

Towards a European waste management model

*Denis Gasquet**

Differences and coherence of the Member States' models

The current European waste management policy is based on the “waste treatment hierarchy” principle, which implies that waste production should be avoided as much as possible. When it cannot be avoided, focus should be on reusing, recycling and recovering waste, disposal being the very last option.

2005 figures show that, in the European Union, 49% of waste is landfilled, 18% incinerated and 33% recycled and composted. These average figures hide a highly contrasting reality, with variations ranging from 90 to 10% for landfills, 10 to 25% for energy recovery and 10 to 65% for recycling!

Germany has now banned all unstable waste from its landfills in order to promote recycling, resulting in making incineration capacity the pivotal point of its waste management policy. It should also be noted that this country has the highest material and organic recovery rates in Europe. Conversely, England where 80% of household and equivalent waste was landfilled, has taken drastic measures to catch up (implementation of economic tools such as Landfill Allowance Trading Schemes), and develop incineration and recycling. The results are already palpable. Italy, with a lot of ground to make up for and under the scrutiny of the European Union, tends to comply with the European legislation. Lack of coherence in the successive government policies and significant local interests have led to the development of a dual waste management system: one, highly advanced, in the North, and one in the South weighing heavily on Italian statistics. France's situation is not as variable as these two examples, as the three main treatment methods (landfill, incineration and recycling) are relatively homogenous. Finally, new Member States such as Poland must redouble their efforts to switch from predominant landfills to a high recycling rate. Southern and Eastern European countries are obliged to come up with strong incentives to build infrastructures “at the double” and are looking for alternative solutions (methanization, composting etc.).

There are existing solutions, whether relating to a more “administrative” (Germany, Netherlands, the North of Italy etc.) or “regulated” approach, as long as a genuine desire exists.

A constantly evolving European regulatory framework integrating new issues

Considering the scope of the European Union, it is striking to note that certain national models are being challenged by the choices made by European institutions, while others are becoming references. In a context where nearly one third of the European legislation is devoted to the environment and 90% of the legislation of certain member states stems from the European legislation, waste management has become a crucial issue. For over 30 years, the regulatory framework has developed around the 1975 waste framework Directive and the hazardous waste Directive by taking into account waste transfer or integrated emissions approach (IPPC Directive). Subsequently, treatment methods such as landfilling or incineration were also subject to specific regulations aimed at reducing the amount of unstable waste landfilled or at controlling and reducing incinerator emissions. Finally, a number of specific waste streams were subject to regulations based on the Extended Producer Responsibility concept (developed within the OECD) in order to organize treatment processes for waste oils, batteries, end-of-life vehicles, WEEE etc.

Further developments aim at switching from a “health-oriented” (eliminate waste) to a “global” type of waste management, integrating environmental, economic and social issues (resource preservation, renewable and alternative sources of energy etc.).

Guidelines for a European recycling society

Current debates at both International (G8, OECD) and European level on texts' reviews (Waste Framework and IPPC Directives, Climate Change and Energy Package) give rise to this "European Recycling Society" that Institutions are trying to settle.

Only an integrated vision of waste management that considers treatment from both an up- and downstream perspective, associated with the respect of the waste hierarchy principle will enable significant progresses. Quantitative and qualitative prevention (reduction of hazardousness, eco-design) will play a major role. Efforts shall also focus on promoting material, organic and energy recovery from waste. Finally, the development of recycling requires sustainable outlets that should be fostered through harmonised incentive measures. All these elements shall create the "Level Playing Field" we all need.

*Chief Executive Officer of Veolia Environmental Services, Executive Vice President of Veolia Environment