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ZERO-WASTE MAGAZINE

EXCLUSIVE

GREEN GROWTH
AFRICA'S
PERSPECTIVE ON
WASTE
SOLUTIONS

WHY THE GLOBAL SOUTH CANNOT COPY THE “GLOBAL NORTH'S WASTE SOLUTIONS”

(ADVANCING LOCALLY LED ZERO WASTE SYSTEMS IN GHANA AND
WEST AFRICA)

Table Of Contents



04 THE WHY AND HOW OF WASTE

This session introduces the waste challenges in the Global South and how different they are from other locations.

05 IMPORTED SOLUTIONS DON'T WORK

This session explains the reasons current solutions do not work in the long run.

06 WHY IMPORTING GLOBAL NORTH SOLUTIONS DON'T WORK

This session continues with explanations on the Global North's solutions and why they are not ideal for the Global South

07 INCINERATORS VS WASTE TO ENERGY

This session discusses the adversities posed by incinerators and waste to energy plants

09 GLOBAL SOUTH'S REAL SOLUTIONS

This session details zero waste solutions ideal for the Global South with evidence on why this works.

THE WHY AND HOW OF WASTE



Discussions around waste management and climate action have become topical in recent years, with many development practitioners, government ideologists and general public aligning towards high-tech recycling plants, waste-to-energy facilities, incinerators and 'ambitious' circular economy frameworks.

These 'solutions' often implemented in the Global North (wealthy countries) with established infrastructure, regulated systems, and significant public investment often fall short of solving real problems faced by everyday communities in Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, and other low and middle income countries.

THE REALITY

Often, these 'solutions' believed to be contemporary, promises relief and lasting impact yet delivers a shadow of what was hoped for, leaving many practitioners in disbelief after huge investments are made.

These solutions rather than minimizing waste, births a culture of creating more refuse, building dependencies and empowering major polluters, while reducing jobs for ordinary community members.

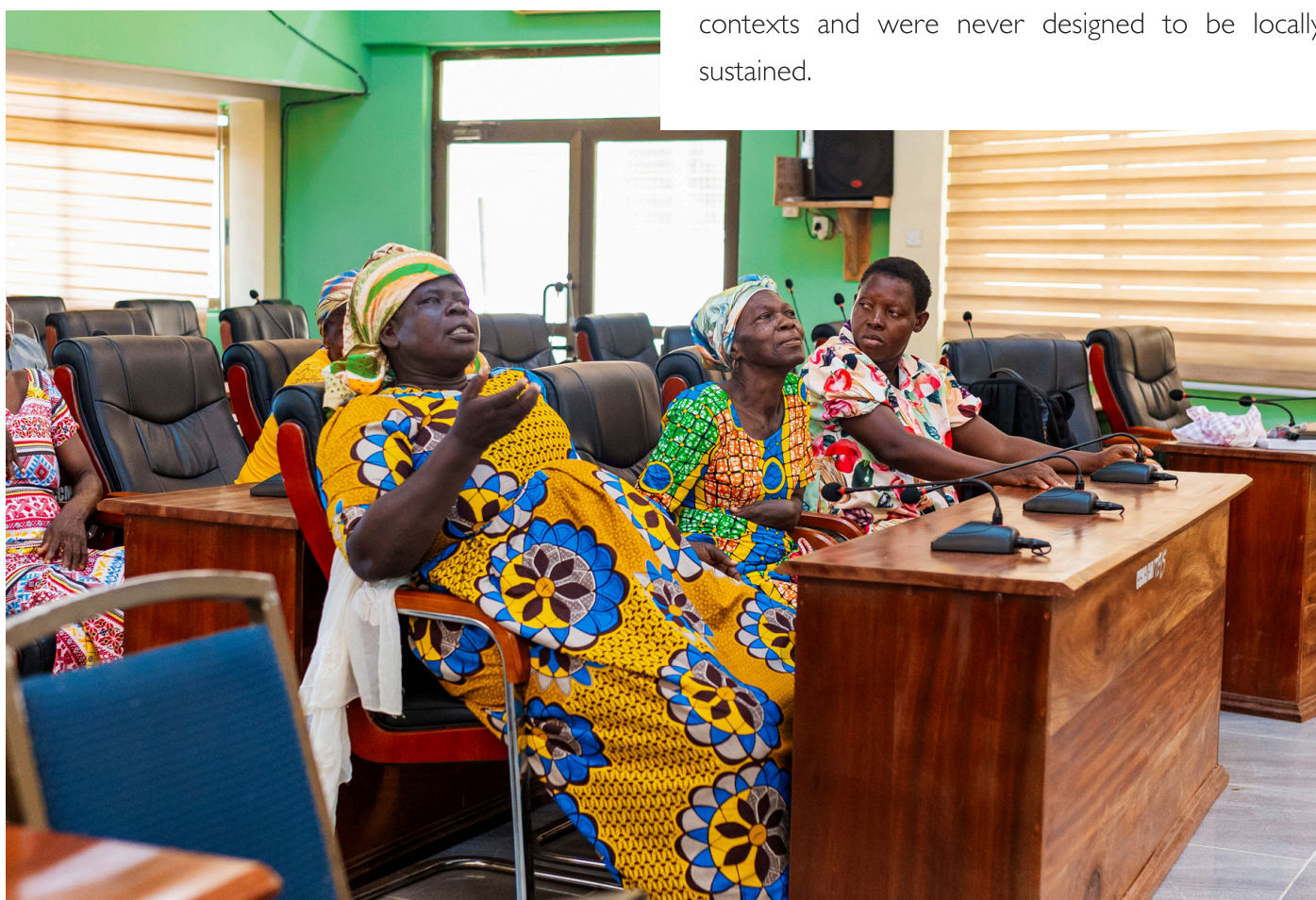
IMPORTED SOLUTIONS DONT EVER WORK

Additionally, these solutions entrench a cycle of permanent aid dependence, requiring continuous injections of external finance, imported technology, and specialized expertise just to operate, maintain, or scale them.



At best, the reality of sustaining these interventions are not feasible in the Global South.

As waste generation grows and operational costs rise, governments are forced into long-term financial liabilities, foreign currency exposure, and escalating public subsidies, making it clear that these so-called solutions are structurally unsuited to Global South contexts and were never designed to be locally sustained.



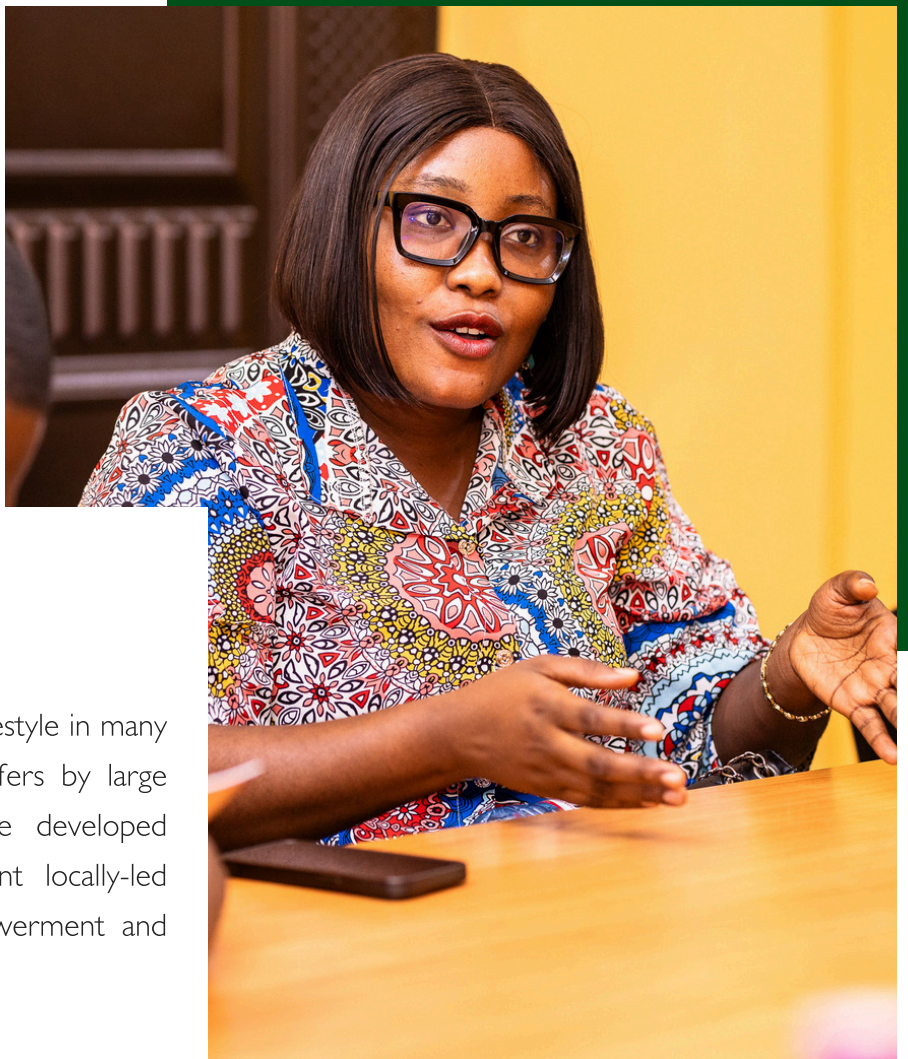
WHY IMPORTING GLOBAL NORTH SOLUTIONS DON'T WORK.

The composition of waste as well as lifestyle in many low and middle income countries differs by large from what is predominant in these developed economies, thus necessitating different locally-led solutions that rests on justice, empowerment and realism.

According to the World Bank's What a Waste 2.0 report, nearly 44–60% of municipal solid waste in many Global South regions is organic or food waste, a much larger share than in most high-income nations (Kaza et al., 2018).

In Ghana, for example, about 60% of municipal waste is organic, followed by 14% plastics, 5% paper, and metals accounting 3% (Yirenya-Tawiah et al., 2020).

That means much of what ends up in the trash could be composted, used in agriculture, or turned into biogas.



Yet, it often remains uncollected in drains, leached into water bodies or piled in dumpsites, producing methane, a greenhouse gas with 25 times the warming potential of carbon dioxide.

In contrast, high-income countries see a higher share of packaging and industrial waste, where high-tech sorting and recycling programs are thought to be relevant.

Even in these Global North economies where such 'solutions' are being replicated, interventions like waste-to-energy facilities, incinerators, high-tech recycling etc. have been found as FALSE SOLUTIONS, masquerading as real climate interventions that only do more harm than good.

INCINERATORS VS WASTE TO ENERGY



Incinerators and waste-to-energy plants produce significantly more carbon, nearly three tonnes of CO₂ for every tonne combusted, and produce toxic pollutants such as dioxins, heavy metals, and fine particulates, disproportionately harming low-income and marginalized communities.

Additionally, analyses of recycling systems in Europe and North America show that even with advanced infrastructure, plastic recycling rates remain low, and most plastic waste continues to be incinerated, landfilled, or exported, undercutting climate goals and exposing environmental injustice.

Research from the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA), also confirms that incinerators and waste-to-energy interventions are false solutions that should be frowned on.

Findings indicate they create fossil-fuel dependence, displace real zero waste strategies, and divert funding from waste reduction, reuse, and composting that drive greater greenhouse-gas savings.

On the other hand, Informal waste workers across the Global South are already evidently at the frontlines working hard to reverse climate atrocities, enhance waste sorting and resource recovery amongst others without needed support. Recent reports estimate that 24 million people are involved in the informal waste recycling sector worldwide, with 80% working as waste pickers.

In parts of Africa, waste pickers recover 80–90% of post-consumer packaging in some cities, significantly reducing plastic leakage into the environment (Dean and Asen, 2024).

Despite their contribution, these workers often lack legal recognition, social protection, and support to scale their efforts. At the expense of these informal waste workers who are already creating locally-led results, false solutions like incinerators and waste-to-energy alternatives, proponents by big polluters from the Global North are being discussed.

Arguably, if local solutions like waste reduction, reuse, and composting are yielding preliminary results there is therefore no need importing globalized solutions that are not contextual. Another stark reason global north 'so-called solutions' aren't ideal for the global south is the infrastructure gap that exists between the two poles.

In high-income countries, widespread curbside collection, engineered landfills, and regulated recycling systems are taken seriously unlike in many global south cities, where less than half of generated waste is collected, and much of what is collected ends up in open dumps or burned openly causing excessive environmental harm.

Ghana as an example has only five engineered landfills, many of which are dysfunctional, operating as open dumpsites, forcing cities like Accra to transport waste long distances to controlled disposal sites (Yirenya-Tawiah, D. et al., 2020).



Solutions the Global South Needs to Prioritize

Instead of importing capital-intensive waste technologies that have failed even in the Global North, the Global South must prioritize locally led, low-cost, and labor intensive zero waste solutions that align with its cultural, social and material realities.

These include decentralized composting systems that address the high organic content of waste, the formal recognition and integration of informal waste pickers who already deliver high recycling and climate benefits, and the strengthening of reuse, repair, and small-scale upcycling enterprises rooted in local economies.

These interventions reduce greenhouse gas emissions at source, create dignified livelihoods, improve public health, and require far less public subsidy and foreign capital than incinerators, waste to energy or high-tech recycling plants.



False Solutions	Why They Don't Work	What to Invest In Instead
Waste-to-Energy & Incineration	High carbon emissions, toxic air pollution, expensive to run, and require constant waste supply. Even in rich countries, they undermine recycling and climate goals.	Composting, waste reduction, reuse, and material recovery
High-Tech Recycling Plants	Need clean, separated waste and high subsidies. Globally, less than 10% of plastic is actually recycled.	Community sorting, informal waste picker integration, low-tech recycling
Landfill Expansion	Produces methane, contaminates land and water, and is not a long-term climate solution.	Organic waste diversion, composting, landfill reduction
Plastic Clean-Ups Alone	Treat symptoms, not causes. Do not stop plastic production or pollution at source.	Plastic reduction, reuse systems, producer responsibility
Centralized Privatized Waste Systems	Exclude informal workers, increase costs, and reduce recycling rates.	Inclusive, locally led zero waste systems





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