how waste management is the responsibility of all. It is the responsibility of consumers to reduce waste generation by using durable alternatives in the first place, and it is the responsibility of manufacturers and producers to ensure that items are recyclable after use.

3.1 Legislative framework

Government's role is to ensure compliance by providing the necessary infrastructure and support services, and a regulatory framework under which waste management processes are monitored. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, section 24, stipulates that "everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health [...] and to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures..."⁶ To fulfil this constitutional obligation the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries is mandated to develop and oversee a legislative framework that ensures a safe and healthy environment for all citizens. The pieces of legislation that currently govern waste management in South Africa include, but are not limited to:

- The South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996)
- The Environmental Conservation Act (Act 73 of 1989)
- The National Environmental Management Act (Act 107 of 1998)
- The Air Quality Act (Act 39 of 2004)
- The National Environmental Management: Waste Act, 2008 (Act 59 of 2008)

3.2. The National Waste Management Strategy

The National Waste Management Strategy is a legal requirement flowing from the National Environmental Management: Waste Act of 2008.⁷ The overall purpose of the strategy is to achieve the objectives of the Waste Act, these objectives being: avoidance and reduction of waste; re-using and recycling of waste; and treating and disposing of waste as the last resort of the waste management process. The development of the Waste Act was necessary for a country that at some point experienced rapid economic growth which led to massive waste generation. The strategy seeks to ensure that the waste sector is responsive to the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, and that the sector's strategic interventions are in alignment with the country's National Development Plan. It was

developed as a living document that would constantly require updating as a monitoring tool.

The most recent revision of the strategy was done in October 2020, updating the document and building on the lessons and success of the implementation process of the strategy. The 2020 version of the strategy contains a significant shift in priorities and strategic interventions. It puts some of the most vital concepts, such as the concept of a 'circular economy', at its centre. This is a key component of the strategy, which will ensure environmental protection and sustainable use of resources, while promoting economic growth through industries such as renewable energy generation from waste material. It is an approach that creates a platform for business, government and people to work together towards sustainable development as an ultimate goal. As such, the strategy has a great potential to link various important sustainable development objectives – if it is implemented correctly.

Another important aspect highlighted by this recent version of the strategy is the establishment of Extended Producer Responsibility Schemes. These will be established under the regulations published in terms of the strategy for the packaging, electronics and lighting sectors, for implementation from May 2021. These schemes seek to ensure that producers take responsibility for the reclamation and recycling of waste in these specified sectors. They will also ensure that products are labelled for consumer awareness as per the recycling requirements.

One of the major lessons learned from the implementation of the National Waste

Management Strategy 2011, is that there is not enough involvement of the public in waste management process. People are not sufficiently aware of their role in *reducing* waste as a first priority out of the three principles of waste management. They also have little knowledge on how to identify *re-usable* products or even how to *re-use* some of the items they purchase. Moreover, consumers are not encouraged to purchase *recyclable* items.

4. Conclusion

The revised 2020 version of the strategy acknowledges that there has to be a fresh approach to addressing issues such as consumer behaviour and promoting beneficiation for informal stakeholders in the waste sector. Another significant aspect that the 2020 version considers is the involvement of community-based organizations in building initiatives that will assist communities to be able to separate waste at source, and dispose of it correctly in order to minimise resources used in the sector.

In the immediate future the strategy has to provide a platform for all stakeholders to participate, since waste management is everyone's duty. Thus far, government has worked quite well with business in advancing the objectives of the strategy, although there is always room for improvement. Now, it is important that great efforts and resources are committed to involve communities as much as possible, both for the implementation of the individual objectives of the strategy and for the achievement of sound waste management in general.

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¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/brief/solid-waste-management#:~:text=In%202016%2C%20the%20worlds'%20cities,3.40%20billion%20tonnes%20in%202020.50>.

² <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/302341468126264791/pdf/68135-REVISED-What-a-Waste-2012-Final-updated.pdf>

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- ³ <https://e360.yale.edu/digest/balloons-more-deadly-for-seabirds-than-any-other-kind-of-plastic>
- ⁴ <https://www.wwf.org.au/news/blogs/the-lifecycle-of-plastics>
- ⁵ http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=11527&gclid=Cj0KCQjw2tCGBhCLARIsABJGmZ66KaVbJ1xGt4JrHc2t7o3XQkBsa_uZxRidj2pP0yR4Nxr_H8s1jFYaAtQjEALw_wcB
- ⁶ <https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/chapter-2-bill-rights#24>
- ⁷ https://www.environment.gov.za/sites/default/files/legislations/nema_amendment_act59.pdf

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