# Waste wars reveals the dark realities of the global waste trade



Alexander Clapp’s book, "Waste Wars: Dirty Deals, International Rivalries and the Scandalous Afterlife of Rubbish," offers a comprehensive and sobering exploration of the global waste crisis, interweaving historical, geographical, and socio-political threads to depict a complex landscape of environmental degradation and human exploitation. Published by John Murray, London, and recently reviewed in Frontline Magazine, the book spans worldwide waste flows, revealing the disturbing realities behind the generation, disposal, and trade of rubbish, especially its impact on the Global South.

Clapp's investigative journey reveals a pattern that unfolded after the pesticide industry’s rise, highlighted initially by environmentalist Rachel Carson. Regulatory measures aimed at controlling hazardous waste were mostly confined to the United States and parts of the Global North. Meanwhile, many countries in the Global South became repositories for escalating volumes of industrial waste. International aid agencies such as USAID facilitated the transfer of waste stockpiles to nations like India, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Haiti, regardless of local environmental or health conditions.

An entire industry grew around collecting and exporting toxic pollutants, including asbestos residues, cyanide-contaminated materials, PCBs, hydraulic fluids, and infectious medical waste, under the guise of aid or development assistance. This trade found lucrative markets within poor countries, often entangled with their indebtedness and dependency on wealthier nations. In Latin America, right-wing governments allied with the US accepted waste in exchange for military support, while the Soviet Union also engaged in waste exports to client states like Benin.

The year 1973 marked a significant turning point as the oil crisis plunged many countries into debt, forcing them to accept foreign scrap metal as development aid, thus blurring the lines between waste and economic growth. This phenomenon intensified the existing disparities between the "clean" North and the "dirty" South.

One of the most harrowing accounts Clapp provides concerns “waste villages” in East Java, Indonesia. Initially established to support a local paper production industry reliant on bamboo, these villages became recipients of foreign waste paper mixed with plastic sheets. Unable to return the plastic contamination, locals spread the remainders on rice paddies, which led to the disappearance of agricultural land replaced by fields of dried plastic. Villagers burned the plastic as a cheap fuel source in everyday cooking, contaminating local food supplies and further damaging the environment. Despite the barren soils, depleted wildlife, and polluted water sources, the economic incentives led to a grim acceptance of this toxic reality, with communities even electing “trash chiefs” to manage the distribution of plastic fuel.

Turkey emerges in Clapp’s narrative as a key site in global waste management, especially following China’s 2018 ban on plastic imports. Faced with diminished options, the Global North redirected plastic waste to countries in Latin America, Africa, India, Southeast Asia, and occasionally to Southern Europe, including Greece and Turkey. Turkey’s economic expansion was partially fuelled by importing scrap steel and aluminium from the US and Europe, recycling it, and shipping some of the finished products back to the West. This complex arrangement effectively outsourced the environmental burden of recycling and waste processing.

Ghana's capital, Accra, is depicted as a graveyard for electronic waste, with slums like Agbogbloshie at the heart of the global e-waste crisis. Young local workers dismantle discarded electronic items from the West, processing toxic materials often by burning components to extract valuable metals, frequently at great personal health risk. Others exploit the digital remnants to commit online scams. Clapp highlights that this dire situation results not from local failings, but from the Western world's careless disposal of functional or near-functional devices, exacerbated by a lack of data wiping or responsible recycling practices.

The book also touches on other egregious examples, such as development projects in Somalia involving roads built to conceal toxic waste beneath tarmac, and the covert dumping of hazardous waste in isolated Central American lakes. A notable case features waste ash from Philadelphia, mislabeled as fertilizer, which was moved through a labyrinthine shipping route across multiple continents before finally being dumped in Haiti, a process timed to align with the installation of compliant officials.

Clapp’s work illustrates the global trade in hazardous waste in stark human and environmental terms, with ship-breaking yards in places like Alang, India, and Chittagong, Bangladesh, serving as hubs for dangerous scrapping activities under lax regulations. The fact that the United States has not ratified the Basel Convention, which regulates the transboundary movement of hazardous wastes, perpetuates a system whereby wealthier nations export their pollution problems to poorer regions.

Throughout the book, Clapp offers a pointed critique of what he terms the longstanding ideology of "Trumpism"—a worldview that privileges the interests of white Western nations above all else, justifying exploitation and environmental injustice. He argues it reflects an Ayn Rand-like selfishness that ignores the rights and welfare of the poor and vulnerable globally.

Despite the grim scenarios detailed, Clapp also presents cautious optimism, highlighting existing knowhow and financial resources that could be mobilised to develop sustainable waste management solutions. He points to initiatives in Kerala, India, promoting decentralised, community-driven zero-waste systems, as encouraging examples. The emphasis lies on the need for effective governance, policy reform, and active civic engagement to shift away from business-as-usual models that rely on exporting waste burdens.

Reviewer P. Vijaya Kumar, an English teacher based in Thiruvananthapuram, calls Clapp’s contribution an indispensable update to the earlier India-focused narrative provided by Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey in "Waste of a Nation" (2018). Kumar praises Clapp's journalistic thoroughness, eloquence, and ability to illuminate the global waste trade's darker aspects, which collectively point to pressing challenges and potential avenues for reform.

Clapp’s "Waste Wars" ultimately serves as a stark exposé of the international waste trade’s consequences for people and ecosystems in the Global South, as well as an extended meditation on the geopolitical and economic forces sustaining this trade. His work underscores the urgent need for systemic changes in how waste is managed worldwide.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/214175143-waste-wars> - This link provides additional context on 'Waste Wars,' detailing its exploration of the international trafficking of hazardous waste and its consequences in various countries.
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