

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 Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to launch "the 3R initiative" to tackle the global waste problem. The 3Rs refer to Reduce, Re-Use, Recycle – a policy concept meant to reduce waste, first established about 20 years ago.

Working to eliminate waste sounds like a very good idea. One would expect that groups 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 reducing waste. However, a closer look at this initiative provides real cause for concern. At the outset it is important to note the following:

- Two of the biggest proponents of the 3R initiative – the **US** and **Japan** are both governments that are 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 the 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 primary goals of the initiative is to "*Reduce barriers to the international flow of goods and materials for recycling and remanufacturing, recycled and remanufactured products, along with cleaner, more efficient technologies, consistent with existing environmental and trade obligations and frameworks*";

Direct Affront to the Basel Convention

The most obvious "trade barrier" to the international flow in "goods and materials for recycling" (known as "wastes" in 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 paper prepared for the Ministerial Conference on the 3R Initiative scheduled in Tokyo in April 2005 by the Japanese government speaks at length of Asian Regional Waste Networks, and cites specific examples of transport of hazardous electronic wastes from Japan to developing countries. The paper openly discusses 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) in 1995 to amend the Convention to forbid exports of hazardous wastes from developed countries for any reason.

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

Where is the NGO Involvement?

The Orwellian contradictions do not end there. One of the stated goals of the 3R Initiative is "to encourage the cooperation among various stakeholders" including NGOs

and communities. Yet, it must be noted that, to date, the 3R initiative has not involved NGOs in planning the initiative, in developing papers for the initiative, nor in the planning of the conferences. Moreover, the initiative has banned NGOs from participating in key working groups. Despite the claim of encouraging cooperation, NGOs have so-far been relegated as “observers” in the strictest sense. Two of the primary international networks working on waste issues – the Basel Action Network, and the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA), had to invite themselves to the conferences.

3Rs is Insufficient

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

One of the primary shortcomings with the 3Rs approach is that, despite waste management hierarchies that have sought to give more weight to waste reduction and re-use, it is the last of the 3Rs – 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 2Rs. 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 reserves hazards rather than eliminating them. The risks will simply be shifted to impacting the recyclers and recipient communities as the hazardous substances exit the recycling process as pollution residues, or being reintroduced as hazardous product into the marketplace.

It must be understood that industries utilizing hazardous materials love 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 bottomline, as profits are maximized through rapid obsolescence and new sales.

For this reason, recycling is likely the primary thrust of waste management programs like the 3Rs, while reduction and re-use becomes the subject of talk without real action. We see no reason as yet to believe that the 3R Initiative will be different than the past programs aimed at promoting the 3Rs.

Perhaps the most obvious gauge of the bias away from the first 2Rs is the fact that all recent statistics from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) show that, despite the 3Rs policies, not a single

G8 country has so far succeeded in even capping its waste generation, let alone reducing it. Rather, waste generation in each country has continued to rise in recent years. Until the emphasis in terms of implementation is placed on Reduce and Reuse, not on the last, Recycle, 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 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, toxin 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, 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).

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the present form of the 3R Initiative is a means to perpetuate business-as-usual behind a mask of a 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, as does the exploitation of international trade to irresponsibly sweep hazardous and other wastes out the backdoors of rich developed countries. If we are to assure that the 3Rs are not used as a password for such irresponsibility, we need to add the 4th R to any waste policy. Only through the incorporation of Responsibility as the 4th R can we truly work on upstream solutions rather than exporting our problems downstream, and begin to embrace the global environmental justice in waste management. The fate of future generations rests on the present generation’s willingness to seriously take such responsibility.

The Basel Action Network
c/o Earth Economics

122 S. Jackson St., Suite 320, Seattle, WA 98104

Phone: 1.206.652.5555, **Fax:** 1.206.652.5750

E-mail: inform@ban.org, **Website:** www.ban.org