

Shipbreaking: European waste disposal causing conflicts

Case study from India shows shipbreaking is toxic waste disposal

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Briefing

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Keywords

- > Shipbreaking
- > Toxic waste
- > Basel Convention
- > Labour conditions
- > India

Shipbreaking in Alang-Sosiya (India), the world's largest shipbreaking yard, causes waste disposal conflicts

The European Commission's proposal for a ship recycling regulation launched in March 2012 serves to illustrate that the EU wants to avoid such conflicts. However, due to its flaws, **this proposal will not be able to address the problem.** The proposal is mainly based on the Hong Kong Convention, neglecting the Basel Convention and the Ban Amendment, which are translating, at the EU level, in the Waste Shipment Regulation.

The Basel Convention defines what types of waste are qualified as hazardous and it bans all exports of these wastes from the developed countries that have ratified it. **By allowing end-of-life ships to be exported to non-industrialized countries and at the same time removing ships from the Waste Shipment Regulation's list of hazardous wastes, this proposal is trying to circumvent the Basel Convention, which the EU has ratified.** It also **misses opportunities for Europe.** It does not have a financial mechanism based on the polluter-pays principle **to stimulate recycling and greener ship construction.** It misses the opportunity **to stimulate innovation and create green jobs** in Europe. The commission states they will only allow European ships to sail at end of life towards facilities that respect strict rules for environment protection and workers safety; but would it not be easier to control and keep that promise if these facilities are based inside the EU?

Rationale

The social and environmental damages from waste disposal often arise not because of externalities but due to successful cases of cost shifting or **capital accumulation by contamination.** The growing societal metabolism (energy and material flows) is inevitably linked with waste

Country	Vessels		Metal	
	No.	%	Tons	%
India	373	44	2 810 000	44
Bangladesh	145	17	1 550 000	24
China	119	14	1 208 000	19
Pakistan	83	10	737 000	11
Turkey	55	6	144 000	2
USA	19	2	-	-
Europe	5	1	-	-
Others	55	6	-	-
Total	854	100	6 449 000	100

Numbers and tonnage of ships dismantled (Jan-Nov 2011)

Source: Source: Robin de Bois, Information Bulletins on Ship Demolition: #23-25, Nov. 2011

production, triggering such waste disposal conflicts.

Greater and effective **opposition** encountered by ship owners and ship breakers regarding their shifting of environmental costs would result in **improved sustainability and reinforced environmental justice**, potentially both locally and globally.

Locally for the pollutants that would not be discharged into the environment; globally because an increment in the operations' costs for the shipping industry, might slow down the social metabolism (by increasing the costs of trade) and its impacts.

Background

More than 80% of international trade in goods by volume is carried by sea, according to UNCTAD. Ocean-going ships owned and used for their trade by developed countries are often demolished, together with their toxic materials, in developing countries. Ship breaking is the process of dismantling an obsolete vessel's structure for scrapping or disposal.

The Alang-Sosiya yard in India is the world's largest shipbreaking yard. The unequal distribution of benefits and burdens, due to international and national uneven distribution of power, has led to an ecological distribution conflict. The controversy at the Indian Supreme Court in 2006 over the dismantling of the ocean liner 'Blue In Lady,' shows how the different



Social and cultural impacts
Dumping site (asbestos) in agriculture fields around the Alang-Sosiya shipbreaking yard (Apr. 2009)
Photo: F. Demaria



'One ship, one death'
Operations take place directly on the beach with high exposure to occupational risks and pollutants
Photo: F. Demaria

Policy demands

- By a legally binding EU directive, the Union and its member states should **ban all export of European ships for shipbreaking and recycling** to other parts of the world. It is in the spirit if not in the wording of both the EU Flagship Initiative on Resource Efficiency and the commitment to end the export of toxic waste that the Union should make sure that **European ships are recycled in Europe**, in environmentally benign facilities with good and safe working conditions.
- This means to make sure that also in this case the **waste** is understood as **one of the most important sources of resources**, and that to re-use it properly, the products - in this case the ships - have to be managed properly. Even in the case of export of ships for recycling to other OECD countries, let alone in the South, the Union can demand contracts regarding clean recycling, but contract law is by far weaker than legal obligations which can be monitored and enforced in the EU, by governments, civil society and trade unions. The EU policy demand to enhance transparency and accountability can be realised only this way.
- Proper Management of ships throughout their life cycle starts with the construction: **building green and clean ships** could be the last chance for what remains of Europe's ailing wharf and shipbuilding industry. When not the price, but the environmental quality is decisive, Europe is competitive. However that requires **minimum standards for ship building**, to be enforced in the long long run by the WMO, but triggered by a EU regulation on **safety standards for ships entering EU harbours** (with enforcement instruments such as bans if certain minima are not reached, and economic incentives like mandatory insurance or fees between this minimum and the desired standard). If the EU want to make its commitment to a Green Economy credible, and indeed wants to create green jobs, a bon on exporting ships for recycling is necessary, accompanied by environmental and **labour standards for the shipbreaking industry in Europe** and an initiative for Green Shipo Building in Europe.



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The project supports the work of Environmental Justice Organisations, uniting scientists, well known activist organisations, think-tanks and policy-makers from the fields of environmental law, environmental health, political ecology, ecological economics, to talk about issues related to Ecological Distribution.

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languages of valuation expressed by different social groups clashed and how a language that expresses sustainability as monetary benefit at the national scale, dominated.

In August 2009, a fire broke out aboard the European ship MSC Jessica killing six workers on the Indian ship-breaking beaches of Alang. The fire erupted as they were dismantling the cargoship's engine room. It took place as the ship had neither been decontaminated by the original owner nor made safe by the local enterprise. **This kind of tragedies is rather common in Alang.**

In the 1970s and 1980s scandals of toxic waste dumping in the South led to attempts to stem these flows, such as the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal of 1989. Yet, India, among others, has been increasingly used as a dumping ground for toxic industrial waste (like asbestos and mercury) from developed countries.

In our **EJOLT report 1**, the issue of shipbreaking is examined as an example of toxic waste trade. The dismantling includes a wide range of activities, from removing all machineries and equipment to cutting down the ship infrastructure. We describe the process through which a ship becomes waste for the ship owner, enters the scrapping market through a cash buyer and is finally dismantled by a ship breaker. Finally, we present different options for the management of the ship's toxic waste and analyses the socio-environmental impacts resulting from current practices.

For more information

An Industrial waste conflicts around the world Case studies from India and Bulgaria: shipbreaking and incineration.

EJOLT Report No. 1, available at:

www.ejolt.org/reports

Or please contact the lead author:

Federico Demaria
Autonomous University of Barcelona
federicodemaria@hotmail.com