**[Wasting waste](https://www.dawn.com/news/1823832/wasting-waste)**

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WASTE management is a major challenge as the world’s material footprint expands to meet the needs of economic development and a large population. Growing at 2.3 per cent annually, global production and consumption of material resources has tripled over the past 50 years. The volume of waste produced has also grown significantly during this period.

As resource exploitation is set to increase, the waste generated in the process will also grow, posing serious threats to human health and the environment, while exacerbating the crisis of climate change, nature loss and pollution.

With their capacity constraints of waste collection and disposal, developing countries feel the impact on multiple fronts. Waste is either dumped in landfills, burnt in the open, or thrown into rivers and other waterways. Chemical effluents and sewage are often discharged into rivers. Thus polluted water and toxic air spread disease and take lives in the absence of effective policy and regulations.

The United Nations Environment Prog­ram­me’s (UNEP) Global Waste Management Outlook 2024reveals that last year 2.3 billion metric tons of municipal solid waste was generated, which is set to reach 3.8bn metric tons by 2050. An estimated 540 million metric tons of municipal solid waste was not being collected, mostly in developing countries. The problem is acute in South Asia where rapid urbanisation and a growing population have accelerated waste generation. South Asia’s 2bn-plus people constitute a quarter of the global population with per capita daily waste generation of about 0.5 kilograms.

UNEP estimates that in Central and South Asia only 37pc of refuse generated is collected against a global average waste collection rate of 75pc. In contrast, in developed countries, almost all the waste is collected and disposed of. The huge volume of uncollected municipal refuse is creating health problems and an environmental disaster, while the costs of healthcare and pollution are rising.

However, waste management itself is a costly affair. “In 2020, the global direct cost of waste management was estimated at $252bn,” notes the UNEP report. “Factor­ing in the hidden costs of pollution, poor health, and climate change from poor waste disposal practices, the cost rises to $361bn.” It could almost double to $640bn by 2050 without urgent action.

The problem is aggravated by the linear approach of the current economic development paradigm, which resorts to the indiscriminate use of material resources in pursuit of raising GDP. For cash-strapped developing countries, the challenge to keep town and cities clean and secure from disease is insurmountable. Establishing or revamping national strategies and developing action plans for waste management is fundamental. They would need innovative ways to urgently prioritise policy actions that reduce waste generation as well as technical and financial support from development partners to implement waste management strategies.

An intersectional approach to policy development for waste management will minimise the multidimensional and harmful impact of municipal solid waste on poor and marginalised sections of society. UNEP and other UN organisations have identified policy measures which can help. Adapting a circular development model will reduce pressure on resource use and help decouple waste generation from economic growth based on the ‘3R’ principle of reduce, reuse, and recycle. In this way, waste is converted into resource for another cycle of sustainable production.

Circularity and resource efficiency can be improved by harnessing digital technology and AI to mainstream sustainability practi­c­­es across all sectors and move to a mod­el of a zero-waste economy. Waste can also be used as a re­­source to produce electricity. The un­­regulated urban sprawl in many parts of South Asia without proper waste strategies is escalating the waste problem. More than half the waste generated is organic, which emits greenhouse gases if left to rot. Wasting this waste is unwise. The potential of ‘waste-to-energy’ must not go untapped.

Local authorities and city administrations responsible for waste management must be enabled and provided with adequ­a­­te resources for implementing action plans.

Human behaviour under the influence of a consumerist mindset and throwaway habits is also a major factor in the generation of waste. Governments, local authorities, industry, civil society, and media will need to work together to encourage a behavioural change for sustainable consumption and to raise awareness among households and citizens.

Achieving the SDGs related to poverty, health, water and sanitation, cities, climate change are all affected by the problem of uncollected and untreated municipal solid waste.

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