

By Flemming Stender, Ambassador of Denmark to Latvia

Towards a circular economy

In my house in Denmark, just outside Copenhagen, my family and I have for many years been used to collecting waste in several different types. We have four different waste containers sorting glass, plastics, paper, metal, hazardous items and ordinary waste. Soon we will have more containers in front of the house to sort also food waste, carton, textiles, and milk and food boxes. All citizens and companies in Denmark will be obliged to sort ten different types of waste in order to increase reuse and recycling.

All over the world, we see waste in places where it does not belong. Plastic floating in the sea causing harm to marine life, or garbage polluting the ground or the air.

But waste does not only pose a threat to the climate, nature and environment. It also represents a resource that potentially can be reused instead of using new raw materials.

Efficient waste management addresses some of the most urgent global issues identified in the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) including sanitation, climate action, sustainable cities and communities as well as responsible consumption and production.

We need to reduce the amounts of waste and use our resources smarter and more responsibly. This calls for a change. Where waste is more seen as a valuable resource rather than a problem. Opening up for new possibilities for recycling, reuse and sharing.

Denmark has set a very ambitious goal to reduce CO₂ emissions by 70 percent in 2030. To reach this objective, all sectors of the economy have to contribute by reducing CO₂-emissions - including the waste sector.

More than two-thirds of all waste in Denmark is being recycled. Less than five per cent goes to landfills. While the rest is being used for the production of energy producing a quarter of Denmark's district heating needs and approximately five per cent of electricity production.

The Danish return system for cans and bottles is a good example of efficient recycling. The return system for glass bottles was introduced already back in 1942! Twenty years ago, the return system was extended to also include cans. Today, 96 per cent of all bottle packaging with pant, or 9 out of 10 bottles and cans are being collected and returned. It makes 1,2 bn. bottles and cans annually! The return system has saved the environment for more than 1 million tons of CO₂. Every time each of us return our bottles and cans, we make our own small contribution to a better climate and environment. It is good to see that a similar return system is now being introduced in Latvia.

But Denmark wants to move further towards a circular economy. Recently, we have agreed on a new vision for a green waste sector with less waste, more reuse, and less incineration. The aim is to make the Danish waste sector entirely climate neutral by 2030 and to sort 80 per cent of all plastics.

To reach the goal of a climate neutral waste sector, everyone has to contribute. Citizens, companies, and local communities. Sorting the waste from all households and cities in ten different waste types will ensure a more uniform waste collection across Denmark, and thus increase the potential for reuse and recycling.

The Danish island of Bornholm – a very popular holiday destination in the middle of the Baltic Sea - was last year chosen as the most sustainable island in the EU. Bornholm has a vision to

become the world's first zero waste society based on the principles of a circular economy. With an ambition to put an end to waste entirely by 2032, by either recycling or reusing all waste and eliminating incineration completely. The aim is to become a lighthouse for others showing an example of how waste can become a resource for the benefit of the whole society. Bornholm – who is also the venue for annual Danish democracy festival “Folkemødet” that has inspired the Latvian conversation festival LAMPA - presented the island's zero waste vision at LAMPA last week in a session organized by Green Liberty and the Danish embassy in Latvia. Sharing experiences and best practices on circular economies across the Baltic Sea can give inspiration for realising the potential of the circular economy for the benefit of peoples and societies.