

The 3R Initiative: A Mask for Toxic Trade?

In June of 2004 the Group of Eight most developed countries (G8) adopted a proposal made by then Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi to launch a "3Rs initiative" to tackle the global waste problem. The 3 Rs refer to Reduce, Re-Use, Recycle – a policy concept meant to reduce waste that was first established about 20 years ago.

Working to eliminate waste sounds like a very good idea. One would expect that NGOs like BAN, which serves as a proponent and watchdog of the world's only treaty on waste – the Basel Convention, would be overjoyed that the most wasteful countries on earth are now huddling together to work on waste reduction. However, a closer look at this Initiative provides real cause for concern. At the outset it is important to note the following:

- Two biggest proponents of the 3R Initiative – the **US** and **Japan** – are both the governments unfortunately well known for their opposition to the Basel Convention's call for *national self-sufficiency in hazardous waste management* and the Basel Ban Amendment -- a decision by the Basel Parties *to ban all exports of hazardous wastes from rich to poorer countries.*
- Both the US and Japan have recently been exposed as major players in an illegal trade of hazardous electronic waste to developing countries. Neither country has renounced these export activities nor tried to prevent them.
- One of the stated objectives of the 3R Initiative is to *"reduce barriers to the international flow of goods and materials for recycling and remanufacturing, recycled and remanufactured products, and cleaner, more efficient technologies, consistent with existing environmental and trade obligations and frameworks;*

Reducing Trade Barriers for Waste: Direct Affront to the Basel Convention

The most obvious "trade barrier" to the international flows of "goods and materials for recycling" (known as "wastes" international law) is the Basel Convention. The so-called "trade barriers" found in the Basel Convention and the Basel Ban Amendment were agreed by the international community despite the strong opposition of the United States and Japan. They were erected intentionally to protect developing countries from the free market's propensity to exploit weaker economies, desperate laborers, and disproportionately burden the global poor with pollution and poison.

Despite the seeming assurances that "existing environmental obligations and frameworks" will be respected, the background papers prepared for the 3R Initiative by the Japanese government speak at length of Asian regional waste networks, and cite specific examples of transport of hazardous electronic wastes from Japan to developing countries. The papers openly discuss the competitive advantage of Asian developing countries to manage wastes due to low wages. While the background documentation warns against obviously polluting enterprises in developing countries, the organizers of the 3R Initiative seem to be oblivious to the primary obligations of the Basel Convention, which include achieving national self-sufficiency in hazardous and household waste management and preventing the exploitation of developing countries in the management of such wastes. In fact the Basel Convention has passed a decision (III/1) to amend the Convention to forbid exports of hazardous wastes for any reason from developed countries.

Is it coincidental that the two countries that fought hardest to defeat the Basel Ban Amendment (Japan and the United States) are now two of the biggest proponents of the 3R Initiative and its goal of *"Reducing barriers to the international flow of goods and materials for recycling..."?*

Where is the NGO Involvement?

The Orwellian contradictions do not end there. One of the stated goals of the Initiative is "to encourage the cooperation among various stakeholders" including NGOs and communities. However, it must be noted that the 3R Initiative

has not involved NGOs in the planning, the development, and the implementation of the Initiative and its series of meetings held in the past 4 years. Despite the claim for encouraging multi-stakeholder cooperation, NGOs have so far been relegated as "observers" and not allowed to participate in key working groups.

3Rs is Insufficient

The concept of 3Rs has been in use already for years and in that time it has proven to be a useful concept. At the same time, it has also been revealed to be inadequate alone to address some of the fundamental issues surrounding globalization, consumption, and wastes.

One of the primary shortcomings with the 3Rs approach is that, despite the waste management hierarchies that have sought to establish priorities to waste reduction and re-use, it is the last of the 3 Rs – Recycling – that ends up being the primary thrust. Recycling, while having great utility for non-hazardous waste, is far from being the best solution in comparison with the first 2 Rs. Recycling cannot address issues of over-consumption and profligate wastefulness.

Further, where hazardous waste is concerned, such as in the matter of electronic waste, recycling by itself merely transfers hazards rather than eliminating them. The risks are simply shifted to recyclers and recipient communities of hazardous waste. The hazardous substances exit the recycling process either as pollution residues, or are reintroduced as hazardous product into the marketplace.

It must be understood that industry utilizing hazardous materials like recycling because they can appear to look "green" while continuing to promote the business-as-usual approach and needless consumption to sell more products. If they can have recycling take place in the lowest wage countries of the world, they profit even more, while having little incentive to make efforts for re-use and waste reduction. For post-consumer wastes, Reduction and Re-use actually work directly against the economic bottom-line, as profits are maximized through rapid obsolescence and new sales.

For this reason, Recycling ends up being the primary thrust of waste reduction programs, while Reduction and Re-use are just the subject of talk and no action.

Perhaps the most obvious gauge of the bias away from the first 2Rs is the fact that statistics from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) show that, despite 3Rs policies, not a single G8 country has so far succeeded in capping its waste generation, let alone reducing it. Rather, waste generation in each country has continued to rise in recent years. Until the emphasis is placed on Reduce and Reuse, no real progress will be made on actual waste reductions.

A Fourth R is Needed -- Responsibility

It has become clear that the 3Rs are not adequate as a basis for a government or corporate waste management policy. They are strictly technological notions devoid of meaning without the essential **4th R – Responsibility**.

The Fourth R of responsibility includes the concepts of **producer responsibility** (for the entire life cycle of a product, including efforts to enhance product longevity, toxics use reductions, energy efficiency, and design for recycling); **individual consumer responsibility**, (to make informed and responsible choices in consumption and disposal practices); **national and international governmental responsibility** (to embark on national waste reduction strategies, to institutionalize the principles of environmental justice by banning economically motivated waste trade, and to become self-sufficient in waste management); and **social/democratic responsibility** (the fabric that holds the other three tiers of responsibility dictates that we respect human rights and democratic involvement in all phases of decision making including the right to corporate planning and product design decisions).

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the present form of the 3Rs initiative is a means to perpetuate business-as-usual behind a mask of the familiar and benign 3Rs concept. It has been designed to run around the Basel Convention, rather than embrace its obligations of waste prevention and national self-sufficiency in waste management. Meanwhile, the global generation of hazardous waste continues to rise. So does the exploitation of global trade to irresponsibly sweep hazardous and other wastes out the backdoors of rich developed countries. If we are to assure the 3Rs are not used as a password for such irresponsibility, we need to add a 4th R to any waste policy. Only through the incorporation of Responsibility as the 4th R, we can truly work on upstream solutions rather than exporting our problems downstream, and begin to embrace the global environmental justice in waste management. Responsibility by all stakeholders is vital. The fate of future generations rests on the present generation's willingness to take such responsibility.

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