

# Wasting Our Waste

## Current Waste Strategy is Rubbish!

Dictionary definition of recycling:

- 1 To put or pass through a cycle again, as for further treatment
- 2 To extract and reuse
- 3 To use again, especially to reprocess
- 4 To recondition and adapt to a new use or function



'Recycling' is one of the most misused words in the lexicon of the modern industrialised nation. In Ireland's case, it is epitomised by the sending of waste to distant lands to be disposed of by somebody else.

Of the 1,700,000 tonnes of glass, metals, textiles, plastics, paper and card-

board which Ireland claims is recycled, only 2.2 percent is actually dealt with in Ireland. Over 99 percent of paper and cardboard wastes are shipped out of Ireland for treatment elsewhere. A similar proportion of scrap ferrous metal is exported (Table 1).

Once this waste is despatched abroad, there is no way of knowing what happens to it. It may be recycled in some meaningful way but on the other hand it may be simply dumped on a beach or in a landfill in Asia or West Africa. Beyond noting the country to which it is initially despatched, Ireland makes little or no effort to establish exactly what really happens to its exported 'recycled' waste.

What we do know, however, is that one third of paper and cardboard waste is shipped directly to Asia – mainly China - while a similar quantity goes to the UK. It is not clear what happens when this waste gets to the UK. However, given that Britain also exports consid-

erable quantities of its paper wastes to China it seems reasonable to conclude a proportion of wastes imported from Ireland end up being shipped on to Asia.

Similarly, about one third of Ireland's plastic wastes are sent directly to Asia, with an unknown proportion of the remainder being routed there through intermediary countries in Europe (1).



## Dumping in Asia and Africa

In the last few years, a number of very disturbing reports have revealed what can happen to wastes which are dumped in the developing world for 'recycling'. In June 2007, the British Sunday Times documented the appalling health risks posed by the unregulated dumping of rubbish in Asia.

On the outskirts of Delhi, in India, imported waste plastic considered too degraded to recycle or difficult to sell is simply burnt on huge fires, releasing dioxins and other toxins into the atmosphere. According to the article, the situation is very similar in China's Guangdong province, which is the main destination for much of Europe's unwanted waste: "Some of the containers shipped overseas [from Britain] do not even contain sorted recyclable materials, but an illegal mix of household rubbish, glass and plastics" (2).

Anything which can't be recycled ends up in landfill. Residents of localities which deal with imported waste speak of rivers contaminated with rubbish and chemicals, and fields strewn with plastic. The migrant workers who sort the rubbish – estimated by Greenpeace to number around 100,000 - earn less than €3 a day. The workers include children.

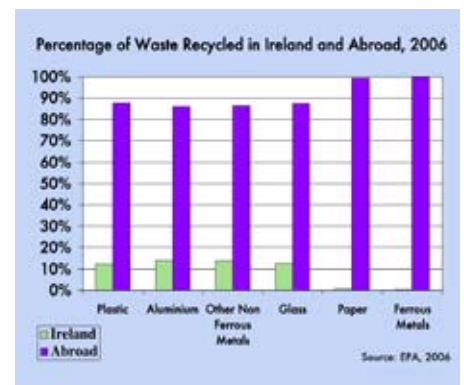


Table 1

**Percentages of Waste Recycled in Ireland**  
(percentage of total waste in each category)

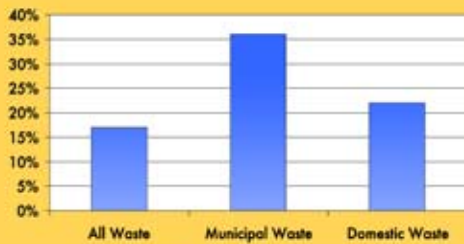


Table 2

Source: EPA, 2006

**Breakdown of the Recovery Rate For Household Waste**

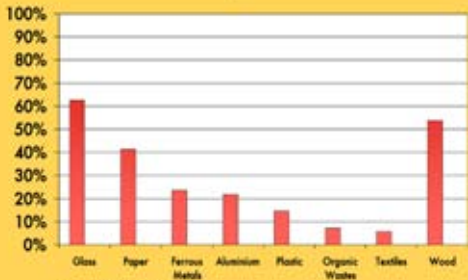


Table 3

Source: EPA, 2006

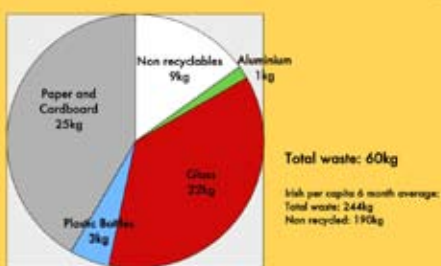
A more recent article in the Guardian documented the dumping of computers and other electronic waste in Ghana. Apparently, unscrupulous salvage companies are sending these wastes to West Africa under the guise of providing second-hand equipment for schools and hospitals. But up to 75 percent ends up being smashed up and burnt in an effort to reclaim scrap metal, including gold. Children as young as six search through the smoldering mounds of waste, which are contaminated with toxic heavy metals such as lead and mercury (3).

### Loss of Resources

Quite apart from the extremely serious health, environmental and ethical issues raised by dumping rubbish in countries with poor statutory environmental protection regulations, the long distance transportation of around one million tonnes of waste per annum also contributes further to resource depletion and greenhouse gas emissions.

Perhaps of equal significance is loss of another valuable resource, *the waste itself*. The annual export of 600,000 tonnes of used paper and cardboard

**Sustainability Institute Six Month Household Study**



No steel bins were used during the study period of 6 months. All paper and cardboard was recycled on site. Plastic, aluminium, glass and non-recyclable waste were taken to the municipal facility. Organic waste was not measured but was recycled on site.

Table 4

deprives Ireland of a precious raw material which could be used in the manufacture of insulation or cardboard for packaging, or used for composting. Combined with an equivalent volume of food wastes, cardboard and most non-glossy paper will quickly break down to form a rich compost suitable for use as a mulch on food crops and under orchards or forestry.

The current methods of 'recycling' glass involve the destruction of perfectly good bottles and jars. The glass is melted down and remade into new products, at an enormous cost in energy.

### Volume of Waste

The sheer volume of waste created is a major part of the problem. Domestic waste in most developed countries amounts to roughly 300-500 kg per capita per annum, with Ireland at the upper end of this range.

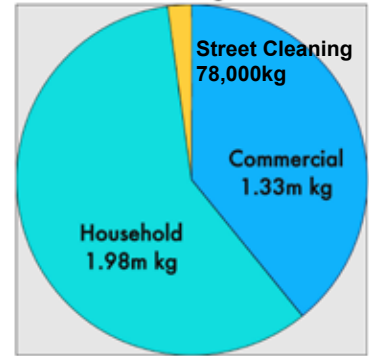
Careful manipulation of statistics has created the impression Ireland recycles much of its waste, but in reality it is under one fifth of the total (Table 2). The figure for domestic waste in isolation is 22 percent. There is also a wide variation between different local authority areas as well as is in the recovery rate for different materials. The recycling rate for organic wastes is particularly low (Table 3).

By far the greatest proportion of domestic and other waste ends up in landfill. Every year, the average person in the Republic of Ireland generates 380kg of landfill waste. Collectively it amounts to 1.5m Tonnes per annum and its disposal places an enormous burden on society. Without doubt, this figure could be reduced by a massive amount.

In order to establish what might be achievable on a countrywide basis, the Sustainability Institute carried out its own examination of household waste. All the domestic and office waste produced by Andy over a six month period was carefully sorted and weighed. The office proportion was relatively minor, except in the case of paper. The results can be seen in Table 4.

Although not included in the figures, all waste food material was also recycled on site. The most notable finding of the study is the very low volume of non-recyclable waste which is achievable. At 9kg over a six month period -

**Municipal Waste Ireland.**



Source: EPA, 2006

the equivalent of 18kg per annum -this is under one twentieth of the average per capita figure of landfill waste for Ireland. Although products with copious amounts of packaging were studiously avoided, and no tinned products were bought during the study period, this result was not especially difficult to achieve.

While it can be argued that a single person has a greater control over both purchasing and waste disposal strategies, economies of scale may also come into play in larger households. A recent study in the UK showed that per capita food wastes were much lower in large households (4)



Municipal Waste Mayo



The Block Bin System: Rebuilding the Bin.

The left hand bin has been emptied of ready-to-use compost. The bin on the right is being filled with new material.

- 1 EPA National Waste Report 2006
- 2 Britain's 'recycled' waste dumped in Asia, Sunday Times 17 June 2007
- 3 Breeding toxins from dead PCs, The Guardian 6 May 2008
- 4 The Food We Waste, www.wrap.org.uk/the-foodwewaste. This study found that one third of food was thrown away.

## How Not to be a Waste Terrorist

*Avoid picking up waste at source: Don't buy goods (especially food) with excessive packaging. This may also involve a move towards better quality living and cooking wholesome meals instead of relying on heavily packaged convenience foods.*

*Avoid buying throw-away goods which will end up in the bin in a few months.*

*Compost all kitchen and garden wastes. Food wastes compost far better with the addition of generous quantities of paper, cardboard or straw. Lawn cuttings can also be put in this mix. Simple rat proof compost bins can be made from un-mortared concrete blocks with a piece of old plywood (weighed down) for a lid and work far better than the plastic compost bins supplied by the local councils (see photo). Newspaper and cardboard can also be used for mulching around fruit trees and hedging plants and for covering bare parts of the vegetable garden over the winter.*

*Re-Use! Advertise goods which are suitable for re-use on freecycle and other similar organisations which help redistribute unwanted but reusable household goods.*

*Avoid new goods if second-hand alternatives are available.*

*Have clear infrastructure in place at home for the separation of rubbish. Have different bins (with good lids) for the effective separation of different categories. Wash all containers which have had food in them so they don't smell or attract rats if stored for a prolonged period.*

*Demand greater transparency on what happens to waste, and campaign for local recycling initiatives, particularly ones geared to the re-use of paper, cardboard and organic wastes.*

*Campaign for better municipal collection services which facilitate the separation of waste into different categories. Complain to the council (every week if necessary), lobby local councillors and write to newspapers.*

