

AN INQUIRY INTO WASTE MANAGEMENT FOR A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

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Abstract

The term 'sustainable waste management' (SWM) is increasingly being used in academic literature and policy spheres, but what does it really mean, and what does it stand for? There is still a lack of theoretical congruity behind its substance and forms.

This paper explores the broad question of how waste management should be pursued in a sustainable society from the perspective of a national government. Dominant theoretical frameworks and principles related to sustainability, sustainable development and waste management are critically reviewed. It is found that current frameworks and models of sustainable waste management are largely decision-support frameworks that are based on a 'weak sustainability' approach of optimizing the sub-system from economic, environmental and social perspectives. It is argued that this approach is helpful, but ultimately inadequate when it comes to contributing to long-term, higher sustainability goals of society.

Alternatively, the 'strong sustainability' paradigm calls for a framework that recognizes the primacy of natural functions and laws over economic and social factors, and understands the waste phenomenon through the lens of material and ecological science. Under a strong sustainability paradigm, the heuristic boundaries of the waste management agenda are broadened to encompass interventions over issues concerning the entire life-cycle of materials, from production and consumption to disposal.

In the final section, this paper proposes a strong-sustainability inspired framework on waste management for sustainability. Taking into account the existing challenges encountered in making sustainability operational in practice, some policy suggestions are made for waste management policies and practices.