

Tackling waste management and recycling in Cyprus

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Waste management ... a dirty word!

I get the tastiest topic of the day!!

Waste management ... let's be honest ..who wants to know?

It's dirty, it's often smelly, and when I was young our parents used to say .. "if you don't study, you'll end up being a dustman"!

Well I got a University degree .. and here I am, for the last 17 years .. in my spare time .. a dustman (or woman).

We got used in the last century to not having to think about things like where our rubbish went. We filled the dustbin, and twice a week it was emptied. We didn't know about landfills (or if we did, they were not nearby, and of little concern). We didn't stop for a moment to think that there were different categories of rubbish, and we certainly had no inclination to sort it.

But perhaps we also didn't have quite so much rubbish then as we do these days. We used things more than once .. that was the ethos of the age, especially after the hardships and rationing of the two World Wars. Then came the consumer age, the 'era of packaging' as marketing gurus found ever more tantalizing ways to tempt us to spend spend spend. Multiply that by a burgeoning population and you have an ever growing mountain of waste, and increasingly few places to put it.

Too much waste

Cyprus comes near the top of the list with regard to per capita production of waste, and despite efforts to reduce the amount of rubbish we produce it's fair to say that these have, for the most part, failed.

Cyprus produced 571,000 tonnes of solid waste last year – a 3.2 per cent increase compared with 2005, and the per capita production of urban solid waste in Cyprus reached 741kg - one of the highest in Europe, where the annual average is 517 kilograms per resident.

Around 87 per cent ended up in landfills while the rest was collected for recycling.

The problem is that there's a widespread lack of interest here in waste management issues and little understanding of the factors involved. Efficient waste management should, in theory, be relatively easy to achieve on an island the size of Cyprus.

Certainly in the urban areas, recycling strategies are relatively easy to implement. The outlying rural communities, however, present rather more of a challenge, simply because it may not be financially viable to collect from them: the fuel costs can greatly exceed the return from recyclable material collected.

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One of the major challenges facing organisations which aim to increase recycling in Cyprus is the lack of public awareness of the importance of sustainable living. Those who *are* aware and wish to recycle are also confused: mixed messages have been sent out by various government agencies and local authorities over the last few years.

So-called 'pilot' studies in several municipalities (usually funded by the EU and implemented by the relevant government department) have been functioning for a limited period only. Not only was the material collected NOT recycled, but when the time limit for the study was up, the collection bins were simply removed and not replaced – people who had been sorting their rubbish for recycling were suddenly left with nowhere to take it. Many potential recyclers now think “Why should I bother?”

More confusion arises from the lack of co-ordination between different agencies attempting to implement recycling: the organization which was recently formed to deal with packaging waste to conform with EU directives and targets uses a *different* colour scheme from another, government run, project. Some schemes collect from houses, others place 'banks' for recyclable materials in different neighbourhoods and ask the public to take their recyclables there. In some areas there is no recycling at all.

For recycling to work, it has to have public support: citizens need to understand *why* it's important, and it needs to be made as easy as possible for people to contribute to recycling schemes.

It's clear that if a sustainable, island-wide collection is to take place, the public must not only be informed, but they must also see the benefits of the scheme.

Cans For Kids

It was for precisely this reason that Cans For Kids, a registered charity formed in 1990, decreed that any funds raised through recycling should be ploughed back into the community. I was aware that, while we had highly trained doctors in Cyprus, they were often working with below standard equipment. It was therefore decided that revenue raised by recycling aluminium cans would be used to buy medical equipment for the children's wards at the Makarios Hospital.

Back then, there was little public will to recycle: not many people were concerned about the environment, but they DID think about sick children and the care they receive in our hospitals. As a result, many people who had no particular enthusiasm for the environmental aspect of recycling saved their cans for the philanthropic end.

No longer do the doctors have to muddle through with out of date equipment, waiting for government bureaucracy and the approval of tenders: Cans For Kids has changed that – and we don't buy the cheapest equipment, we buy the best!

Since its inception, more than 35 million cans have been collected, and over £125,000 worth of equipment has been donated to the Makarios Hospital in Nicosia, which is the central paediatric hospital in Cyprus, treating seriously ill children from all over the island.

As well as upgrading the equipment - and therefore the standard of care - in Cypriot children's wards, Cans For Kids also spends an increasing amount of time and effort raising awareness of the benefits of recycling. We visit schools to give talks and show the Cans For Kids video and PowerPoint presentation explaining why we should

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recycle aluminium. We also regularly host school visits to our recycling centre, where we talk to the children about sustainable living and demonstrate the practicalities of recycling.

We encourage young people to join our volunteers who sort the cans ready for crushing: they quickly understand how important proper sorting is. They realize that if other rubbish is thrown in with the cans it not only takes much longer to sort, but is messy – indeed, it's sometimes downright unpleasant! (But I won't elaborate on some of the nastier items we have come across!)

European conformity

With increasing pressure from the European Union to improve recycling in Cyprus, there is now a greater urgency to meet European targets. The government has been forced to act to avoid paying punitive fines, but facilities are still not up to standard: collection is sporadic and localized. We have made a start on paper, glass plastic and metal, but provision also needs to be made to collect all sorts of things which so far have not been recycled on a regular basis: batteries, refrigerators and motor vehicles and car tyres, to name but a few.

I haven't even mentioned the energy savings that come with recycling:

- Recycling one aluminium can saves the energy equivalent of one cup of petrol.
- Recycling one aluminium can saves enough energy to light a 100-watt light bulb for 3 and a half hours.

Melting down an aluminium can so it can be re-used requires just 5 per cent of the energy needed to make a new one. It creates no pollution at all.

So every can that is thrown away is a lost opportunity to save energy and preserve the environment.

The list is endless. And if we look at the problem globally, rather from a local point of view, the accumulative benefits of recycling are self-evident. Recycling is another weapon in our fight against global warming.

Support for recycling schemes must move higher up the priority list at both national and local level. At present there is hardly any financial support offered for recycling, which is a labour-intensive activity. Local authorities need to appreciate how the extensive adoption of recycling can benefit them: far fewer trips to the landfill for their refuse collectors, which could translate into a significant reduction in costs and free up funds for other projects - and of course a much cleaner environment for their citizens.

I've met and talked to literally thousands of people since we started Cans For Kids, and it's very obvious to me that a large proportion of the population is willing to recycle – especially if they feel it will benefit the community as well as the environment (and that, I believe, is key to our success).

There has been a huge increase in the amount of cans recycled in Cyprus since Cans For Kids started 17 years ago, and though we can't take credit for all of it, I like to think we have played a significant role. More and more people are thinking twice before they throw their cans in with the rest of their rubbish, and we have expanded from being a small operation in Nicosia to one that collects cans from all over Cyprus, from Polis in

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the North West to Paralimni in the East, including many rural villages. And we do it with just two employees and a dedicated band of volunteers.

Cans for Kids is proud to have led the way in aluminium recycling in Cyprus. Over the last seventeen years the charity has worked tirelessly to promote awareness of recycling in Cyprus, and until recently, when local authorities and those who create much of our packaging waste were forced to address the issue to conform to European Union regulations, Cans For Kids was the *only* organisation which had taken practical steps to implement recycling strategies on the island.

Cans For Kids has always worked on the premise that 'actions speak louder than words'. We don't just talk about it, we DO it.

YOU can help:

By saving your aluminium cans you:

1. Cut down significantly on the amount of rubbish going into Cyprus' limited landfill refuse sites.
2. Save energy: it takes the equivalent of half a drinks can filled with oil to make one new can from scratch and only 5% of that energy to create one from recycled aluminium.
3. Improve the quality of care given to sick children in Cyprus.

Getting the "recycling habit" couldn't be easier: just keep a bag or container handy near your waste bin and throw empty cans in there rather than the dustbin. When the container is full, take the cans to your nearest Cans For Kids can bank, and we'll do the rest.

- A** Always save it!
- L** Learn more about the importance of recycling
- U** Utilise the energy through recycling
- M** Make sure you pass the message onto everyone you know
- I** Insist that your home becomes a home that recycles
- N** Never throw it away
- I** Imagine the world if we use up its resources
- U** Ultimately, the planet is in your hands
- M** Make a difference today – start recycling

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