

BIR: “The importance of the recycling industry is one of the best-kept secrets”

*Ranjit Singh Baxi, President
of Bureau of International
Recycling*

Olga Yakymchuk, Metal Expert, London

Depletion of the natural resources globally amid growing population and industrial development is increasing the role of waste recycling as it has become a core element of sustainable economic growth. Moreover, the circular economy concept which gains more popularity in the world today and implies reducing waste to a minimum as well as re-using, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products, makes the problem of wastes very important. Metal Expert had a unique opportunity to discuss this matter with Ranjit Singh Baxi, President of Bureau of International Recycling (BIR), who is confident that the recycling really should lead the world and its future.

2018 is a very special year for all BIR members as the federation is celebrating its 70th anniversary. How did the sector change over the period? What are the main challenges and opportunities for recycling industry today?

BIR was created after the war to overcome trade barriers so that recyclables can cross borders without any hindrance. Whilst a lot of success was achieved over the years, supported by the European Union's common market and other trade agreements, the recycling industry has been increasingly facing trade restrictions and over-regulation, i.e. having at times to cope with difficult environmental legislation which are very often based on a misconception of the work of recycling companies and of the nature of recyclable goods. The waste/non-waste discussion is at the heart of this misconception.

Another major change is the trend for mergers. Many smaller companies have been bought up by bigger groups, which have evidently changed the landscape of the recycling businesses which historically used to be mainly SMEs.

Over the last 70 years not only has the volume of recyclables produced and traded globally increased tremendously but also has the awareness of our industry started to take centre stage in many countries. The global trade in recyclables is projected to exceed \$400 billion by 2025 which certainly will provide lot more opportunities of growth across all the countries.

BIR unites several commodity divisions and committees such as ferrous and non-ferrous metals, stainless steel and special alloys, textiles, paper, plastic, rubber, e-scrap etc. Which role does each segment play in the global recycling industry?

As you know, all recyclables (and not only the ones the BIR represents) are vital for the value chain (or rather value circle) of the global circular economy. While some commodities like non-ferrous and ferrous shine through the sheer volumes and values attached to their trade, smaller segments like plastics, textiles, electronic waste, glass and tyres are equally important for the ultimate aim of relieving the planet of waste. Plastic and e-waste have particularly recently attracted public attention, and research & technology in those fields remain of paramount importance.

The main point of your work “Recycling our future – a global strategy” published a couple of years ago is that recyclables are resources but not wastes. How did you arrive at this idea?

Today globally we are finding more and more industries increasingly dependent on their usage of recyclables as an important source of raw material but yet the industry finds itself bound by waste regulations with very little understanding or recognition given to the huge contribution we are making for helping to promote a green sustainable planet.

Recycling industry saves over 700 million tonnes of CO2 emissions, helping to mitigate climate change risks whilst providing employment to millions globally and adding billions to global GDP. Additionally, the more we recycle means less we dump in landfills, promoting a healthy environment which are all fundamental goal of UN SDG 2030. So after these contributions, why are we not willing to accept that recyclables are a resource and not waste? So to promote the message, I therefore decided this to be the fundamental theme of my book.

Currently, more and more countries are focusing on building the circular economy. What impact will it have on the recycling industry and connected markets? How is the role of secondary raw materials change in this regard?

The recognition of the necessity of a circular economy is a victory for the recycling industry. BIR and all national recycling associations have always fought for the need to recognise the value circle rather than a chain. However, some countries or regions use the concept of restricting circular economy within their own national boundaries in order to secure their raw material supply. This equals to trade barriers. A circular economy is only fully functional if it works globally. BIR has always been fighting for free and fair trade of recyclables – and will continue to do so. Only then can we enjoy the full benefit of a circular economy that positively impacts the raw materials supply, demand and consumption cycles across the planet instead of a regionalised small economic cycle which cannot be sustainable for the planet.

BIR supports the global free trade. At the same time, we see a rise of protectionism, which influences the segment of secondary raw materials as well (for example, Section 232 in the US). What are the main barriers you see at the moment?

As mentioned earlier, trade barriers (hidden or more obvious) have always been part of the recycling industry's fate. I don't want to go into detail regarding specific countries or regions, these barriers have been headline news for many months now. I can only reiterate that the true economic and environmental benefit of recycling becomes workable when our goods can move freely across borders.

Global trade practices today are continuing to shift away from multilateralism and free trade and moving towards unilateralism and protectionism which seems to be the driving force today. We at BIR have and will continue to support free and fair trade of recyclables.

This year, in March, BIR organized the first-ever Global Recycling Day. Being the author of this idea, please tell us about this project. What effect do you plan to receive from such events?

For many years I have been saying that the great environmental, social and economic contributions of the recycling industry were not recognised globally nor given a central stage as a valued contributor to global trade and sustainable environment. Our contributions in supporting and working to help meet the climate change goals is immense but we are not seen anywhere in the COP Conferences. Why?

It is for this reason, I felt the need to create an event that would attract the public attention and raise awareness regarding the existence and working methods of this 'hidden' industry that not many people are aware of. Raising the public profile of our industry will ultimately benefit each and every company as both the civil population and the legislators will change their perception of an industry segment that has always had an image problem. I believe that we have achieved tremendous success following the launch of our First Global Recycling Day on March 18, 2018, and from now this day will be celebrated each year. It is an inclusive celebration, which unites individuals, companies, governments in the same endeavour to preserve primary resources and save our planet. We need to work together to recognise recyclables at the seventh most important resource on our planet.

Recycling prevents CO2-emissions, saves energy and protects natural resources. Why was not the importance of recycling and secondary raw materials for the climate detected earlier?

One of our keynote speakers once said: "The importance of the recycling industry is one of the best-kept secrets." Unfortunately, we have been busy doing our job well and efficiently for many decades and even centuries and never really worried about recognition of our contributions or even our image. With the increasing burden of environmental legislation, the industry realised that it was necessary to speak up. Recycling was receiving general approval; however recycling companies were almost penalised with more stringent regulation. We felt that there was a huge gap between the industry's actual contribution to the environment and the economy, and the general perception that people had of the 'dirty' recycling business.

It is now we in the recycling industry are wanting our story to be told and shared globally and be recognised for the efforts we are making in saving CO2 emissions, natural resources, creating employment, saving land from being used as landfills, promoting a healthy society and so on. I must also thank the media and especially magazines like yourselves that help us a lot in sharing our story globally.

According to numerous studies, the global economy is expected to grow in 2018. What are your forecasts for the secondary raw material by segments in this regard?

Following the doom and glooms of 2008, global economies have come a long way in the last 10 years. We have seen GDP's of several countries continuing to make huge strides of growth with China & India leading the curve. Today India is the fastest growing global economy at over 7.5%. Africa too is rebuilding their economy with several countries make great progress e.g. Rwanda & Ethiopia are growing at an excellent rate.

Additionally, the global population which today is at about 7 billion plus will grow to over 9 billion in the next 25 years with the middle classes income groups growing exponentially globally.

All this global growth is pointing towards increasing demand of both raw materials and manufacturing hubs in addition to meeting growing need for new roads, houses, hospitals, schools, clothes, cars, air conditions, aeroplanes and so on.

So not only for 2018 but I see that the demand for ferrous and non-ferrous scrap, plastic scrap paper scrap, used tyres, second-hand textile, electronic waste are all going to increase over the next 10 to 20 years to meet the increasing demand for finished goods.

The recycling industry is a key driver for a sustainable development with an annual turnover of more than \$200 billion. Do you see the potential for further growth in the long term?

Again, I would like to quote the keynote speaker that BIR invited to its 70th anniversary celebration in Barcelona this May. Mark Stevenson, a well-known futurist, said about recyclers: "Now is your time." Recyclables will become more and more important, as technology and know-how evolves to make recycling more and more efficient and increase the economic value of our secondary raw materials. With the global population growing exponentially, the importance of recyclables as valuable raw material for production of consumer goods will increase in the same way. So, yes, we have a huge growth ahead of us, and let's hope that legislators and the public will continue to support our important work.

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