Drowning in our own waste

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The European Parliament last week called Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas to discuss Greece's appalling record on waste disposal. The move is significant for two reasons: firstly because two of Europe's centres of power are now sharing an awareness of the problem; and secondly because that shared awareness can lead to shared policymaking. The environment is an area where parliament's voice carries weight because it has power to amend policy, rather than merely advise.

The invitation to Dimas (ironically Greece's commissioner) came after six members of the European Parliament - two of them Greek - visited Athens' only legal landfill (several illegal ones are also up and running) in Ano Liosia and spoke to public officials on how they plan to solve the waste disposal impasse. What seems to have appalled the MEPs most was the complete lack of policy and planning.

Waste disposal has failed on every level since New Democracy came to power last year; but the failure is rooted in Pasok administrations.

The immediate problem facing Athens is where to put an estimated 700 tonnes of solid waste filtered at its sewage treatment plant on the island of Psyttaleia every day. The sludge is supposed to be baked dry and used as fuel in industry when the plant is completed, but that will take another two years, the government says.

Stopgap measures for the intervening period failed one after the other this year. A contract between the water company, EYDAP, which runs Psyttaleia, and the Liosia landfill, to dump the sludge in the landfill until 2008, has been challenged because Liosia inhabitants cannot abide the stench.

A temporary plant that would have burned the sludge at high enough temperatures to vapourise it was never built because of local opposition. The direct 25 million-euro tender was also viewed with suspicion by Europe's internal market commissioner.

As a last-ditch solution, Public Works Minster George Souflias, who handles the
environment portfolio, rode over the objections of waste management officials to endorse composting. Mixed with soil and other organic matter the sludge would form a rich compost to surface Liosia's replete cells. Even this process, however, proved too smelly for Liosia residents and it stopped in October.

In a state of desperation, EYDAP, whose storage tanks on Psyttaleia will soon overflow, has now floated the idea of exporting the sludge to Sudan for fertiliser.

If the sewage impasse demonstrates public incompetence perhaps hitherto unrecorded by political science, it ranks only as a subheading in Attica's wider waste disposal problem.

Sewage makes up just a fraction of an estimated 6,000 tonnes of rubbish the capital produces every day. Currently, only a few hundred tonnes of that are recycled. The rest is dumped in Liosia and other, illegal, landfills. Unsurprisingly, Attica is now running out of landfill space, and no credible solution has been planned.

As with sewage, a series of problems is to blame. Attica's recycling plant, Europe's largest, would have relieved the landfill of at least 20 percent of its daily intake. For two years it has operated at a sickly, experimental capacity, and will likely never be well because its builder and operator installed shoddy machinery. A second, identical plant was never built because of the problems experienced by the first, doubling the lost benefits.

Another problem is that recycling programmes were never widely implemented at a municipal level because it is unrealistically cheap for municipalities to dump. Packaging-intensive industry formed the Hellenic Recycling Recovery Corporation (HERRCO) in 2001 to manage local recycling programmes; but it has achieved only a fraction of its potential because not two dozen of Greece's 1,000-odd municipalities have signed on. Most Attica municipalities prefer to pay the mandatory six percent of their budget to dump. Not only is it a low rate; it also gives them carte blanche to dump unlimited amounts. For the same reason, municipalities have resisted alternative forms of disposal such as burning for energy. And the problem is rapidly getting worse. The European Commission thinks Greek municipal waste has increased 42 percent in the past decade.

Greece has paid a pittance for its lack of planning in waste disposal - approximately 5 million euros in fines for the Kouroupitos landfill near Chania. That is nothing compared
to the 290 million euros Souflias reckons he needs to close Greece's easily relocated 2,031 illegal landfills. (He has not even announced the cost of replacing the most difficult 600).

Even this, however, does not reflect the real cost of not making sound policy - or any policy at all. Europarliment should encourage Dimas to tie the disbursement of Cohesion funds, agricultural subsidies and structural funds to environmental compliance. Witholding these would hurt any government more than court fines, which are slow to take effect and can only goad authorities on piecemeal atrocities. Cleaning Greece up through the European Court will take centuries.

The government also needs to restructre. Environmental problems do not fall neatly under the jurisdiction of municipalities, prefectures, regions and ministries. They cross all these administrative boundaries. Attica's - and the country's - waste management failure is in large part due to a refusal on the part of local and central government officials to cooperate.

New Democracy could start by making a higher priority of the environment. It needs to separate the environment ministry from the town planning and public works ministry which currently smother it. Souflias has never been heard to utter environmental policy except in dire emergencies. He is, in effect, only a public works minister. The same was true of his two predecessors in the post. If nothing else, an emancipated environment ministry could begin to collect reliable data and carry out monitoring, both currently in desperately short supply.

The government can also tax dumping, as in the UK, while offering generous co-financing for recycling and clean burning for energy. And it can begin to use its legal right as owner of the airwaves to encourage people to recycle through public service announcements. A recent pilot programme in Athens revealed that the man on the street is eager to do his part. It seems that only government is disinterested.