

POLICYMAKING FOR POLLUTION PREVENTION (July 2015)

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Pollution prevention and control needs local action.
But national policy is needed to make local action happen.
People do not cooperate unless forced to by laws or policies.

In 1994 after the Surat plague, Capt J S Velu of EXNORA Chennai and I and a friend Sandhu travelled to 30 cities by road in 30 days to share best practices in city waste management and to learn along the way. We found all Commissioners uninformed and craving information on how to manage waste and exactly what to do. A second Clean India Campaign in 1995 from Kashmir to Kanyakumari over four months to 70 more cities confirmed the need for a national waste policy as a road map for action.

My PIL in Supreme Court No WP(C) 888/96 led to creation of an expert committee report which resulted in the issue of India's first Municipal Solid Waste (Management and Handling) Rules 2000. It had two key objectives : 'Minimise Waste To Landfill' and 'Stabilise biodegradable waste' so that it stops releasing leachate into the ground and odour and greenhouse gases into the air. A further objective was to restore sustainable practices dating from Vedic times, by returning to the soil as composted food waste, all the nutrients removed from the soil by crops.

Two more major policy directions arose during the PIL after these basic Rules. Cities used to open-dump their mixed waste all over, at "no cost" to them but enormous cost to the environment and human health. They claimed that they had no funds to spend on eco-friendly processing and hygienic disposal of waste. This led to accounting reform, led by CAG, on accrual-based double-entry book-keeping to replace the earlier cash-based system where funds needed for waste management could be spent instead on foreign trips and unnecessary or cosmetic city 'improvements'.

A second major policy shift occurred after the Court sought for, and later endorsed, an Inter-Ministerial Task Force Report on Integrated Plant Nutrient Management or IPNM. Numerous studies and farmer experience showed that urea which was beneficial when applied to carbon-rich soils during the Green Revolution in sixties, showed declining response over time and later, even now, is making soils less and less fertile over time. But combined use of city compost with chemical fertilizers, called IPNM, restored soil vitality. The humus-rich compost retained soil moisture and also the 40% of highly soluble urea which normally runs off the field, often polluting downstream water-bodies. So just half the standard dose of chemical fertilisers sufficed when the money saved was used to buy as little as half a ton per acre of city compost. Multiple benefits were drought-proofing of newly-sown areas, no weeding expense compared to raw farmyard manure, improved soil porosity leading to stronger roots and better immunity to pests,

and better colour, taste and storage life of fruit crops. Use of city compost also restores fully-degraded saline and alkaline soils to full fertility within three years.

The Supreme Court in September 2006 directed immediate implementation of the May 2005 IPNM report prepared jointly by the ministries of agriculture and fertilizers with the Cabinet Secretary. But its key recommendations, of a subsidy for city compost to make it affordable for farmers, and its co-marketing with urea, has remained unimplemented till now, despite a 2007 Fertilizer Ministry circular to fertilizer companies advising co-marketing. Despite regular reports of farmer hardships and suicides, there has been no political and administrative will to implement this highly beneficial recommendation by framing a clear policy for it.

This may change soon, because the latest 2015 Draft MSW Rules state that the duty of the Fertilizer Ministry is to “ensure promotion of co-marketing of compost with chemical fertilizers in the ratio of 3 to 4 bags: 6 to 7 bags by the fertilizer companies or whatever quantity is made available to the companies.” Discussions have also begun on a policy statement for compost price subsidy or support.

There are other issues where a fight for a national policy will prevent or reduce pollution. This is where the voices of each reader of this paper can make a difference. Letters to concerned decision-makers offering Solutions, not Problems, sending supportive resolutions from seminars and workshops, and convincing spiritual leaders and others who can influence policy-makers are ways to achieve success in improving Waste, Water and Energy issues in rural areas.

1, Vegetation choking both urban and rural water-bodies is a nationwide issue. It costs a huge amount to remove this and find ways to process and handle this waste. Phosphorus is a “limiting nutrient” for the growth of both waterweeds and algae choking water-supply intakes. They can be controlled by limiting the amount of allowed phosphorus in detergents and laundry soaps. Once this solution was known, a US-Canada agreement saved Lake Erie from eutrophication by limiting phosphorus to first 8.7% in 1970 and later 2.2% in 1973. The same detergent MNCs who comply abroad control major market share in india but do not use eco-friendly formulations because they are not forced to do so by any Indian laws. It is time for a change.

2, Similarly, non-biodegradable surfactants cause very frequent huge rafts of foam over urban lakes like Bellandur in Bangalore, where industry effluents flow unchecked into storm-water drains now serving as major sewers. This polluted lake overflow goes to numerous downstream villages, also polluting the local ponds on which they depend for life and livelihood. Now biodegradable surfactants are available but not mandatory. The Central Pollution Control Board framed guidelines for a voluntary Ecomark for 16 major industries in 1991. For detergents they require zero phosphate and fully biodegradable surfactants. But because this Ecomark is voluntary and perhaps too rigid, there are no takers for the Ecomark even after 24 years. We need to work for a policy to make these standards, if not the Ecomark itself, compulsory in stages by annually-tightened limits.

3, Pollution by Lead and lead compounds is pervasive and unnoticed, but affects the IQ of our children and of future generations, especially among the poor depending on polluted water sources. Lead gets into water bodies through immersion of idols with lead-containing paints or illegal battery-recycling effluents. This water used for irrigation gets into soil and the plants grown on it, e.g. entering onions used for noodle masala. The way to protect our family's and the nation's health is not to ban Maggi noodles but to ban lead in paints, toys, cosmetics etc. Again, all the MNCs with a share of the Indian paint sector know how to comply affordably, as they do in other South Asian countries with stricter laws, but firms do not care for public health unless forced to.

4, High-mercury tube-lights have been phased out in the EU after they mandated expensive haz-waste disposal of lights containing over 4 mg of mercury. The same MNCs here continue to produce and supply tube-lights with mercury between 20mg and 40 mg for want of a national policy to regulate a switch to readily-available eco-friendly technology. A beginning can be made by mandatory labelling of mercury content in fluorescents and mandatory purchase of low-mercury products by municipalities for street lighting and public sector for lighting offices, factories and railway platforms etc. This will enable wise consumer choice and create sufficient market demand for change.

5, Dioxins are formed when chlorinated plastics are burned. These are released wherever shopkeepers burn their unwanted waste at their doorsteps, and when open dumps of mixed waste catch fire. PVC or polyvinyl chloride, which is 40% chlorine, is the only plastic whose burning also produces dioxins in huge amounts at mass-burn Waste-To-Energy plants, making effective emission controls as costly as the incinerator plant itself. Unwanted plastics except PVC can be very effectively used in making long-life bitumen "plastic roads", or can be used in P2F Polymer To fuel plants. So it is worth having a policy to phase out the production and use of one-time-use and short-life PVC products and many cities and countries have done. Some of these even ban PVC for long-life items for the construction industry, but we can address that at a later date.

6, Sanitary napkins are now reaching even remote rural areas through the free distribution plans of various State governments. These contain non-compostable plastic outer non-woven wrappers and barrier films. It is very easy to require them to be fully compostable, at least for Govt schemes. Such a policy and standards can make simple burial an easy alternative to burning them.

7, Highly-subsidised kerosene causes huge indoor pollution when used for lighting, and also outdoor pollution by exhaust fumes from adulterated vehicle fuels. Policy change can be driven by making the Govt aware that just a one-time outlay of Rs 300 for 70 million households, totaling Rs. 2200 crore one time, can save Rs 37,000 crore every year for removing kerosene subsidies at no hardship to the poorest. We need enough voices demanding this to happen through national policy.

I am happy to partner with all those who wish to work for these issues, which I am already pursuing.

