

RECYCLING IN AUSTRALIA: CHALLENGES AND ISSUES WITH A VIEW ON THE FUTURE, by Alessio Claudi, HOPE Researcher Qld

Australian problems in waste management

In the last few weeks numerous Asian countries that were major recipients of Australian waste, especially recyclable materials, limited or stopped accepting these materials. In particular, Indonesia earlier this month returned several hundred tonnes of waste to Australia. 'About 210 tonnes of waste from Brisbane has been stranded on a dock in the city of Surabaya since June when suspicions were raised the shipment may have been contaminated. Indonesian officials on Tuesday announced a full inspection has found that the shipment of paper also included motor oil containers, old CDs, a television set top box and a remote control. The containers have been deemed contaminated by toxic or hazardous materials and will be returned' (Lipson 2019). This will mean that an increasingly higher amount of waste that will go to landfill, causing environmental problems that are already quite an issue for Australia, as for other developed countries. Also, this situation highlighted the weakness of Australia's waste management and the reliance on exporting waste to Asian countries.

Waste delocalisation & management

The phenomenon of "waste delocalisation" is far from new. For decades developed countries, like Australia, have been sending unwanted waste to developing countries, delegating the problem of waste management to these countries. This issue is part of a well-known global waste trade, which has been scholarly analysed by many (Miller 1995; Lepawski 2015; Gregson & Crang 2015). Global waste is something that should be considered unacceptable since it involves the export of toxic and highly polluting waste to developing countries, which then have to deal with the environmental and disposal issues derived by waste produced in richer countries. To contrast this issue, in many countries in the world, from the US to Russia, to Singapore to Japan, and several South American countries, volunteers started projects to reach the goal of zero waste. Australia has several projects in this regard, but as for other environmental issues the Australian governments throughout the years demonstrated a lack of active involvement, other than pledges and words, that never led to concrete application.

Waste levy increase

State governments in Australia will be likely to increase the waste levy, due to the above-mentioned stop of waste export to Asian countries, demonstrating once more how the increase of levies and taxes is still the easier way for governments to deal with problems. Rather than finding and funding recycling initiatives on a large scale (apart from the container deposit scheme), the choice is to literally throw money at the problem, making taxpayer cope with the inability of policy-makers to implement a smart waste management system. A virtuous example on how to tackle the waste issue in a more proactive way is the reform that Japan has been working on in recent years.

Recycling in Japan

Since 1995, Japan implemented its waste management system achieving very good results in recycling various types of waste, ranging from recyclable to e-waste (JCPRA 2019). Japan's increasing rate of recycling can represent a good example on how a country can achieve good results in waste management in a relatively short time. The most impressive result is the recycling of e-waste and household items, well above 80% of the total for a wide range of white goods and tv sets (Amemiya 2018, p. 7). Japan has embraced this battle against waste for two main reasons, the environmental one and the economic one, since it is not a country with many natural resources. Being able to reuse some of them it is good for their economy and creates also jobs in the recycling sector.



Figure 1 - Retrieved from <https://www.nippon.com/en/features/h10031/taking-out-the-trash-in-japan.html>

Can Japan be a model for Australia?

Japan can indeed be an example for Australia in regard to recycling, even if in many areas are very different starting from the geographical point of view, for example Japan has more population but it is way smaller than Australia. However, we have to consider that Australia is one of the world's most urbanised countries in the world, with around 90% of people living in towns and cities within 50 km from the coastline. This reduces by much the area in which waste is produced, limiting the extent of the infrastructure needed for processing and recycling of waste. Anyhow, the problem is not only the lack of infrastructure and the government scarce willingness to invest, but it is the willingness of each citizen to do their part in recycling. Education and awareness also play a pivotal role in a correct and widespread recycling, which would provide in turn many different advantages to Australia.

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