

“Opportunity and threat in Africa’s growing waste sector”

South Africa faces both an opportunity and threat from the looming deluge of waste that will be generated on the continent. If recent projections prove to be correct, Africa’s municipal solid waste by 2025 will be nearly double the 2012 levels.

This is according to a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report, which states that 244 million tonnes of municipal solid waste will be produced across Africa within the very near future. This is due to rapid population and consumer-led growth, which leads to greater urbanisation.

“Unless we prepare now for a future in which substantially more waste will be produced in these growing cities, then we could face crises of monumental proportions,” Johan van den Berg, Managing Director at global waste management company [Averda South Africa](#).

“Government regulators and planners need to take action now if they wish to avoid problems that run far deeper than simply collecting waste.

“The threats to people, animals and the environment from unmanaged waste streams are multiple, and often life-threatening. We’re not being alarmist when we point this out. A practical and pragmatic response is needed that starts preparing us for the increase in municipal waste over the coming years.”

This is a warning that South African regulators and planners need to heed, not only to protect their domestic environment, but also because they have a lot of knowledge and experience they can share.

The motivation to do so would be to head off the possibility of region-wide epidemics as a result of sub-par waste practices. Experience with diseases ranging from Ebola to swine flu show that these threats are not beyond the realm of possibility.

This alone is reason enough for local authorities to prioritise regional co-operation between governments and waste industry players. Ensuring an appropriate response across the region serves everyone’s interests, as well as those of the individual countries.

South Africa stands out from many of its counterparts in this regard because it has the infrastructure able to handle the bulk of the country’s waste. Despite this advantage, much more needs to be done to raise waste collection and management to world-class standards.

For instance, while an estimated 42 million tonnes of general waste was collected in 2017, only 11% of this was recycled. And only 7% of the country’s 38 million tonnes of hazardous waste was re-used or recycled.

These figures were reported in the *State of Waste Report* released by the Department of Environmental Affairs in May 2018.

The report points out that South Africa was experiencing the same urbanization pains as other African countries, even though the economy and population growth have slowed considerably.

Growing urban populations, it is reported, contribute to an increase in poverty in townships, informal settlements and inner cities, which in turn place added pressure on city waste collection and management resources.

This is a situation that could reach crisis proportions if plans are not put in place now to deal with the growing number of urbanites who, by 2050, are predicted to make up 80% of the country's entire population.

At a continental level, the UNEP's Africa Waste Management Outlook report predicts that municipal solid waste will be nearly 1kg per person per day within the next seven years. This is nearly a third higher than in 2012 and closing in on the global average of 1.2kg per capita per year.

"The growing piles of waste are due to rapid urbanisation, solid economic growth and an expanding middle class," says van den Berg. "Due to these growth factors, African cities face a perfect storm that could have a long and devastating impact on the continent's more than 1.2 billion inhabitants unless swift action is taken."

The potential for making a solid contribution to the economy, employment and the environment are already evident across the continent, even at existing recycling levels which are low. Exponential growth of this segment could sustain many more formal and informal enterprises by the collection, sorting and recycling of materials.

In many respects, the waste management industry is an ideal example of how the public, private and informal sectors can work together effectively in a way that benefits everyone.

Working in harmony, the private sector is encouraged to develop solutions that support the informal sector while local and regional governments can achieve their goals of building clean, healthy communities.

The end result is an effective waste management system that would lend further credence to city managers' calls for more investment in infrastructure, so that these benefits can reach even more residents.

It is clear a lot more needs to be done to create robust systems able to handle Africa's growing waste challenge.

Public and private sector partnerships should be harnessed to develop solid, scalable plans. Even in the absence of sufficient budget for capital projects, there is some low-hanging fruit that would deliver tangible benefits.

Clamping down on illegal dumping and ensuring that landfill sites are properly built and managed, for instance, would minimise the risk of disease or contamination. Winning these small battles are crucial to maintaining momentum in the war against the continent's looming waste crisis.

Which is a crisis that South Africa needs to take seriously. Sharing knowledge and best practices can help authorities around the continent avoid pitfalls and implement proven, Africa-relevant strategies.