

Headline: Toward an Asean circular economy

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As the Association of Southeast Asian Nations turns 50, our planet breaks records in global temperatures and pollution. Asean enters its next 50 years with the planet considerably different from the time it was founded. The most urgent challenge facing the world and particularly the region today is climate change. Closely related to it is an equally urgent issue: waste.

Southeast Asia is one of the world's fastest growing regions. Asean has done much to promote industrialization and economic growth. But development has come at a heavy price. The consumption-oriented model of progress, responsible for the climate crisis, has led to ever-growing volumes of waste.

Open dumps and plastic pollution of the oceans are perhaps the most visible manifestations of this growing problem. A recent report by the United Nations shows how waste generation is growing in Southeast Asia, alongside increasing population and urbanization rates. But the report offers a problematic way out for Asean countries: "waste-to-energy" incinerators.

So-called waste-to-energy incineration is among the most polluting, energy-intensive and inefficient ways to generate electricity. The technology carries all the flaws of incineration, most notably the release in the atmosphere of highly carcinogenic dioxins and furans, identified in an international treaty, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, as toxic chemicals for elimination. Equally toxic is incinerator ash, hazardous waste that can seriously contaminate soil and water, and that needs to be managed carefully in tightly controlled and secure facilities.

In 2008, the US Environmental Protection Agency identified incineration as a significant source of carbon emissions, producing more CO₂ per megawatt hour compared to coal-fired power plants. Waste-to-energy incineration also requires the additional input of fossil fuels or electricity in order to operate. Breakdowns are frequent problems; many waste-to-energy incinerators in Europe and the United States produce only a fraction of the power promised due to the unreliability of the technology. And waste, compared to other feedstock, is an inefficient fuel. Waste in many SEA countries is largely organic, burns poorly, and is much better managed through composting and other organic management methods.

Clearly, incineration, whether standalone or for "energy recovery," is a bad choice for Asean. Far from solving the waste problem at root through reduction and reuse, it encourages consumption and disposal, which in turn aggravates climate change.

Europe, home to some of the world's most advanced waste-burning facilities, has taken the first step to phase out incinerators. The impetus for this change was the European Union Action Plan for the Circular Economy. A circular economy is "one in which the value of products, materials and resources is maintained for as long as possible, minimizing waste and resource use." Last January, a European Commission communication on the role of waste-to-energy in the circular economy has advised member-states to issue a moratorium on new incinerators, decommission old facilities, and phase out public support and subsidies for incineration.

On the other hand, incineration is finding resurgence in unsuspecting Asean countries. In recent years, the region has seen proponents of incineration—industries from Japan, Denmark and South Korea, among others—aggressively peddling the technology in all its permutations: mass burn,

pyrolysis, plasma arc and gasification. Singapore is held up as a shining example of waste management through incineration, although it is modeled after the now debunked European incineration paradigm. If Asean is not vigilant, the region will become a dumping ground for incinerator technology that will lock nations into this outdated practice for the next 50 years.

More sustainable, practical and people-centered waste solutions are being implemented across Asia. Many cities are practicing zero waste, an approach aimed at minimizing and eventually eliminating waste through reduction, redesign, reuse and recycling, starting with waste segregation at source. Asean needs to heed the EU lesson, leapfrog to a circular economy—and leave incineration behind.

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