

Waste: “Structurally, we are 20 years behind the European average”*

Waste management in Portugal is faced with huge challenges. Let's not delude ourselves: structurally, we are 20 years behind the European average, and 30 years if we compare ourselves to the countries at the front of the pack in terms of environmental performance (Denmark, Belgium, Germany, etc.). In these countries, some waste streams have enviable recycling rates of more than 90%, and work has been carried out in recent years on another goal, namely making the circular economy a reality and dissociating the increase in waste production from economic growth. This is an ambitious goal, which PERSU 2030, the Portuguese strategic plan for municipal waste, also aims to achieve, but without setting out a concrete path for getting there.

Way back in the 1990s I had the opportunity to visit different cities in Germany and Belgium, which already had PAYT systems in place at that time. Some were very simple, with the quantities of waste calculated on the basis of estimated volumes of plastic bags collected, and others were more complex, with the use of GPS software or bar codes, in which the data from the collection were processed automatically while the municipal vehicles were doing their rounds. In some cases, selective door-to-door collection was combined with various green centres spread around the city for citizens to drop off specific streams such as electronic equipment, fluorescent tubes, corks, bulky waste, and more. In 2022, you can count on the fingers of one hand the municipalities in Portugal that have started to implement PAYT systems. Landfill as the main destination is not limited to the MSW sector. In the industrial waste sector as well, too much hazardous waste ends up in landfill.



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In 2002, a Belgian colleague told me about Council Decision 2003/33/EC and the restrictive criteria for the acceptance of hazardous waste at landfills, and explained how the maximum limits of 6% TOC and 10% loss on ignition would significantly limit the depositing at landfills of many types of hazardous waste, which would have to be treated in another way. As a result, Portugal, like the Central and Northern European countries, would in the near future divert organic hazardous waste, such as waste originating from the chemical and pharmaceutical industries, reaction waste, filter cakes, etc., away from landfill. Unfortunately, my colleague was mistaken. The Community legislation has been transposed into national law, but in practice, the implementation is not there. 20 years after the publication of Council Decision 2003/33/EC,

..."in recent years, this sector has had many difficulties in achieving the targets to which Portugal has committed at a European level"...

the final destination for most organic hazardous waste continues to be landfill, albeit camouflaged by prior stabilizing treatment, which in truth does nothing with respect to eliminating the hazardous nature of the organic components.

At this point, it's time for change. Sustainable waste management as a key factor in a circular economy should be a national priority. Am I overstating it? No. We are a poor country. Depositing waste in landfills is a wasted opportunity in terms of technological progress, investment and job creation. We are a long way behind, so the only way we can catch up in a short space of time is if waste management is a priority.

The XXIII Government of the Portuguese Republic is in a unique position, unlike that seen by any other Government in the last two decades. It has an absolute majority in Parliament, a majority in the National Association of Municipalities, community funds including the famous "bazooka" that is the Recovery and Resilience Plan, and citizens and companies who are aware of environmental issues and the urgency and need to change behaviour. Against this backdrop, it is possible to considerably increase the pace of change. There must be the political will. There must be the will on all of our part.



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