

# Looking at the opera from the back door

## Intercultural communication from the point of view of waste management

*« Tomorrow is Monday, so don't forget to take out the dustbin. And Wednesday is the second Wednesday of the month, so we need to take out empty bottles and glass. »*

Switzerland has long been one of the leading countries in the area of waste recycling. For decades, the country has recycled practically everything.

Households sort glass, paper, compost, aluminium, batteries, plastic, clothing, coffee capsules, portable phones, computers, and televisions for recycling. And this list is far from exhaustive.

Industry, construction, offices and ministries, towns, train stations, church parishes – everyone recycles.



SORTING BINS AT THE LAUSANNE TRAIN STATION

## Very clear rules

Not only is everything recycled, but things are sorted according to very clear rules: cardboard does not go with paper, cooked vegetables must not be put in the compost, and definitely no meat or cheese. Glass bottles are separate from plastic bottles, and clear glass does not go in the same container as brown glass.



SORTING BINS IN A LAUSANNE BLOCK, PROPERTY OF SCHL (Société Coopérative d'Habitation Lausanne)

Towns pick up each kind of waste on specific days, and each home gets a detailed schedule of what is picked up which day in which block.

And things do not stop there. Each town has specially coloured bags for collecting trash. These bags are sold in stores, and only these are picked up. There are even trash controllers who open illegal bags and try to discover a sign of the identity of the cheaters. Offenders are reprimanded.

Not only is it necessary to use the correct bag... householders must also put them out on the right day and into the correct container. Here also great precision is required in sorting: there are containers for glass, containers for batteries, those for paper, those for cardboard.....





SORTING BINS IN A LAUSANNE BLOCK, PROPERTY OF SCHL (Société Coopérative d'Habitation Lausanne)

Municipalities also run recycling centres where any person living in the town can take all kinds of waste, putting it in clearly-separated locations: wood, iron, tyres, cleaning products, coffee capsules, etc. These centres are open at specified hours, and there, too, precision holds sway. Green waste is recycled and composted in a special place.



AT THE PLATEAU DE DIESE RECYCLING CENTRE



## Shared cultural values

Everyone participates in this great activity, which rests on essential principles and cultural values shared by the great majority of the population: ecology, the struggle against waste and pollution, cleanliness, the beauty of public spaces, hygiene, thrift, individual and collective responsibility, public health, the partnership between citizens and towns, the effectiveness of services, and transparency of rules and schedules.



VEVEY: SIGN IN THE SIDEWALK DESCRIBING WHERE TO DISPOSE OF ORGANIC WASTE

Although certainly there are exceptions, the great majority of people living in Switzerland voluntarily participate in the game, carrying out their part of the responsibility in this vast common enterprise.



RENENS: THE CITY LIFTS BURIED CONTAINERS TO EMPTY THEM



## The role of concierges

There is one professional group that plays a very significant part in this whole operation: **the concierges**. In the buildings, the concierges take care of the well-functioning of this whole operation of recycling. They make sure that the services of collection find containers according to the rules of the art, they assure cleanup after the collection, and they inform tenants of all the rules that govern the management of rubbish for the building and for the city. The task is often thankless and painful, because not everyone plays by the rules. Familial or professional frustrations are sometimes transferred to the handling of waste... Just to annoy or take revenge on someone, the rules are ignored... and the concierge has to come along and try to mend or clean up the mess.

The concierges also have a role as teachers, especially for foreign tenants who do not yet know the Swiss culture of waste management.

Indeed, in many countries, the recycling of waste follows rules quite different from those practised in Switzerland. Interacting with people from diverse cultures allows concierges to realise how the management of waste is a cultural act and not universal, based on very specific values and norms.

## Waste management – other traditions

The Swiss system relies on each person managing his or her own waste... which is not a universal idea. In India, for example, certain castes do not touch rubbish, while others have the responsibility to do so.

In Cairo, in Egypt, the collection and sorting of waste is not the business of the municipality, but of a specific community. The article below «Die Müllspezialisten von Kairo», by Gundula Madeleine Tegtmeyer gives a fascinating description of the efficiency of its functioning.

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[http://www.natuerlich-online.ch/fileadmin/Natuerlich/Archiv/2006/03-06/3\\_52-59zabbaleen.pdf](http://www.natuerlich-online.ch/fileadmin/Natuerlich/Archiv/2006/03-06/3_52-59zabbaleen.pdf)

In Brazil also, the sorting of waste is most often a private affair. The means of transport vary from bicycle to truck, occasionally by handcart...



PHOTO BY SIMONE SOARES DE OLIVEIRA: A YOUNG MAN WORKS AT SORTING WASTE IN BRAZIL

In certain poor countries, rubbish is all deposited in open containers, which are occasionally collected by the city and burned. In many rural areas, fire is the preferred way to get rid of waste. Watercourses are often used for dumping refuse... the streams are charged with taking it away.

In many countries, people take out rubbish when they feel the need, not according to a schedule set up by the municipality.

Systems of waste management depend on culture, beliefs and, of course, the economic resources of a country.



TRASH COLLECTION IN LANGA, A SUBURB ON THE SOUTH AFRICAN CAPE: « THE TRUCK IS COMING BY TODAY »

In Cochabamba, Bolivia, trash collection is a chance to interact with the neighbours... at dawn, as described by Karin Krebs and Paulo Vallejos, participants in a cooperation project for Comundo in Bolivia, in this passage from one of their letters:

*« Contact with our neighbours is very friendly: on the road or at the playground, we always exchange warm words. But the regular rendezvous is each week, at dawn, when we all get ourselves up to give our trash to men who come to collect it with the city trucks.*

*In our street, the truck comes by before 6 o'clock, and the driver rings a full peal on the resonant bell. This is the signal—time to jump out of bed, grab the trash bags, and run to give them to the men who collect them. Several times so far we have not gotten out quickly enough... We had to save our bags until the next collection. This morning activity, which might seem disagreeable, in fact provides a chance for very precious contact with neighbours, to exchange the gossip of the day, in bathrobe and wild hair. »*



RUBBISH COLLECTION IN COCHABAMBA, BOLIVIA.  
Photo Karin Krebs



In Cochabamba too, trash is deposited in a huge open air dump. The poorest people come and search the rubbish for something to eat or certain precious bits that can be resold to recyclers.



WASTE MANAGEMENT IN COCHABAMBA, BOLIVIA. Photo Karin Krebs





## The intercultural dimension of waste management

Integrating into a new culture is difficult and takes a lot of time. Managing waste is not an insignificant challenge in this adaptation.

- What a strange idea, that people with modest budgets should spend money for trash bags, when they have old plastic bags at home that would work just as well. Better to spend the money for food, or for cigarettes, or to send money back to family still in the homeland.
- What a strange idea that people no longer have the right to burn their trash, nor to throw it outside.
- What a strange idea that people have a collective responsibility to keep public spaces clean, if they come from a country where responsibility is limited to keeping private spaces clean.
- Likewise, what a strange idea that people have to sort waste and take it out on a precise schedule, especially for those who come from cultures where the present moment guides activities more than fixed appointments established well in advance.
- What a strange idea that people should worry about the collection of this or that rubbish when they are in full culture shock, when they have lost their bearings, do not speak the language, and do not know the receiving culture yet. The pervasiveness of recycling and its importance is not clearly apparent during the early stages of cultural learning, even if the concierge explains the rules.
- Finally, what a strange idea that people have to worry about rubbish when they have much more important concerns, when they have lost kin or endured traumatic experiences that have not yet healed.

Concierges are well aware that it is not enough to explain the rules. They have to be re-explained over and over again. In fact, it is not enough to present the rules, it is necessary to explain the why and the how, to build bridges between the cultural workings of a person's country of origin and the cultural workings of Switzerland in terms of waste. This involves joining in an important part of the process of integration. Rules are better understood and better put into practice if concierges establish a friendly relationship with people newly arrived in Switzerland. Providing time for dialogue allows the avoidance of many disappointments, frustrations and arguments, and expands the cultural and personal horizons of the people interacting. The time invested in this yields rapid returns and allows concierges to save a lot

of time very soon! Explanatory written information published by some cities is a great help for such dialogue, but it cannot replace it.



MATERIALS DEVELOPED BY THE CITY OF RENENS TO EXPLAIN, IN SEVERAL LANGUAGES, HOW TO SORT WASTE

Esteemed concierges, thank you for this work of information and the help to integration that you provide daily, discreetly, regularly. Integration is also understanding why and how one handles waste in the host country.

Véronique Schoeffel, April 2016

A great thank you to Simone Soares de Oliveira and to Karin Krebs for sharing their photos. Other photos are by Véronique Schoeffel.

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