Linking public and private action for sustainable waste management

When it comes to managing waste in developing countries, the private sector can contribute technical skills, organisational capabilities and flexibility. Yet private sector involvement alone will not solve all the problems. The public sector, while far from abrogating its responsibilities, has to strengthen regulations and step up project management. It is also vital to improve the financing of waste management services and to ensure a better-structured regulatory framework.

Solid waste management is often regarded as the most local of all public utilities. Since the first steps were taken to decentralise this service in developing countries, responsibility for it is increasingly falling to municipalities, as it has been the case in Europe for decades. Frequently subject to financial, material and work force constraints, municipalities try to manage just the most urgent needs, such as removing waste from cities to keep them clean. Many focus their efforts on developing basic cleaning services – street sweeping, waste collection, gutter maintenance and running landfills – with mixed results and high costs. In some cities in sub-Saharan Africa, operating costs can account for 30 to 50% of a municipality’s total annual budget. Yet this approach, based on collecting and storing waste in open landfills, falls short of managing municipal solid waste on a long-term basis.

The exponential growth in waste, which is a consequence of increasing urbanisation and change in consumption habits, requires a change in practices to reduce landfill deposits and incineration. For several years, government authorities in the South have had to conduct in-depth reviews of how waste management services are configured and have been encouraged to safeguard the environment and protect public health. Improving the geographical coverage of such services so that vulnerable or peripheral neighbourhoods are no longer excluded is also a major social challenge.

Developing facilities, managing infrastructure and recovering and recycling waste are increasingly considered critical to any public waste management policy. Yet more often than not, such policies are implemented in a deprived economy, and management costs inevitably increase as infrastructures become more sophisticated and the number of stakeholders multiplies. Against this backdrop, it is essential for the private sector to become more involved, which would require a renewed public-private partnership.

The need for integrated management of municipal solid waste

Reducing the quantity and noxiousness of waste at the source, introducing separate collection and sorting procedures to encourage recycling and reuse, organising waste trans-
Waste management of all or part of the system does not solve the problems entirely. But private sector management of all or part of the system requires coordination among numerous stakeholders at different stages in the process, and calls for a broad range of skills and know-how. Implementing a proper waste management policy implies a strong involvement from the public authorities in running the service. This includes controlling costs, planning investment, negotiating contracts with service providers, educating users, establishing and enforcing regulations, and involving producers and consumers.

SUCCESS FACTORS OF PRIVATE SECTOR INVOLVEMENT

To attract private investment, local authorities need to establish a strategic framework tailored to local conditions and based on consultation with all local stakeholders. The project must take into account the town’s socio-spatial structure, the type of waste involved, the resources available, the institutional setting, and whether those involved are from the formal or informal sector. Adopting European standards is often counter-productive for local authorities lacking the necessary financial and technological resources. For a public waste management policy to be sustainable, a pragmatic, customised and progressive approach is essential. Such an approach is preferable to applying high standards from the beginning. More generally, a clearly defined regulatory framework enabling companies to compete equitably is a prerequisite for effective private sector involvement.

The public authorities should be able to offer a clear, well-defined and secure contractual framework for the private sector. Public-private contracts must be relatively long term so that private operators can customise and improve the services provided, while complying with municipal budgets. Shared responsibilities must be stated explicitly so that private operators are best able to manage their risks. Financial and legal stipulations (such as:

1. The goal of a BOT (Build, Operate and Transfer) contract is to appoint a private operator for the design, construction, operation and maintenance of a project. It implies a transfer of ownership of the project to the government at the end of the contract.

2. The challenge for public authorities is to include, structure and regulate the informal sector, which handles a significant portion of waste sorting, recycling and reuse.
as penalties or termination conditions) must be included in the contract to ensure that private operators fulfil their role in a professional manner and comply with the strategic framework (particularly in terms of service level and access). Ultimately, local authorities must have the workforce and sufficient resources to be able to monitor and control contracts and, more generally, implement a consistent public policy.

**A Complicated Financial Equation**
Solid waste management services in both developed and developing countries rarely reach financial equilibrium. Local authorities in the developing countries often have to resort to three different funding sources – household waste collection fees paid by the user, a household waste collection tax, and general budget contributions – in an attempt to cover sector costs. Waste collection fees are paid directly by each household and usually apply to collection only. The amount is kept low, to be manageable for households, and is typically paid to private or informal waste collection operators. These fees are generally not enough to cover the system’s upstream costs. Local authorities therefore try to obtain additional financing via a household waste collection tax, which is used to finance other aspects of the service. This tax is usually linked to a land tax on developed properties. In the case of local authorities in the developing countries, the base of this tax is reduced, and payment rates are low. Furthermore, the tax is collected by the state and channelled through the treasury. Due to the lack of transparent systems for paying local taxes to municipalities on an ongoing basis, losses inevitably occur. Waste management services in the developing countries are therefore subject to the problem of mobilising tax resources in towns and cities. Consequently, the income generated is not sufficient to cover the costs of setting up an integrated waste management system.

Some interesting initiatives have been introduced to improve tax revenues. For example, the city of Lomé has been experimenting with levying fees on major producers of waste (manufacturing industries, restaurants, hotels, business, and so on), while Addis Ababa has been experimenting with indexing the household waste collection tax based on a household’s water bill. These fees, generally proportional to consumption, mean that at the very least, payments are spread in keeping with living standards. Mobilising the private sector, skilled as it is, does not in itself constitute a solution for better waste management. To be effective and appropriate, a waste management system must be accompanied by better financing mechanisms, increased technical and institutional capabilities on the part of public authorities, and a well-structured regulatory framework.

In the absence of such an environment, private sector involvement – even if it can temporarily fill public management gaps – may still not be enough to achieve an integrated and sustainable waste management system.

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The Agence française de développement (AFD) supports development of the integrated management of municipal solid waste in several cities such as Lomé, Addis-Ababa, Cap Haïtien and Gaza. Through loans or subsidies, it mainly focuses on the reorganisation of the pre-collection, collection and transport of waste, and the improvement of waste storage and elimination. It also supports innovative projects involving waste recovery and recycling.