

Links between waste management and environmental sustainability spotlighted at UN-backed conference



Piles of garbage being burned in the streets of Cairo, Egypt. Photo: IRIN/Amr Emam

6 November 2012 – Amid a rapidly growing world population, waste management issues are becoming increasingly crucial for the promotion of environmental sustainability, delegates at the conclusion of a two-day United Nations conference on the matter heard today.

At the latest meeting of the Global Partnership on Waste Management (GPWM), hosted by the UN Environmental Programme ([UNEP](#)) in Osaka, Japan, waste experts from around the world addressed the ongoing problems surrounding waste management, discussing how to reap greater economic and environmental benefits through better mutual cooperation.

“Basic human needs such as clean water, clean air and safe food are jeopardized by improper waste management practices, with severe consequences for public health,” a UNEP [news release](#) warned, adding that improper waste management could lead to the spread of diseases, as well as contaminate the surrounding air, water and land.

The UN agency noted that municipal waste is a growing burden for communities around the globe, citing World Bank statistics estimating waste volumes to grow from 1.3 billion tonnes to 2.2 billion tonnes by 2025.

Moreover, with the global middle class slated to expand from two billion people to 4.9 billion by 2030, and expected to consume more resource-intensive goods, public waste management systems risk struggling with the pace of urban expansion, the agency warned.

UNEP, however, also acknowledged that waste management is one of “the most complex and cost-intensive public services,” tending to absorb large chunks of municipal budgets.

Nevertheless, the Director of UNEP’s International Environmental Technology Centre, Matthew Grubb, argued that despite the spectre of a potential global waste crisis hanging over the world’s human and environmental health, the increasing role of waste management also provided an opportunity for establishing “a model area for greening the economy.”

“If handled properly, waste management has huge potential to turn problems into solutions and to lead the way towards sustainable development through the recovery and reuse of valuable resources; the creation of new business and employment opportunities, including for the informal sector; reduced emissions of greenhouse gasses from waste management operations, such as landfills; and conversion of waste to energy,” UNEP added in the news release.

A 2010 UNEP report showed that, in Northern Europe, recycling one tonne of paper or aluminium saves more than 600 kilograms and 10,000 kilograms of carbon dioxide, respectively. Similarly, a 2009 report by the agency revealed that there is 65 times more gold in one tonne of old mobile phones than in one tonne of ore.

“The business case for ‘urban mining’ is clear,” UNEP noted. “Waste matters.”

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