

The recent fires that plagued the Harrold Road landfill in early March of this year were a turning point for many residents on New Providence Island who suffered the shutdown of schools and public facilities, and in some cases, evacuation from their homes. Based on an assessment by a Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) team, the closest residents to the landfill site at Jubilee and Victoria Gardens were acutely affected by the fumes. Although healthier alternatives of disposal such as sanitary landfills, incineration and composting do exist, the Harrold Road Landfill is currently classified as a Hazard Waste Partially Controlled Dumpsite by the PAHO. Thus, it is critical that an open and honest dialogue on solid waste management be established engaging The Bahamas' Government, our private sector, and local civil society groups to ensure the safety and cleanliness of the very air that we breathe.

Uncontrolled landfill fires are sadly not unique to The Bahamas. Finding an adequate solid waste disposal mechanism is a challenge for most countries in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region. Jamaica experiences 1-2 landfill fires annually, while St. Maarten experienced a record-breaking 19 dump fires just in 2016.

It goes without saying that the appropriate disposal of waste is critical to prolonged health and well-being for all citizens. Throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, solid waste management is one of the least recognized public policy challenges, although its relevance to the economic and environmental policy-making can be clearly identified. Recognizing the importance of proper waste management, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), in partnership with the

Government of The Bahamas (GOBH), funded a comprehensive study of garbage collection practices and the condition of the various landfills within The Bahamas during the early 1990s.

The purpose of this IDB-GOBH study was three-fold: (1) to invest in appropriate disposal facilities for New Providence and 10 of the Family Islands; (2) to develop well-managed hazardous waste disposal facilities in The Bahamas; and (3) to provide comprehensive institutional support with a focus on health education and awareness. Based on the study's recommendations, the IDB provided a loan to support a Solid Waste Management Plan in 1999, which culminated in the construction of waste management infrastructure. Although the integral infrastructure was developed, operational management and support has remained inadequate throughout the past 18 years. As result, a number of key lessons were learnt from this experience.

Even with the best intentions, challenges in implementing efficient solid waste management practices in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) like The Bahamas are complex. Limited institutional and human resource capacities, an ever-growing population, the mixed density of populations scattered on more than 700 islands in the Bahamian archipelago, the limited availability of suitable land, and the excessive costs required for waste management operations are just a few of many hurdles that SIDS typically face. However if progressive measures are employed to tackle these challenges, core sectors of SIDS economies stand to be significantly impacted, especially in the realm of tourism – a sector most SIDS countries heavily depend on.

Barbados has undertaken innovative approaches to solid waste management by utilizing the expertise of the private sector. In 2009, Barbados created the Sustainable Barbados Recycling Center (SBRC), to divert waste from its Sanitary Landfill; and the SBRC ultimately achieved a 70% conversion of waste into recyclables. As the product of an IDB-sponsored Solid Waste Management workshop in 2015, Barbados improved its favorable results further through a collaborative effort with the Import-Export Bank of Korea (KEXIM). The IDB-KEXIM collaboration resulted in the improvement of transport routes for garbage collection on Barbados, using international best practices. As a result of these Solid Waste Management initiatives, Barbados now has a collection rate of 90%. Supported by a well-functioning regulatory framework, Barbadians anticipate further benefits, once the recommendations for transport optimization are fully implemented.

Belize has also had its fair share of solid waste management challenges. Troubled by a range of institutional and budgetary shortfalls, the Belizean authorities approached the IDB's private sector window in 2002 seeking solutions for its waste management problems. In coordination with the Government of Belize, a public-private partnership for the construction, management, operation and maintenance of major facilities was developed. To ensure financial viability, the project design included compliance supervision funded by an environmental tax as well as the use of user fees which would gradually be phased in at a socially acceptable rate. To ensure social sustainability, a heavy focus was placed on integrating institutional strengthening and public awareness.

Although these projects are by no means perfect, they illustrate the possibilities of sustained partnerships with the private sector. To engage the private sector, trust needs to be built. For example, when the government undertakes competitive Requests for Proposals, this activity serves to build trust by facilitating a transparent process of recruitment. Maintaining longevity and stability in government operations is also critical. The implementation of long-term concessions may also serve to maintain momentum until a stakeholder approved tariff, levy or alternative can be implemented. Knowing that challenges occur in the real world and navigating rough waters within a co-partner system – rather than a sovereign-subordinate one– is critical to successful solid waste management.

Returning focus to The Bahamas’ case study, effective solid waste management is reliant on the immediate implementation of policies that can lay the foundation for consistent waste management. A full understanding of realistic operational costs is also critical to maintenance, especially within an archipelago that is consistently impacted by storms and hurricanes – events which have catastrophic effects on equipment, amenities and human resources. Building trust between private and public entities should be emphasized and improved, even if there have been historic deficiencies.

There is also a strong role to be played by civil society in the management of the country’s waste, since after all, we personally produce it – we’re all stakeholders. Local non-governmental and community based organizations have already started when it comes to public awareness and educational activities related to

waste management. Notable local examples include the Eco-Schools program represented by The Bahamas Reef Environment Educational Foundation (BREEF) to encourage sustainable waste management practices, as well as the Abaco-based Friends of the Environment who undertake an awareness based litter reduction and recycling program. Nationwide, the annual International Coastal Cleanup was positively recognized by many environmental and social groups who served to remove over 1,000 pounds of trash from the beaches of The Bahamas during 2016.

Achieving success in solid waste management in The Bahamas also requires partnering with local stakeholders who know the Bahamian environment and its logistical structure. They are best able to identify potential opportunities and future challenges within the system since they stand to be most impacted by any flaws therein. Knowledge sharing and expertise can be gained by working with international stakeholders who have worked and learned through successful and not-so-successful experiences in solid waste management, bringing with them best practice methods, lessons learnt, innovative ideas, and the capital needed to effectively implement these complex and costly programs.

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