Towards Zero Waste in New Zealand

Over the last two hundred years, Mankind has created a system of production and consumption based on the idea that natural resources are endlessly available and that waste can forever be poured into nature.

The same industrial system that created the problem of waste has created two solutions - landfill and incineration. The problem is that these solutions are based on the same old thinking that created the waste in the first place, and they themselves create serious environmental problems further down the road. Add to this the loss of valuable resources that could be used instead to create local employment and business opportunities and it becomes clear we need to have a new vision and to apply a new solution to the problem of waste.

'Zero Waste' means nothing less than the total re-design of the industrial system. The good news is that Zero Waste can compete against landfills and incinerators in terms of economy and at the same time bring enormous social and environmental benefits. Gradual or incremental change will not bring about the change we urgently need. We need a totally new way of looking at the problem, something that creates new thinking - a new vision for a sustainable society.

In New Zealand, we have set up a non-profit body - the 'Zero Waste New Zealand Trust' - to organise the Zero Waste campaign. Since the campaign was launched five years ago, the trust has helped a network of around 50 community-based groups to establish local initiatives to reduce waste in their communities. Many of these non-profit enterprises have won contracts from their local municipalities to provide waste reduction education in schools or to operate recycling programmes. Some run waste transfer stations that they have turned into resource recovery and recycling centres, others have won contracts to run kerbside recycling programmes or waste collection systems.

We have also been able to convince 50% of New Zealand's municipalities to adopt the target of Zero Waste, with most aiming for the year 2015. Their planning and waste systems are now being designed around this target, resulting in changes to the way that waste contracts are written, to the design of waste systems (now focusing on resource recovery and recycling rather than landfill disposal), and to educational programmes and community participation.

The New Zealand government recently incorporated a vision of 'Towards Zero Waste and a sustainable New Zealand' in its new national waste strategy. Its inclusion was as a result of the community-driven Zero Waste campaign. New Zealand has become the first country in the world to have Zero Waste as its goal.

The waste strategy includes goals for waste reduction. However, not many people engaged in resource recovery and recycling would feel that the strategy is visionary or constitutes a breakthrough - at least in its detail - in how we move 'towards Zero Waste'. Neither could it be said that it has the sense of urgency that the crisis of unsustainable production/consumption patterns and material flows demands. However, it is a platform for change and recognises the strength of commitment of many New Zealand communities to work towards eliminating rather than managing waste.

The challenge will now be for the government to develop the economic and legislative framework to ensure that producers at the top of the waste pipeline are incentivised to work towards Zero Waste, as well as the community groups, recyclers and municipalities at the end of the waste pipeline that will never be able to achieve Zero Waste on their own.

A crisis demands action - a breakthrough - and we believe that breakthrough is Zero Waste. Zero Waste is not a technology in itself but rather an 'umbrella' for a range of technologies that can compete with landfill and incineration. Zero Waste is already changing the way businesses, institutions, communities, schools and individuals think about waste in New Zealand. We are slowly educating people to think beyond the end of the waste pipeline; to see that the whole supply chain is their responsibility and that every time they buy something they must think of where it will end up at the end of its life.

It is still early days but we are on the road to Zero Waste in New Zealand and there is a very exciting future ahead. For further information, visit the Zero Waste New Zealand Trust website at: www.zerowaste.co.nz □

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