

Sustainable Innovation 2010

Social Innovation for Green Jobs and Zero Waste: How Community Enterprise in Reuse and Remanufacturing is Shaping the Transition to a Low Carbon Economy

Stephen Edwards, Eco Interiors, UK

In recent years the UK Waste Management & Recycling Industry has moved from relative obscurity to become a highly visible, key player in both the UK economy and the environmental sector. Its importance has grown beyond society's growing awareness of pollution caused by the disposal of waste, to the significant role waste plays in both climate change and resource efficiency. For example, if 70% of the UK's municipal waste (which alone represents just 9% of the UK's total waste) was reused and recycled, it has been estimated that it would save 14.8 million metric tonnes of carbon equivalent.

Compared to many of our continental European neighbours, the UK has lagged behind in Waste Management and Recycling initiatives. Municipal and commercial recycling rates have been low and, with few exceptions, both government and industry have been slow in developing successful and innovative examples of sustainable waste practices.

Whilst many barriers exist to the development of sustainable innovation in industry, commerce and agriculture, leading sustainability thinkers have highlighted the importance of community and local participation in sustainable solutions. Others advocate a shift of policy from recycling (or 'downcycling') and incineration, to 'upcycling' and closed loop industrial processes. Given the failure of the UK government and industry to take the lead on shifting towards a zero waste economy, this paper examines the importance of community based approaches to eliminating the concept of waste from our industrial processes through radical and transformative closed loop strategies.

Three UK case studies will be examined that demonstrate how social enterprises are leading the way in developing these radical and transformative approaches to a more sustainable and resilient future.

1. The Able Project's 'Cardboard to Caviar' scheme illustrates how creating local, closed loop material flows can also create social benefits in employment and rehabilitation.
2. Through reuse and remanufacturing, Green-Works helps to divert some of the 400,000 tonnes of furniture sent to landfill in the UK each year, and creates jobs and skills training for marginalised sections of the community.
3. Bioregional's ReLY programme has developed both a network and structure for social enterprises to establish the reuse and recycling of construction materials to reduce waste and carbon emissions, and help to regenerate local economies.

These pioneering projects understand the importance of pursuing the triple bottom line of social, economical and environmental benefits to sustainability within a radical and transformative framework based on community participation and an ecological literacy that enshrines the concept "waste equals food". These projects are leading the way forward and inspiring UK business and industry to create a zero waste, low carbon economy.