

# Sustainable living key to tackling climate change

ISWA's James Law explains how changing people's mindsets and behaviours could just save the day

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James Law, chair of the ISWA's Working Group on Landfill, says we must commit to promoting sustainable living in all nations. PHOTO: JAMES LAW

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SUSTAINABLE living is increasingly becoming important in view of the worsening global climate change situation – as witnessed in recent months in different parts of the world, which experienced extreme temperatures never seen before in some locations.

“Many human activities, such as burning fossil fuels and deforestation, contribute to these extreme climate changes – such as heat waves, severe drought and unusual weather patterns, wildfires, and the melting of the Arctic glacial ice – that have been observed in recent years. Our climate will continue to get worse if we do nothing,” says James Law, who was recently re-elected for a second term as chair of the Working Group on Landfill (WGL) at the International Solid Waste Association (ISWA).

He is also chair of the Task Force for Closing Dumpsites (TFCD) initiative, and on his last year of his third term as a board member of ISWA. Law is a vice-president at SCS Engineers in the US and has been with the firm for over 30 years.

“Wildfires are no longer just rampant over the western United States in the California area, but now they are occurring in Europe and Africa. For example, a heatwave fueled wildfires that raged across Western Europe. In Portugal on Jul 13, temperatures reached 45 deg C in the town of Leiria, and burned down over 3,000 hectares of land,” he tells *The Business Times* (BT) in an interview.

There is a direct link between human health and the extreme heat from global climate change conditions, he says.

“Sustainable living, in a nutshell, may just save the day, because it helps us to manage properly the use of our limited natural resources and with creating less waste and conserving environmental resources for our future generations. Therefore, we must commit to promoting sustainable living in all nations.”

He is of the view that action needs to be taken by countries to promote sustainable living, which he believes every policymaker in every country needs to promote.

“Our education system and outreach programmes need to focus on human activities contributing to climate-change conditions, followed by what actions can be taken by all citizens to promote sustainable living practices,” he tells BT.

There are some actions that he suggests be taken for promoting and practising sustainable living:

- Define the goals and objectives and on what topics or past practices that we want to change our behaviour from,
- Bring in experts to provide education and outreach programmes to targeted communities,
- Get support from politicians and the approval from the government,
- Create a common agenda for the enactment of laws and policies and establish minimum regulations requirements such that it is enforceable and observable by an agency,
- Find local champions who can take the ownership seriously to implement an executable work plan that is measurable based on the goals and objectives set up at the beginning of the process,
- Engage the entire population within the selected communities to participate.



## Assuring a success story

To practice sustainable living in a rewarding way, you must do it with everybody in order to assure a success story to tell later, says Law.

An example of actions used against fossil fuels include the carbon tax policy, emissions tax on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, or energy tax. These laws enacted must be backed up with heavy penal sanctions and fines, including the shutting down of industries generating high levels of GHG.

The WGL chaired by Law is 1 of the 10 working groups under ISWA's Scientific Technical Committee with the primary mission of promoting sustainable and best waste management and sound landfill operations and management practices worldwide. The group's members are experts from all over the world who volunteer their time to share their experience and to get involved in activities that benefit others who want to improve their waste management practices, for better protection of human health and a clean environment.

“Currently, we have about 100 members worldwide. We also give training workshops, publish case studies, white papers and guidance documents on specific topics of interest based on current challenges and trends on waste management practices and landfill operation issues,” Law tells BT.

Law says: “We have the expertise and a clear goal of providing capacity building, educating and sharing our experience with interested landfill operators in many developing countries to improve their landfill operation and management practices, including issues with health and safety that impacts the workers' health.”

An example is the WGL's involvement in teaching and training participants at the ISWA – Solid Waste Institute for Sustainability (ISWA-SWIS) Winter School programme directed by Dr Sahadat Hossain at the University of Texas in Arlington, Texas. Since 2016, it has been involved with the 2-week training programme, covering landfill operations, management and landfill mining, for more than 300 participants from over 80 countries.

The WGL has a 2-year work programme that helps in organising its international efforts. The current one is for 2022-2024.

Another “hot initiative”, implemented since 2018, is the TFCD, which Law also chairs. “Its aim is to promote dumpsite closure worldwide as eliminating dumpsites is urgently needed to improve local, global health and the environment,” he tells BT.

In July, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted a historic resolution declaring access to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment a universal human right. “The resolution is a major achievement for the world and a game changer for the environmental industry, with ISWA as one of its representatives. This comes at a good time, supporting our continued call for closing all dumpsites and stopping open burning of waste,” says Law.

“A clean, healthy and sustainable environment will only be realised and possible with sound waste management by all nations.”

## **Psychological challenge**

For the next 4 years, the TFCD initiative will work to help many communities and inhabitants live a healthier life along with a clean environment. Its action plan will continue supporting waste diversion, waste recovery, and generation of biofuel from the landfills as alternative waste management systems during or after closing of dumpsites.

The WGL will continue publishing documents and case studies highlighting the benefits of closing dumpsites and managing waste in a sustainable and responsible manner. It offers support to countries and cities addressing this issue and suggesting potential funding agencies, Law adds.

“The WGL’s vision is to close all dumpsites worldwide and to transition into engineered sanitary landfills, along with other practical and affordable integrated waste management systems. To be an influential organisation globally, it is important for us to provide case studies on the success stories and to publish guidance documents and publications addressing basic education and training for achieving better waste management practices at all levels,” Law tells BT.

This is an effective way in changing people’s mindsets and behaviours to then practice innovative and sustainable waste management for a better sustainable living.

“I believe these types of activities will provide a bigger impact factor that attracts big funding players such as the World Bank and the UN’s Waste Management Division,” says Law.

Funding is often a key to success when experimenting or executing developmental work such as implementing sustainable living or better waste management systems that have not been tried before. Sustainable living requires well thought-out programmes with goals and objectives, along with estimating new employment opportunities and revenues. When trying out other waste management systems, capital costs, operation and maintenance costs, and cost-benefits analyses must be discussed and done to determine what level of funding is needed, Law tells BT.

“The challenge has a lot to do with the psychology of changing people’s old mindsets and traditional ways of doing things. There are a few steps that I would like to suggest doing before we get into the funding needed to practice sustainable living or to improve better waste management practices in a locality or community,” says Law.

“We must define the goals and objectives before deciding on the technologies or funding; bring in the experts to educate and present facts to decision-makers; and get approval from the local government. A road map must be laid out to track progress with budget and spending, with a clear payment schedule justified by actual results.”

Most of these development works are done through funding from the local government, a regional development bank, foreign investors or a private-public partnership programme who bring in the technologies, the money, and the know-how to execute the work, he adds.