Recycling: The first step toward a sustainable economy

Thanks to public/private cooperation between the non-profit Ecoembes and public administrations, Spain leads container recycling in Europe.

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Between 1998 and 2012, Spain went from recycling a mere 5 percent of discarded containers to 70 percent. At this rate, the country has surpassed E.U. objectives by 15 points and has become a model of recycling within Europe.

One of the key factors is the success of Ecoembalajes Spain in managing this initiative. Known as Ecoembes, this non-profit organization oversees the enforcement of the law governing the recycling of containers and container waste, in effect since 1998.

With a sustainable economy as the ultimate aim, Ecoembes has aligned the participation of different agents involved in waste management over the past few years. Their efforts have contributed to an improved institutional framework, the adoption of best practices and raised citizen awareness.

A report published by J.R. Pin, the José Felipe Bertrán Chair of Governance and Leadership in Public Administration at IESE, and Begoña de Benito of Ecoembes outlines the key factors that have led to this model's success.

According to the report, coordinated by Ángela Gallifa, Ecoembes is an example of a successful entrepreneurial initiative.

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An integrated management system

The enactment of the container law, aimed at preventing and reducing the environmental impact of domestic waste, such as Tetra Briks, cans, paper, cardboard, wood and glass, is just the first step. Devising the necessary measures to implement the law is the next step.

This task falls on the shoulders of Ecoembes, whose stakeholders include container and raw material manufacturers as well as distributors and recyclers.

The Integrated Waste Management System (in Spanish, *Sistema de Gestión de Residuos* or SIG), approved by the European Commission, is the compass for its activities.

SIG is a model of shared responsibility in which packaging manufacturers, public administrations and citizens all take part.

These three main actors are key in the recycling chain and ensure the smooth functioning of Ecoembes, which has generated 42,000 jobs since it was created.

Inside Ecoembes

In 2012, Ecoembes had 12,000 associated businesses that finance the organization by paying a quota based on the amount of containers released into the market (1.7 million tons in 2012). The objective is to fund the collection of selective waste for public entities.

By law, companies are obliged to declare both the amount and the weight of containers that they release into the market, and at the same time, assume responsibility for their recovery.

At the end of the chain, it is the companies themselves that reuse the new containers and products that come about from recycling. This is beneficial to them and to the environment.

Food and beverage companies (75 percent) and cleaning and maintenance businesses (8 percent) contribute most to financing Ecomedes.

Public/private synergy

Business efforts would be to no avail if it weren't for Spain's town halls and autonomous regions, which have contributed to the waste management system's effectiveness.

The Ecoembes model covers 99 percent of the population, thanks to the 107 agreements between various public entities.

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Most of the 436 million euros that Ecomedes spent in 2012 was earmarked for agreements signed with local and regional authorities for the financing of selective collection and subsequent separation of containers at their respective plants.

R&D plays a role in this process, as it fosters the exploration of alternative materials, improvements in collection and separation systems, and new markets for recycled materials. The objective is to optimize resources, decrease costs and develop an efficient process.

Citizens taking part

Citizen involvement is the third pillar of the system, especially since citizens are active participants in the recycling phase. Because of their role, Ecoembes works closely with public administrations in awareness-raising campaigns, and the results have been quite impressive.

In 2012, every Spaniard recycled, on average, 11 kg of lightweight packaging and 16 kg of cardboard and paper, by depositing it in any of 528,000 containers distributed throughout the country. Despite the decrease in consumption, there has actually been an increase in the amount of lightweight packaging that is recycled.

Another area that the Ecoembes report highlights is the promotion of ecofriendly design, making packaging lighter and lessening its environmental impact. Its strategy rests on four pillars:

- tools to support ecofriendly packaging design
- information about waste prevention
- training in packaging and the environment
- disseminating companies' accomplishments

As a result of its innovation, sustainability and constant search for environmental and economic efficiency, Ecoembes has developed an effective and competitive system within a framework of reasonable costs.

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