

# Control Waste to Create a Valuable Resource

Keith Alverson

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This year, for World Environment Day on June 5th, UNEP's International Environmental Technology Centre published two important reports. The first of these, *Single-Use Plastics: A Roadmap for Sustainability*, provides an overview of plastic waste globally. According to the report, more than 140 million tons of single-use plastic packaging waste was generated in 2015. Of this, about 30% was recycled and incinerated, 40% land-filled, and 30%—45 million tons!—simply leaked into the environment. The report also looks at priority actions to minimize the plastic waste problem; one of which, legislation to ban plastic bags, has been predominantly implemented in Africa. At first glance, this seems to indicate that African countries are leading the world in taking bold environmental actions against waste, but digging a bit deeper, one can see that there are many reasons African governments are banning single-use plastics.

One reason is that African countries don't have functional waste management systems, and outright bans appear to provide a quick and easy alternative. Some anecdotal evidence suggesting that these actions may be making a positive difference have, recently, even been promoted by UNEP. Unfortunately, according to our report, it is not at all clear that this is always the case. Usually there is simply not enough data to assess if bans are effective or not, and most of the examples of such glaring paucity of data are, not too surprisingly, in Africa. This brings me to our second World Environment Day report, *Africa Waste Management Outlook*. According to this report, 125 million tons of municipal solid waste was generated in Africa in 2012, a figure which is on



track to double by 2025. On average only about half of this waste is collected, and of that which is collected, about 90% is disposed of at uncontrolled dumpsites or landfills.

The outlook report highlights two areas of intervention to address current and future waste management challenges on the continent. First, bring waste under control. Collection and controlled disposal is the first step required for sustainable or, indeed, any kind of development. Second, harness the opportunities of waste as a resource. At present, about 75% of municipal solid waste generated in Africa is recyclable, yet only 4% is recycled. By formalizing the waste management sector, African countries can catalyze local technological development, create job opportunities, and gain enormous wealth from currently untapped resources. Unlike climate change, where populations in Africa are vulnerable to a problem that is largely caused elsewhere, waste is an African problem requiring African solutions. In this context, JICA recently launched the African Clean Cities Platform\*, bringing together 60 cities in 31 African countries to work together to achieve these goals. UNEP is proud to cooperate with this JICA initiative, helping African cities to better monitor and publicize waste statistics to improve the health of, and provide economic opportunities for, their citizens.

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\* <http://africancleancities.org>

#### Profile:

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