

Chapter 1

Sustainable Waste Management Challenges in Argentina

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ABSTRACT

A general picture of waste management in Argentina is presented, taking into consideration the obligations of the state to guarantee the collection of household waste and to dispose of it in authorized sites and the generator's responsibility on the management of hazardous waste. Separate boxes are presented to present the activities performed by organized waste pickers and by CEAMSE, a state-owned company responsible for waste disposition in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. Waste management is essential for a sustainable development agenda. As witnessed in Argentina, this requires (1) closing open dumpsites, (2) a reliable and complete waste collection service, and (3) proper treatment of all waste streams. It is thus clear the need to (1) promote a circular economy; (2) tackle the management of organic waste; (3) ensure the adequate control and treatment of hazardous waste; (4) promote a suitable set of policies, regulations, and economic instruments; (5) select the best available technologies; and (6) formalize the informal phase of recycling.

OVERVIEW

In Argentina, local governments are legally obliged to guarantee the collection of household waste and to dispose it in authorized sites. This can be done by the State itself or by hiring third parties.

The situation is different for hazardous waste whose management is under the responsibility of the generator (industries, stores, universities, healthcare centers, etc.), who must perform source separation, temporary storing at adequate storage and employ the authorized transporters and operators for transporting, treating and final disposal.

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Several locations adopted regionalization models for municipal waste management that has reaped benefits for all the involved parties from the environmental and economic perspective. However, this model deserves further development especially since different technologies for treatment of different waste streams are required which are costly and necessitates a certain scale to be sustainable.

The recovery of recyclable materials from garbage must also be considered. Waste recycling is a growing practice nowadays. However, it is not rare meeting unorganized families collecting and selling materials that other people have considered waste, as a way of life. Thus, people of different age, including kids, without personal protection elements, handle waste daily without even taking into account the implication this activity has on their health.

Besides, although legally forbidden it is not rare abandoning waste in public sites, especially in the periphery of largest cities. It is known that uncontrolled burning and open dumpsites with the expected consequences of environmental impacts on the air, soil and surface and underground water, associated with several health risks, should be avoided.

Solid waste treatment plants and sanitary and secure landfills, such as any work project or activity with entity to cause an impact in the environment are required by the environmental legislation to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment's procedure prior to its habilitation. Nevertheless, the so-called NIMBY effect¹, especially in connection with the selection of sites intended for sanitary landfill still is a relevant issue in Argentina. Communities' rejection to have a sanitary landfill nearby is frequent, affecting the possibility of having sites suitable for the final disposal of waste.

In these troubled situations, a number of faults are immediately noticed that derive basically from pending issues of governments that go beyond the site itself, such as: 1) most cities have grown in a disorganized and unplanned manner, being it difficult to find examples of consistent works that pertain environmental management of the territory; 2) the weak control of the premises by the authorities and the scarce information regarding design, operation and monitoring of the sites; 3) the lack of timely inclusion of the citizens in the decision making process, and/or in choosing the opportunity to provide information to the community and 4) the low impact of communitarian opinions. In many conflicting cases the governments make huge efforts to explain facts and supply information when the conflict has already been unleashed.

COUNTRY PROFILE

The Argentine Republic extends over the south of the American continent, the islands of the South Atlantic and part of Antarctica. The surface of its continental region is 2,791.810 Km² and that of Antarctica and the islands of the South Atlantic of about a million Km² (969.464 Km²).

The country spans in latitude from the Tropic of Capricorn to the South Pole, and in longitude from the highest peaks of America in the Andes to sea level on the Atlantic coasts, which determines a wide variety of climates.

The wetlands in the East of its territory comprise forests and subtropical mountains and the Pampas Plain in which the main agricultural and livestock activities of the country are developed. The arid and semiarid zones occupy two thirds of the surface of Argentina. They have a high variability in their landscape with xenophiles' forests, areas with deserts, mountain and spinal, in the North and central region. In the South there is the Patagonia, almost all arid and with strong winds.

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