

Manila's mountains of waste provide a lifeline

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Scavengers at Manila's largest landfill in Payatas village. For the 30,000 residents who live around the garbage site, it is their only source of income. (AFP)

Before dawn breaks over the Philippine capital, an army of human scavengers make their way from the squalid slums they call home to the gates of one of the city's biggest garbage dumps.

Armed with headlamps and wicker baskets they make the slow walk to the top of the Payatas dumpsite picking through the stinking refuse.

Rising some 30 to 40 meters from the valley floor, the mound of garbage covers 10 hectares and takes in sweeping views of the surrounding countryside.

The first trucks start to arrive just after 4 am, carrying their cargo which will be rummaged through by teams of scavengers looking for anything they can recycle.

Over the next 17 hours, some 450 to 500 trucks will deposit an estimated 1,200 tons of waste at the site.

For the 30,000 residents who live around the garbage mountain, it is their only source of income.

The teams of scavengers who pick over each truckload of refuse are lucky if they make two dollars a day for their efforts.

Down in the slums, cottage industries thrive as thousands of people, including children, sort through baskets brought down from the mound.

Rusted inner springs from discarded mattresses are used as fences around shacks made from scrap pieces of wood and iron sheeting. The fences are used to dry paper and plastic for recycling.

Foam rubber is washed and dried before being glued in strips to make mattresses. Covers are made for around 12 pesos (23 cents) each and the finished product sold in local markets for 100 pesos or more.

A broken concrete bridge crosses a narrow river where boys wash plastic in putrid water. It is dried and bundled up and sold for recycling.

In one yard are piles of discarded backpacks that will be washed, repaired and later sold in markets in the poorer districts of Manila.

A study by the Asian Development Bank estimated some 150,000 residents of this sprawling metropolis are dependent, in one way or another, on the city's 8,700 tons of household garbage that is collected daily.

Despite having some of the best legislation in the region aimed at waste management, the metropolis is drowning in a sea of garbage.

Emelita Aguinaldo, executive director of the National Solid Waste Management Commission (NSWMC) says Metro Manila is facing a major problem with its garbage.

"If we do not change our way of life, we will run out of land to dump the waste and we will soon be walking on streets full of garbage," Aguinaldo says.

She says Metro Manila produces about 8,700 tons of garbage daily and as the population grows, so does the volume of garbage that the agency needs to dispose of every day.

"There is a direct correlation between population and garbage. In the next few years, the volume of garbage we produce will also increase," she adds.

Currently, Metro Manila's garbage goes to three different dump sites.

Metropolitan Manila Development Authority general manager Corazon Jimenez says the three garbage dumps have the capacity to take in Metro Manila's garbage for the next four to five decades, after which the agency tasked to dispose of them would have to look for new sites.

Despite legislation introduced over a decade ago to promote waste segregation, recycling and composting, very little has been achieved.

Aguinaldo says if all 17 local governments that make up Metro Manila were to put up composting facilities to convert garbage into organic fertilizer, it would reduce daily garbage production by half.

"Fifty percent of the garbage we produce every day is biodegradable. Local governments should have a composting facility to reduce garbage," she says.

At the Payatas dumpsite, which handles rubbish collected from Quezon City's three million residents, methane gas is being used to produce electricity in a project that began over a decade ago.

For 30 years much of Manila's waste was dumped in Payatas. It was an unregulated eyesore and could be smelt miles away depending on which way the wind was blowing. Today, the new Payatas has become a model of efficiency and renewable energy where deadly methane gas from decades of rotting refuse is turned into electricity powering the dump's facilities, street lights around Payatas and a plastics-recycling plant.

The United Nations Industrial Development Organization has described the dumpsite and its methane power plant as a "good example of sustainable waste management".

The plant is also earning the Philippines its first carbon credits for a waste-to-energy project under the Kyoto Protocol.