

Habitat and Solid Waste Management

By **Iyad Aburdeineh**



The solid waste issue in Palestine is one of the critical issues related to health, environment, landscape, and societal well-being. Along with water, wastewater, and energy, solid waste management is one of the most important services linked to the habitat of residents.

Many people do not realise the burden that solid waste management places on communities in Palestine. This burden can be divided into several categories.

The first category is cost and cost recovery. In most communities, municipalities, and village councils, there is a struggle to cover the cost of waste collection, transportation, and disposal. At the same time, this cost is supposed to be covered by fees collected from the residents in their respective communities. Fee collection in most communities is a major struggle not only for solid waste management but for other utilities as well. In the northern West Bank the tariff for solid waste management is connected to the electricity bill, an action that has, for all intents and purposes, resolved the issue. In the rest of the West Bank, however, the average fee collection is estimated to be about 40 percent, which means that there is a need to subsidise or cover the remaining 60 percent from other financial resources such as taxes, water, electricity, etc. As a consequence, many municipalities and village councils have huge debts.

The second category is technical and depends on the financial resources of a particular community. In addition, capacity at the level of equipment and staff varies from one community to another. Due to the significance of this issue, the Ministry of Local Government has created Joint Service Councils for Solid Waste Management (JSCSWM). The idea behind such bodies was to create utility-sharing equipment and specialised staff to

serve several communities. The same is true for the methods of disposal, such as landfills and transfer stations, and regional facilities were created in order to serve the largest possible population. The role of the private sector is also important in providing recycling and reuse facilities, though the private sector is reluctant to engage in providing waste management services because of previous unsuccessful experiences.

The third category is the level of public awareness. A big challenge in Palestine is raising awareness about keeping public spaces clean. As Palestine becomes more and more crowded, traditional wisdom concerning recycling is slowly being lost. People used to compost, feed animals from food debris, use animal excreta as fertiliser for their land, and so on. Today, as urban culture increases, people are becoming less dependent on agriculture. Industrial "progress" is introducing plastics, glass, metals, rubber, and many other non-organic products into the market. Even organic waste is mixed with the rest. As a result, the public seems to have forgotten about traditional ways, and people do not know how to deal with the new reality. Any and all vacant lands in urban areas contain a mosaic of all sorts and types of waste. There is a tremendous need for

The average daily per capita waste production in Palestine (West Bank and Gaza) is found to be about 1 kg per capita per day. This means that an average household of 5 persons produces about 5 kg of waste on a daily basis and 1.8 tons per year.

Random dumping and burning - Tuqu' -Bethlehem.

private- and public-sector engagement in order to create landfills and establish centres or factories for recycling or reuse purposes in order to absorb the generated quantities of waste. If these facilities were to exist, it would be easier to redirect the public to more sustainable practices. At the same time, although most people know that littering in the public space is not so good, they continue to litter because there are no negative consequences. It is similar to the phenomenon of smoking. People are aware that smoking is bad for their health yet they continue to smoke. Most people will not stop smoking unless they have a serious health problem or are forbidden to smoke. This leads us to the fourth category.

The fourth category is law enforcement. Known as "the polluter pays" principle, this is another vital component to waste management. Ramallah was the first city to impose a fine for littering. Other cities may follow, but it is clear that Palestine needs a "green police," nature protection unit, or some other legal body that can enforce the law and prevent people from littering or polluting the public space. The Israeli military occupation presents a dilemma. Palestine is divided into several zones of control, and we do not know if a particular law that is implemented in Nablus, for example, will also be



Gaza waste. Photo courtesy of electronicintifada.net.

enforced in an area a few kilometres away. The West Bank is a free zone or no-man's-land for all types of illegal practices. If you can't do it in Zone A, then go and do it in Zone C, and vice versa. This leads us to a complicated but not necessarily impossible habitat to rearrange. If Palestine needs to be a good habitat for its citizens then it has to be clean and safe.

Palestine today suffers from the phenomenon of random dumpsites. Wherever you travel in the West Bank or Gaza Strip you can find hundreds of dump sites. This issue is related to the lack of specialised landfills, mainly for construction waste, and the lack of law enforcement. This waste is not from Palestinian sources only but also from Israeli settlements and, in some cases, from nearby Israeli cities and towns. Unfortunately, construction waste from Israeli settlements is frequently dumped in Area C of the West Bank.

Another dimension to take into consideration in this regard is tourism, specifically ecotourism. If we want to promote Palestine as a tourist destination it is important to ensure a clean and beautiful habitat.

Ecotourism in the West Bank can be easily promoted given its special wildlife habitat. Unfortunately, in many cases this rich habitat has become polluted either by random dumping or by unregulated visitor practices that either reduce the site's appeal or even damage it. Ecotourism can be a real attraction not only for international visitors but also for the local population, who are not necessarily aware of the unique habitat of the various species. This can be a great source of income for local communities as part of community-based tourism.

Everyone is responsible for fighting against pollution. It is a national duty. If radical change does not occur, then Palestine will become a polluted, ugly habitat. It's our choice and our responsibility.

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