

# The landfill? Like a secret lover who calls at Xmas.

The dangerous paradox in public debate on the circular economy.

by Massimo Vaccari

**T**he concept of the circular economy is gradually winning over hearts and minds, to the point where it is now one of the main topics of public debate on the ecological transition. Yet, one detail seems to be deliberately overlooked by many of these discussions: the essential role of sustainably managed landfills. And the obvious question is: why?

## Why are landfills not talked about?

The reason why so many people tend to neglect or minimise the role of sustainable landfills when talking about the circular economy is easy to understand. Mainstream thinking tends to idealise a waste-free society, where everything is recycled, re-used or regenerated. So the meaning of the term 'zero waste' is artfully transmuted into 'zero trash'. Although this is a laudable vision from an ethical viewpoint, it bears no relation to current reality and is liable to generate harmful consequences.

Concealing the function of landfills may be rooted in a negative historic perception that sees these sites as symbols of waste and poor environmental management. But ignoring or underestimating their current and potential contribution to the circular economy is not only unwarranted, it is also dangerously misleading.

## The hidden value of landfills

Sustainably managed landfills are not the enemy of the circular economy: rather, they are indispensable allies as we move towards more responsible and efficient waste management. The ultimate goal, of course, is to minimise the volume of waste sent to landfill. At the same time, however, the residual fractions of waste we are left with after all the various phases of the circular economy have been completed (reduction at source, re-use and regeneration of products and spare parts, recycling of raw materials and recovery of secondary materials and energy) are scrap from which no further



Massimo Vaccari  
President, La  
Filippa,  
Assoambiente

value can be obtained, and they need to be safely disposed of. And that must surely be in a limited number of modern, correctly managed landfills serving the circular economy.

Leaving the role of landfills out of the debate on the circular economy is a short-sighted attempt to present a rosy picture. Yet another short-cut that rejects the complexity of the challenge presented by the ecological transition. And on the subject of short-cuts that lead to a dead end, this loser's game also includes the clumsy attempt to use landfills as scarecrows by people trying to fend off attacks on waste-to-energy plants, who underestimate the risk of taking part in the gameplay favoured by the No committees and the huge cross-cutting NIMBY front.

## The need for genuine comprehensive debate

In conclusion: if we persist with the paraphernalia of tactical manoeuvring, overblown clichés and short-winded, long-nosed storytelling, we risk receiving a phone call from the lover we've been keeping secret just as the family is sitting down for Xmas dinner. Because sooner or later the truth will be out. This is why, if the public debate on the circular economy is to have a real impact on the growing challenges for institutions, business and communities posed by the climate crisis and the ecological transition, it has to up its game and become more transparent, more authentic and more comprehensive. We cannot afford to ignore or undervalue the tools and solutions provided by today's best available technology, which play an essential role in current waste management and prevention of serious harm to health and the environment. Sustainable landfills are a part of this, and it is vital that we recognise them as such to move towards a truly circular future: Federico Poli's article – What do landfills have to do with the circular economy? – demonstrates this by entering into the merits of the question and highlighting the value of the solutions available today and the urgent need to bridge a systems gap that is becoming daily more critical. As the FEAD's payoff says: 'waste management is the mirror of the entire economy'.