

## **The National Waste Act – implications for consumers and households**

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The long awaited National Environmental Waste Act, Act No 59 of 2008 (RSA, 2008) came into effect on 1 July 2009. What does it mean for the average South African citizen? What can the lay person expect from this new law? What is the implication for every household? Can we continue with business as usual while government and municipalities worry about implementation?

Unlike many other South African laws, the Waste Act is intended to effect change in different places and at different levels throughout society, including the way we deal with waste in our own homes. This raises a few other questions: “Is it really necessary?” and “To what extent does an individual have to adapt?”

### **What does the Act say?**

The objectives of the Act (Section 2) are clearly spelt out and include issues such as:

- i. minimizing the consumption of natural resources;*
- ii. avoiding and minimizing the generation of waste;*
- iii. reducing, re-using, recycling and recovering waste;*
- iv. treating and safely disposing of waste as a last resort;*
- v. preventing pollution and ecological degradation;*
- vi. promoting and ensuring effective delivery of waste services.*

#### *Waste Minimisation*

In reality *minimizing consumption of natural resources* and *minimizing the generation of waste* means that every citizen has to start thinking and rethinking about what we buy and what will happen to consumer goods when no longer in use i.e. disposed of as waste. If we are serious about minimizing waste, we must refrain from buying unnecessary goods, or replacing goods that are not broken, or if broken, can be repaired. Even buying essential items will require a conscious decision on, for instance, buying the item with the least packaging material, highest recycled content or highest potential to be recycled at the end of its lifetime.

Waste minimisation speaks to altering consumption patterns in a way that is counter-intuitive for most people. One example of our wasteful society is the urge to keep up with the latest technologies. Cell phones, computers and other electronic equipment get replaced while still in perfectly working condition, adding to the mountain of electronic waste. Acknowledging that it is sometimes cheaper to replace broken equipment than to have it repaired, with waste minimisation in mind, we should rather repair than replace, even if it entails paying more. This may seem impractical, uneconomical and optimistic, but the reality of diminishing natural resources and unsustainable consumerism cannot be ignored. What may seem to be a saving to the household may result in a much higher cost to society as a result of the ever increasing waste stream that needs to be managed.

It is important that consumers take responsibility for what they consume and ultimately sent off to be dumped.

#### *Reuse and Recycling*

Viewing waste as a resource that can be used to replace virgin materials during manufacturing processes will lead to the saving of natural resources. *Re-using, recycling and recovering waste* may seem a rather dirty business. It is mostly associated with pickers and salvagers in developing countries, including South Africa, sorting through waste bins in central business areas or at the landfill. This is a clear indication that the waste we dispose of have intrinsic value.

It has been reported that for an average of 46kg recyclables collected per day, urban waste pickers can earn an income of between R500 to R800 per month (Pikitup, 2004). Unfortunately, the material reclaimed from mixed waste is generally of poor quality and not in

economical volumes for recyclers (Buyisa-e-Bag, 2006). There is thus a need to improve the quality of the recycled materials and collect it at volumes that are economically attractive to recyclers.

To improve the quality of recyclables, it must be kept as clean as possible and not mixed together with other non-recyclable materials i.e. separated at source. To collect recyclable waste at volumes that is economically attractive to recyclers, will require the involvement of every household in waste separation at household level. The most appropriate collection system will have to be determined at a local level and supported by the local community.

Recycling initiatives associated with schools, churches and other charity organisations are largely driven by the potential for income generation and to a lesser degree by awareness creation and education potential. These initiatives rely on separation of recyclable materials at source (household level) and require that the waste be taken to a drop-off facility at the school, church or charity organisation. The quality of recycled material collected this way is generally clean and of high value.

Increased participation in re-use and recycling initiatives are required for the implementation of the Waste Act. The Act makes provision for national norms and standards to be set in support of separation of waste at the point of generation.

The Waste Act not only encourages separation of waste at the point of generation (Section 7(2)(a)) at national level, but provides for municipalities to set local standards for the separation, compacting and storage of waste that is collected as part of the municipal service (Section 9(3)(a)). This means that each municipality may prescribe, within their area of jurisdiction, how the waste generated at households must be separated and stored for collection. It may require all recyclables to be sorted into e.g. plastics, cans, paper and glass or co-mingled but separated from non-recyclable materials. The details of the specific requirements will be determined by the municipality, their service providers and/or recyclers in line with national norms and standards that will be developed.

In reality this means that the municipality have the option to collect the recyclables themselves as part of the normal waste collection service or leave it up to the recyclers to arrange for collection (e.g. Mondi's Ronnie bag system) or expect of households to take the recyclables to drop-off centres. The details of the preferred system should be outlined in the Integrated Waste Management Plan of each municipality as prescribed in Section 12 of the Act and translated into the Waste Management By-laws of the municipality.

#### *Extended Producer Responsibility*

The concept of "*extended producer responsibility*" is introduced by the Act (Section 18). This concept implies that the producers of consumer products have a responsibility (financially and physically) for the products that they produce at the post-consumer stage. In reality this means that when certain consumer goods become obsolete it should be possible to return it to the manufacturer thereof for reuse, recycling or safe disposal. National Government will determine the products or classes of products to which extended producer responsibility will apply as well as the specific applicable measures that must be taken.

#### *National Waste Management Strategy*

A National Waste Management Strategy must be established within two years from the date on which the Act came into effect (RSA, 2008). The strategy will outline specific measures and actions that need to be taken to ensure the successful implementation of the Act. It is expected that this strategy will amongst others, set targets for waste minimisation and recycling. The targets will enable government to track progress towards the ultimate aim of less waste to landfill. The Strategy is currently being developed and is expected to be finalised towards the end of the year.

### *Declaration of priority waste streams*

The Act further provides for the declaration of priority waste streams to which waste stream specific waste management measures will apply. For example, specific regulations have been drafted to deal with waste tyres

### **What are the implications for consumers and households?**

The new Waste Act of 2008 definitely has serious implications for every person and household residing in South Africa. We cannot leave it up to government and industry to implement this Act. Implementation of the Act requires action at grass roots level. The Act requires of us to manage our waste differently; to change our values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour towards consumer goods.

Consumers and households are required to generate less waste, re-use and recycle unavoidable waste and dispose only of waste that cannot be reused or recycled. In order to achieve this goal, first of all, consumers have to change their consumption patterns. Households further have to change the way in which they manage their household waste. Composting of biodegradable waste must be encouraged, while separation of recyclable waste at household level is expected to be implemented in all municipalities over time. The focus of implementation will initially be on metropolitan municipalities and secondary cities.

It is necessary that we change the way we manage waste in order to save natural resources and reduce our waste footprint. Many municipalities are running out of landfill airspace while new land for establishment of disposal facilities is scarce and expensive. Municipal waste management services are struggling to keep up with the increasing volumes of waste to be handled while communities are paying the price due to environmental and health impacts of waste. Waste management can no longer be considered to be the sole responsibility of municipalities and industry. Each and every citizen of South Africa has to take responsibility for the waste they generate, from the point of purchase of the consumer good to the point of final disposal of the resulting waste. Waste minimisation, reuse and recycling (including composting) needs to be introduced at all levels of society and become part of everyday life for all. We must lead by example and create a more waste aware society that think before they buy, repair before they replace, reuse what can be safely reused and recycle what is recyclable. In addition, reduction in waste volumes will alleviate the pressure on municipal service delivery and contribute to improved waste management service delivery.

In addition, perceptions of people around waste need to change. All waste does not need to be dirty and unwanted but should be viewed and treated as valuable resources. Every person can make a difference by doing their bit to minimise waste generation. Awareness about waste in general, what is recyclable and the reuse potential of waste needs to be raised at all levels of society but most importantly, waste minimisation and recycling behaviour needs to be cultured and nurtured. The Waste Act relies strongly on the people of South Africa, their positive attitudes and behaviour in favour of waste minimisation, reuse and recycling for its successful implementation towards a sustainable future for all.

### **References**

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**Biography of the Author:**

Suzan Oelofse is a Senior Researcher and the Research Group Leader for Waste and Society at the CSIR. Through directed research, this research group explores the required government, industry and societal changes necessary to alter unsustainable production and consumption patterns and in so doing, decouple economic development and waste generation. Suzan has been active in waste management for the past 14 years and is the current Chairperson of the Central Branch of the IWMSA.