

RACING GREEN

European countries are being outdone by American and Asian rivals when it comes to greening the economy. HSBC figures show the percentage of EU stimulus spending directed towards green measures is less than 10 per cent, compared to 34 per cent in China and a whopping 80 per cent in South Korea. What's more, a report by the UN's Green Economy Initiative calls on high-income countries to spend at least one per cent of GDP on reducing carbon dependency. Most EU nations fall well short of this target.

REVERSING THE TREND

A study by the University of Aalborg, one of very few to measure the carbon impact of waste management over time, has shown that the northern Danish city where the institution is located has reversed greenhouse gas trends through its treatment of organic waste. Forty years ago, Aalborg sent its biowaste to landfill where it emitted methane as it broke down. Now, it composts green waste and incinerates the remaining organic fraction for combined heat and power production, resulting in net greenhouse gas emission reductions.

CARRION CALL

Spanish scientists are calling for EU rules about animal carcass disposal to be loosened to encourage the vulture population to grow. Ninety per cent of Europe's vultures live in Spain and many groups consider them a sanitary, sustainable means of removing dead animals from the countryside. However, scientists say, EU policy has seen population decline, a drop in breeding success and an increase in mortality of young vultures.

Recycling poverty into possibilities

Thousands of waste pickers eke out existences on the Guatemala City landfill. **Susanna Place** explains how the charity Safe Passage is offering them a brighter future

For over 50 years, the waste of Guatemala City's residents and industries has been dumped in an expansive ravine at the edge of the city. Today, Guatemala City is home to over four million people seeking jobs and opportunities that have dwindled in the rural areas and are increasingly scarce in the capital. While the new international airport seems positively space age, the municipal management of rubbish is comparatively primitive. An estimated 500 tonnes of unsorted residential and industrial waste are dumped daily in the city's landfill, where the poorest and most

entrepreneurs, like Hanley Denning, the late founder of the NGO Safe Passage, which are changing the life prospects of this community.

Since its inception in 1999 as a tiny drop-in centre to provide food and respite for young children working along with their parents in the dump, Safe Passage has opened an early childhood education centre, a primary school through to college scholarship programme and an educational reinforcement programme that served 535 children aged 2-21 and 75 parents in adult literacy in 2009. The project is staffed with Guatemalan teachers, social workers and others

working alongside long and short-term volunteers from 14 countries, and raises over US\$1.5 million each year from more than 3,000 donors. Every day follows a routine. By late morning, when refuse vehicles are snaking down the ravine to disgorge their loads, rubbish piles are swarming with flies, vultures, rats and dump pickers locally known as *guajeros*. They pay a monthly permit fee of about US\$6 for the privilege of recycling. About 3,000 *guajeros*

marginalised make their living by salvaging and recycling any item of enduring value. In 2007, the documentary film *Recycled Life* was nominated for an Academy Award for its unblemished portrait of hardship and human dignity in the lives of Guatemala's dump pickers, and the heroic efforts of intrepid social



worldwatch

TALL ORDER

While Taipei 101 is no longer the world's tallest building, it plans to become the tallest green building. Management of the Taiwanese skyscraper has announced plans to carry out more than 100 building modifications at a cost of more than £1 million in an effort to gain the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design gold certificate. Actions will include increasing green landscape, installing energy-saving light bulbs, improving water

efficiency and maximising the use of local food in the building's restaurants to reduce carbon emissions in delivery. The improvements are expected to save around £350,000 a year, as well as raising environmental awareness.

FOOTBALL'S FOOTPRINTS

The 2010 World Cup Finals in South Africa are expected to have a carbon footprint of 2.75 million tonnes, many times that of the 2006 World Cup in Germany. In addition to taking



A panorama of the Guatemala City landfill

– more than half of them women
– trudge into the dump every day, speaking about ‘going down there’. It is sweltering, backbreaking and, very often, heartbreaking.

Every season is inevitably marked by catastrophe. In 2005, a gigantic methane fire engulfed the dump, killing many workers. During the rainy season in 2007, a sodden layer of the dump collapsed, burying 30 people. Dump pickers are routinely buried or bulldozed by accident. But, they have no choice. For now, this is their only job option, and so they return daily to sift diligently for glass, aluminium, copper, plastic, cardboard and paper, removing about 30 per cent of the waste daily – someone else’s trash can be another’s livelihood or treasure.

Although dump pickers only earn the equivalent of US\$5 for an average workday, they perform an extremely valuable – and under-compensated – service to Guatemalan society. The ‘mining’ of these mountains of trash spawns a multitude of secondary businesses that buy, transport and transform recyclables into new products. One

of the businesses buying up scrap plastic outside the garbage dump is Ecoplast, which produces reusable plastic pellets. There are also plans to extract methane from the landfill.


Across from the entrance to the dump, within the shantytown that has developed on ‘reclaimed’ landfill, another kind of human recycling is taking place through the alchemy of Safe Passage. When this project began a decade ago, Hanley Denning battled the popular sentiment that the children and adults living and working in the dump were a lost cause – too ignorant, too entrenched in the vicious cycle of poverty, to ever escape or aspire to a life or job outside the dump. Hanley’s response: That’s simply not true! Hanley Denning, who died in a tragic car accident in 2007, was posthumously crowned ‘Angel of the Dump’.

The youngest children in the programme can now enter primary school healthy and ready to learn. Students receiving Safe Passage school scholarships also get help with homework; English competency, computer literacy, sports and life skills also help the children excel in

school and life. It’s hard to believe that a number of children who were working in the dump just 10 years ago are now moving up the academic ladder through secondary school – a rare triumph in Guatemala, where few but the most privileged remain in education beyond the age of 12.

In addition, more of the parents are signing up for Safe Passage’s adult literacy programme, many learning to read and write for the first time. A group of mothers come early in the morning to huddle over math facts, writing and reading; in the afternoon, they will change clothes and head into the dump. A second group, of dads and young men, come several afternoons a week, after they have completed their stint in the tip.

Safe Passage knows that literate parents inspire their children to perform better in school. These are the families that will work their way out of the dump forever. As Safe Passage celebrates its tenth anniversary, a documentary about these determined families and the dedicated non-profit organisation, is hot off the reels, called *Manos de Madres* – ‘The Hands of Women’.

Safe Passage’s mission is to create opportunities and foster dignity through the power of education. It’s working – one child, one family, one graduation at a time – to recycle poverty into possibilities. 



Children eagerly participating in a Safe Passage class

To learn more about Safe Passage and to get involved, visit: www.safepassage.org

long-haul international flights, players and fans will have to travel vast distances between the nine host cities without the option of ecofriendly transport. To meet the goal of being ‘carbon neutral’, organisers will have to spend between £3.3 million and £5.4 million on carbon offsetting. The local organising committee is targeting efficiency and waste reduction during the finals by installing waterless urinals, issuing reusable

cups and limiting the use of food containers.

CALIFORNIA RECYCLING ON THE ROCKS

Though often held up as a model of what can be achieved, California’s 23-year-old Bottle Bill recycling programme is in grave financial trouble. The system has long gained revenue through deposits paid on beverage containers, but as a result of the recession (and raids on the

scheme’s coffers to ease California’s budget woes), the state abruptly cut all processing payments to its 2,400 recycling centres. Californians Against Waste claims the move will cost consumers US\$100 million in increased fees for beverages, lead to the closure of 1,100 recycling centres, and put 5,000 people employed in the recycling industry, many of whom are at-risk youths, out of work.