

## ***ISWA / RDN / EXPRA Workshop***

### **“Challenges to separate collection systems for different waste streams - barriers and opportunities”**

#### **SUMMARY**

Informal sector valuable waste collection is a phenomenon that is developing rapidly, due to many factors, such as economic crises, inefficient functioning of the established WM systems, lack of adequate legal provisions and economic instruments.

Representatives of all stakeholders: academics, researches, EPR schemes, local authorities and business met in Bucharest to exchange their experience and approaches to tackle the challenges.

The speakers presented different points of view on the problem: environmental, economic and social. Although there is no official data, it is estimated that over 20 million people worldwide are engaged in the informal sector collection. This fact obviously cannot be condemned without trying to find solutions, corresponding to the concrete conditions in each country, region or even a municipality.

There are different terms/definitions used by the different stakeholders: informal sector collectors, street collectors, scavengers, etc. Their activities also differ from country to country: they could collect valuable waste from households, out of the collection containers (pilfering), from streets and at events (for example in case of littered bottles, especially those with a deposit) but also can operate as waste pickers at landfills. Basic socio-economic information on waste pickers was presented at the Workshop, including different forms of their organization in Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa.

EPR schemes' representatives from the Balkan Region and Malta shared their experiences and the negative impact of informal sector collection on their operations. The existence of a parallel, informal collection system, decreases the quantities of incoming valuable materials, increases the operating costs, damages the established collection infrastructure and demotivates the inhabitants to separate the waste.

The participants agreed that the cause for the rapid development of the informal collection in the region is the increased value of some recyclable materials, social problems and poverty, lack of legal provisions regarding the ownership of waste, lack of actual enforcement of existing legislation and no clear definition of the responsibilities and scope of action for different stakeholders. Different approaches and solutions were discussed: pilot projects for integration of informal collectors (Turkey and Macedonia), educational campaigns and economic incentives to motivate citizens to separate waste, as well, as administrative instruments such as penalties and lawsuits against pilfering. It was pointed out that in informal valuable waste collection no environmental or safety standards are met, and no taxes are paid. The municipal representative supported the position of the EPR schemes, as the damaging of the infrastructure, the littering around the containers and the negative attitude of the population are a common problem. It was agreed by all participants that this complex problem cannot be solved by EPR schemes alone, but will need the active involvement of National and local authorities, NGOs and the business.

The presented specific case studies again showed that the informal sector is active in middle and low income countries/regions: Southern Europe and the so-called “new EU” members or countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In these countries the formal Waste Management systems are encountering problems, or are not developed and authorities count mostly on the informal sector’s contribution for actual recycling. In the second case the approach to involve the informal recycling sector in the value chain was proven successful, as the presented projects from Mexico (The Mexicali project) Tunisia, India and Philippines showed. In parallel to the environmental benefits, these projects significantly improved the working and living conditions of the informal waste collectors, provided for sustainable income generation and enhanced the efficiency of local waste management schemes. This again proved that for each case a tailored approach should be used and that there is no uniform solution.

The lack of official data was pointed as one of the major problems in the sector. The informal sector usually keeps no records on its activities, therefore it is difficult to estimate its potential contribution to waste collection, processing and recycling services. In a study of the Institute of Waste Management at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna, presented at the Workshop, KPIs are proposed that can be used for initial appraisal of waste management systems, estimation of informal sector size and planning of new or monitoring of existing WM systems.

Another study of the same Institute assesses the challenges in the collection of bulky waste and possible solutions to integrate the informal sector, within the framework of legal issues and potential loss of resources. It analyses the collection of bulky waste and WEEE, the role of the informal sector and suggests opportunities such as cooperation with IS in re-use activities.

During the round table discussion the participants expressed different positions, concerning the inclusion versus exclusion of the informal collectors, the role of the EPR schemes, should the achievement of targets set by EU/National authorities be the only objective, without investing in establishment of adequate infrastructure for separate collection or in organising information and education campaigns for the population.

The following problems, which need further attention from all stakeholders and especially from the National and European legislators, were formulated:

- The informal sector cannot be neglected; it should be taken into account by the European and national authorities and integrated in the legislation. As a next step, it is of major importance for all parties to enforce the adopted legislation.
- EPR systems in Europe have been operating since 20 years, partly before the IS started to interfere with the established or to be established collection infrastructure and the investments and achievements of this infrastructure should be supported to ensure a functioning waste management system in line with European legislation and standards;
- Different solutions could be tested with pilot projects, thus finding the most adequate one for the specific conditions. There is no uniform solution or “one size fits all” approach, as one should always take into consideration the local circumstances;
- There should be sought solutions to use the strength of the established informal sector, and its contribution to the overall recycling should be recognized;

- Both sides, established waste management and EPR systems but also the Informal Sector should be more open, flexible and creative in working together;
- All stakeholders should continue to collect more data, which could be used in establishing benchmark on informal collection;

All participants agreed that the workshop was a big success but could be also the start of a process of more scientific studies, pilot projects and further workshops and conferences.