Can culture bring new meaning to waste?

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In the face of a growing sense of urgency to address global climate goals, there is a need for approaches that move beyond technical innovations to better integrate a wide range of factors, including cultural contexts. A report published today by WHO/Europe attempts to systematically engage with the role of behaviour and cultural contexts inwastemanagement practices, and how these impact health and well-being.

The report looks at the roles of culture in the generation and management of municipal solid waste (as opposed to industrial waste or sewage) and how this influences the conditions for health and well-being.

With the rise ofconsumerism,wastehas come to symbolize the absence of meaning. Building on insights from the health humanities and social sciences, thereport emphasizes the importance of recastingwastemanagement as meaningful practiceat the individual, community and national level. Usingcase stories and good practice examples from WHO Member States, the report shows howstrategies of reducing, reusing and recyclingare often deeply rooted cultural practices, and how these can be mobilized using grassroots action – if governments create the conditions for it.

The report is based on a scoping review of 193 articles and is published as part of the Health Evidence Network synthesis report series.

A cultural approach is premised on the understanding that different groups operate using a wide range of categories, assumptions and moralities. Culture is as a complex terrain that has intersecting political, economic, ecological, legal, ethical and moral practices and values that influence behaviours and experiences related to waste and health. Cultural factors also operate at various scales, from local customs to national norms.

A cultural lens helps policy-makers understand different ways of knowing, being and doing across and within regions and demographics. It also acknowledges diversity within seemingly shared cultures, which is particularly important given the uneven distribution of the negative impacts posed by waste production, treatment and disposal. A cultural lens can be used to understand perceptions and experiences of these inequities, and to tailor context-sensitive interventions that are more likely to succeed in reducing harm and promoting health and well-being.

Paying attention to differences between and within cultures can reveal multiple points of meaningful intervention. It is important for regulations, laws and incentives to consider the cultural contexts affecting the upstream generation of waste (large-scale cultures of consumption and disposability) and downstream management of waste (disposal, reclamation, recycling etc.). The report highlights the importance of engaging people and communities in policy-making about waste to promote health and well-being.

This relies on creating a shared understanding between different actors involved in and affected by waste management practices, and promoting participatory decision-making processes about waste management that engage local stakeholders to better understand, prioritize and address local concerns and perceptions of harm. Grassroots initiatives, such as community-led clean-ups, art projects or citizen science initiatives, can also be supported and scaled up to catalyse change and ensure sustainability.

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