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Managing Chennai's solid waste

[M G Devasahayam](#)

In the mid-nineties, ExNoRa International launched their movement for Zero-waste Management (ZWM) in Chennai. Source segregation of solid waste and vermi-composting of organic waste were the key elements of ZWM. There was great enthusiasm among the people and ExNoRa became a household name. ZWM virtually became a 'people's movement' and citizens of Chennai started dreaming of a waste-and-litter-free city of which they could be proud off.

Somewhere things went off-tangent and ExNoRa lost its focus and branched off into a hundred unconnected activities. Exnora Green Pammal appears to be the only ZWM initiative left and this community-government participatory venture seems to have achieved its purpose. It is indeed unfortunate that a 'people's movement' that greatly facilitated the designing of the Municipal Solid Waste Management (SWM) and Handling Rules 2000, under directions from Supreme Court of India, has ended in a whimper! Nevertheless, these rules outline the guidelines and principles for collection, segregation, storage, transportation, processing and disposal of waste. The rules specify the criteria for selection of landfill site and monitoring

activities to be carried out before and after commissioning of the landfill. A detailed compliance criteria has also been laid down.

A careful analysis of the existing situation reveals that the Corporation of Chennai and other urban local bodies in Chennai Metropolitan Area have only partially complied with the rules. Even the first requirement of having up-to-date knowledge of the quantity and quality of the waste generated has not been fulfilled. There has been no proper study or survey in recent times. Whatever information available is outdated.

Source segregation of recyclable and biodegradable (organic) waste reduces the waste load at the disposal site, and consequently the cost of transportation of solid waste. Segregation of waste at source is practically non-existent in CMA except in some residential areas where welfare associations are active.

The major reason for this malady is the absence of separate processing facilities for the segregated waste. In actual practice, whatever segregation is taking place is by the lowly rag-pickers at secondary collection points, transfer stations and disposal sites. Corporations/municipalities and their private

partners have miserably failed in this most basic requisite of SWM.

Success of any SWM system depends very much on public participation. While private participation exists in one-third of the Chennai Corporation area, involvement of the public and NGOs is very weak. The Second Master Plan recognised this when it said: "SWM is one area where citizens and private sector participation is crucial to ensure health and safety in cities.... Residents Associations and NGOs have attempted to reduce the burden on the local bodies through local segregation of solid waste, composting and recycling but these have not made any sustained impact due to several reasons including little encouragement from municipalities and local bodies." Landfill management is an integral part of SWM. In the context of global warming and climate change, which is now the raging subject, this has become critical. In a metropolitan city like Chennai, reducing emissions of landfill by lowering the production of methane gas is an immediate imperative. There is great urgency for accessing and adopting appropriate technologies and methodologies for landfill management.

As of now SWM is perceived as just conservancy work to be performed by low-skill labour and nothing more. The larger dimensions are either not understood or not taken into consideration while strategising SWM. It is time we looked at it

in a holistic manner and certain goals - economic, social and environmental – are firmed up for SWM.

Economic goals could include encouraging industries and businesses to adopt technologies and methodologies that minimise waste, conserve resource and are energy efficient. The social goal could be to promote 'green' lifestyles and achieve community stewardship of resources for current and future generations.

The environmental goal would be to adopt the concept of 5 Rs - Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Recover and Residual Management (disposal) – for managing waste and entrench them in a wider framework that emphasises close community involvement and participation. Opting for an integrated waste management system with the above goals seems to be the best option for a clean and healthy Chennai.