



“Cities generate about 1.3 billion tons of solid waste per year, a volume that will increase to 2.2 billion tons by 2025 and will double in lower-income countries in the next 20 years. A trend that has not been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.”

– Caroline CHAL, Syctom, Paris

Image Source: ‘Trucking material from the garbage field’. A child playing in the neighborhood of Babakan Siliwangi in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia, before a joint municipal and community clean-up initiative. Image by Nicolas J.A. Buchoud, all rights reserved ©.



Caroline CHAL
Syctom, the Greater Paris
Metropolitan agency for
waste management,
Paris, France
with Nicolas J.A. BUCHOUD

Urban waste management during the pandemic: A brief outlook

Before the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, it looked like nothing would prevent urbanization, driven by agglomeration economics interconnecting global cities and metropolitan regions, to continue thriving. One year later, the picture has changed but waste management remains as a sensitive and underfunded issue as before the crisis. Yet, aligning local and global initiatives to support circular economy could help put the 2030 Agenda back on track.

Lockdowns, curfews and other restrictions have highlighted the need for more open and public space for all in cities, for more justice in access to nature within and beyond city limits. The crisis has impacted office and retail real estate markets in major cities from London to Paris or Tokyo, as teleworking and e-commerce have developed rapidly. The pandemic has highlighted the deep encroaching of inequalities of revenue and well-being across metropolitan areas,

and revived the attractiveness of small or medium sized cities. In the developing world (and in developed countries alike), the crisis has crudely revealed many deficits in social infrastructure and safety nets, in particular for informal economic sectors. It has exposed many of the workers in the waste management sector, most often in the informal economy, to more risks and vulnerabilities, while the growth of urban waste has not been reversed.¹ As global urbanization is in crisis, leading public and private urban stakeholders have a historic responsibility to review how infrastructure and service delivery can contribute to health safety and to social and economic resilience, with waste management as an immediate priority.

Cities generate about 1.3 billion tons of solid waste per year, a volume that will increase to 2.2 billion tons by 2025 and will double in lower-income countries in the next 20 years, a trend that has not been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. In many developing and emerging economies, the mismanagement of solid waste has been polluting land, water and air, thus leading to spread of disease and generation of greenhouse gases. Whereas waste management has long been held as a local problem to be solved locally, with international cooperation barely compensating for the lack of capacity building or sustainable revenue models, we can no longer go on like this. The call for more sustainable urban management and urban development has been echoed by the Urban 20 Riyadh Declaration, which has rightly pointed out to a universal right for urban sanitation and

waste management.²

In response to the Covid-19 health challenge, the global community has managed to adapt and even create vaccines in less than twelve months. Rapid improvement in technology, innovation for cleaning products and many service industries have found new ways to serve their customers. Cities and subnational governments should take this opportunity to convince global leaders, in particular through the G20, to allocate more resources on urban sanitation and waste management learn from the current adaptation, in 5 directions:

1. Technology can enable the development of low-cost, scalable solutions but it requires governments to engage with markets, to support fragile secondary markets for recycling, to incentivize the private sector down to a community level. This must be complemented by an enabling ecosystem including better regulations and innovative financing to attract private investment.
2. Development assistance such as through international or decentralized cooperation should be optimized to including local issues from early project design stage. Assistance from multilateral and bilateral donors and philanthropic organizations should value capacity building more thoroughly, which could be done by systematically including leading public and private metropolitan agencies in charge of waste management and sanitation in cooperation frameworks. Waste management is not just about general principles. It is about concrete implementation, know-how, and managing challenging business models.

3. Cities are unique social and economic ecosystems to pool resources and experience, and to implement partnerships ensuring that sanitation, drinking water supply, energy supply, waste collection and treatment are being effectively and efficiently delivered to all.

4. SDG 17: Another complementary way to support new partnerships and enabling ecosystems across local and global scales, public and private and community stakeholders would be to include urban waste and sanitation management as a key objective of the seventeenth sustainable development goal (SDG 17 is about reviving partnerships for sustainable development).

5. Circular economy, including sustainable waste management and their financing should be a continued priority for joint international and city-to city cooperation within the G20, as Rome and Milan are jointly chairing the Urban 20 in 2021.

1. The massive lockdowns and repeated confinements across the globe such as in Paris, have initially led to a drop in the production of waste, but it has gradually been erased. There is even growing evidence that disposable masks and other material to further prevent Covid-19 contagion are not finding their way to waste treatment.

2. U20 Mayors Communiqué 2020. Resolution n°18 'Adopt a universal right of access to urban sanitation and waste management for all while promoting 'zero waste societies', in recognition that waste rarely pays for itself and progress towards circular economy is slow but critical, in particular in rapidly urbanizing regions' <https://www.urban20riyadh.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/U20%202020%20Communique.pdf>

See also the research paper issued by the U20 on Urban waste and sanitation for all. <https://www.urban20riyadh.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Urban%20Sanitation%20and%20Waste%20Management%20for%20All.pdf>