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ONE PLANET, ONE CHANCE...

“Waste not, want not” or so the adage goes. Yet, year after year people carry on regardless of the negative consequences their careless and wasteful behaviour has on natural resources. The persistent abuse, pollution, and over-exploitation of natural resources is pushing humankind closer and closer to the brink of extinction. The predictions made in the WWF’s *Living Planet Report 2010* are unsettling - at the current rate of consumption of natural resources, humans will need two planets by 2030 in order to sustain themselves. According to the Report, humans are using thirty percent more resources than is sustainable.

Half a century ago, most countries lived and consumed within the limits of their ecological resources. Figures show that today, three-quarters of the world’s population live in countries where the inhabitants consume resources at a rate faster than they can be replenished. Moreover, there is ongoing pollution of air and water, deforestation, degradation of arable soils, and worrying declines in the numbers of various species of flora and fauna.

Humanity finds itself very much wanting, as increasing modernisation sees more and more countries adopting wasteful, consumptive habits. The question is: what happens to all the resources after consumption?

All activities that cater to human needs – which range from those in the home to the large-scale production within industries – generate waste. There is an ever-growing demand for a variety of resources, including space to dispose of these wastes. This is particularly true for the carbon dioxide that results from burning fossil fuels, and the dumpsites that are increasingly being filled with discarded materials.

Due to the fact that humans have shown scant regard for the manner in which they use natural resources, there is an inevitable security threat as our supply of these materials shows signs of failing to keep up with growing demand. The link between environmental policy and security is undeniable. A lack of resources -- be it as a result of overuse, pollution or wastefulness -- will destabilise populations as people grow desperate to fulfill their basic need to survive.

If we faced an anarchist plot to poison water supplies or release poison into the air, there would, no doubt, be swift action in response. Sadly, a more subtle, but no less dangerous threat to environmental security is growing day by day. Society continues to poison natural resources with pollution, and our treatment and disposal of waste is inadequate. Whilst scientists and environmentalists have raised this alarm for many years now, generally the reaction and remedy from governments, business and civil society has been lacking in decisiveness.

We only have one planet and our actions need to be informed by the fact that we are ‘borrowing’ natural resources from future generations. We need to ensure that we leave future generations an earth that can maintain and sustain them.

Within this context, the South African government has passed the National Environmental Management: Waste Act (Act 59 of 2008) or ‘NEMWA’. NEMWA entrenches international best practices of waste management into law, and espouses an environmentally responsible and

sustainable approach. It is one attempt to respond to the growing threat of contamination and dwindling resources. NEMWA follows the National Environmental Management Act (Act 107 of 1998) or 'NEMA', which was developed to integrate environmental management on a nationwide scale.

NEMWA gives effect to the Constitutional right that guarantees the right of all South Africans to an environment that is not harmful to their health. The key aspects of the new legislation include:

- decreasing the consumption of natural resources
- minimising waste generation
- recycling
- appropriate and sustainable waste disposal
- preventing pollution
- promoting effective waste services
- remedying land degradation, and
- achieving an efficient integrated waste-management reporting and planning regime.

The NEMWA provides comprehensive and integrated waste management legislation for waste throughout its life cycle.

Companies must be familiar with, and compliant to the legislation as NEMWA introduces criminal liability for directors and companies and an offender may receive a fine of up to R10 million or imprisonment of up to ten years for certain offences. Moreover, directors need to ensure that their companies are compliant to the legislation, or they risk being brought to book by the Department of Environmental Affairs' Enforcement Directorate, and its dedicated environmental team, known as the 'Green Scorpions'.

As the legislative requirements have become more rigorous and the costs associated with the treatment and disposal of waste are increasing, so more companies are becoming aware of the need to improve their waste management. Additionally, the costs associated with the treatment or disposal of waste are on the rise, which in turn impact upon a company's financial performance. The private sector has to act on the need to have more improved and integrated waste management systems in place, and waste generation must be examined and reduced at all phases of a product's life cycle.

In line with the philosophy of "waste not, want not"; the issue of waste management speaks to the efficient use of resources and a reduction in waste generation. While the generation of waste can be limited, it cannot be avoided entirely. This may be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. Any portion of waste, once it has been re-used, recycled and recovered, ceases to be waste. Companies may gain revenue by selling recyclables, and recycling is a way to extract value from the waste stream. The other benefits include creating opportunities for Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) and, in the process, creating jobs.

The challenge around waste and waste management is therefore two-fold: *reduce* the amount of waste that is generated, and of the waste that remains, try to *re-use* it for another purpose.

Waste management strategies need to be informed by sound environmental practises, as espoused in the King Report for Corporate Governance (King III). These practises must be sustainable in the economic and environmental sense and will form a critical component of a company's integrated reporting. The methods used need to promote the effective use of valuable resources, support the reduction of waste generation and must encourage resource conservation and recovery.

The risk to human health and the degradation of the environment may be reduced through the implementation of systems that help to prevent pollution and promote a cleaner, 'greener' environment. This will ensure that the different types of waste are separated, that waste is collected regularly, transported and stored safely and appropriately treated, and – as a last resort – disposed of.

What remains to be seen is which companies will rise to combat the growing threat, and adapt themselves to play a more active role in effectively championing, as one key area, sustainable and integrated waste management?

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