

The modern-day BIR – in robust good health at 60

Formed principally to help smooth inter-country trade in recyclables, the BIR has expanded its range of activities beyond all recognition over the last 60 years, representing a robust but flexible force capable of responding to the often rapidly-changing needs of its recycling industry membership. This article looks at the modern-day BIR and how it has grown, while offering an insight into some of the future directions it may take, including the formation of an International Trade Council to address obstacles to the movement of recyclables.



BIR's most direct interaction with its membership comes at the annual spring and autumn conventions. In 2006, the organisation staged a fashion show during its Welcome Reception in the Forbidden City in the Chinese capital Beijing.

Important birthdays – such as the 60th currently being celebrated by the BIR world recycling body – offer a well-merited opportunity to indulge in nostalgia.

However, the BIR is also an organisation with its feet firmly planted in today's world, and the need to tackle a myriad of issues of crucial importance to every-day recycling activity will ensure that the organisation's secretariat and its leading lights do not dwell too long on the past. When the BIR was formed in 1948, its main focus was on facilitating trade between nations. But over the ensuing six decades, the organisation has constantly adapted to changing circumstances and, as a consequence, the changing needs of its membership, most notably perhaps in its response to a constant barrage of environmental legislation that was completely unforeseen among the BIR's founding fathers. The arrival of Environmental & Technical Director Ross Bartley

some 12 years ago and the formation of the International Environment Council (IEC) in 2002 illustrate how response to legislative developments has become core to the BIR operation. The development of the IEC 'has created a very good image for the BIR' in the eyes of legislators 'because this has shown we are committed to environmental matters', according to Director General Francis Veys.

International Trade Council

And such has been its success that the IEC template may be reused to create a body focusing specifically on trade-related issues. Mr Veys explains: 'We are missing an International Trade Council which, rather than looking at hindrances caused by environmental legislation, would address tariffs, duties, quotas and other obstacles to free and fair trade. We should look to achieve in the industry context what we have achieved with environmental regulation at the supranational level.'

It is envisaged that BIR World President Dominique Maguin will launch this initiative at the organisation's 2008 Spring Convention taking place in Monte-Carlo in early June.

Network of experts

For its part, the IEC is composed of environmental experts in the field of recycling, appointed primarily with the support of their national associa-

Representing more than 700 individual members over 40 national recycling federations and associations from around 70 countries, BIR is truly a global recycling organisation



tions. Through this network, national experiences of legislation affecting recycling businesses are exchanged across all the main BIR commodities. In between the IEC's bi-annual gatherings at BIR conventions, the secretariat maintains an active presence at the UN-EP Basel Convention meetings and within the OECD Working Group on Waste Prevention and Recycling, while also working closely with decision-makers within the EU.

The range of topics covered by the IEC is extensive: for example, it has provided technical advice on everything from environmentally sound management to guidelines on lead-acid battery recycling and shipbreaking; it has contributed to UN-ECE work aimed at minimising and managing contamination incidents caused by loss of control of radioactive sources by governments; and it has closely engaged with the improvement of UN, OECD and EU legislation relating to shipments of 'waste', in particular to non-OECD countries.

Promoting solutions

'The IEC has enabled discussion and, where there was consensus, promotion of international and national laws beneficial to recycling,' states Mr Bartley. 'Conversely, where problems with legislation were experienced, the dialogue was to uncover, agree and promote solutions.' This strategy 'has proved successful', with legislation 'getting better', he believes. 'Unfortunately, in too many cases, it has taken many years to obtain improvements.'

Following the origination of a range of international and regional legislation on waste management, including laws on recycling, 'the next generation of legislative development is now growing in a new direction of sustainable materials management', says Mr Bartley. 'Whether that will require a change in the way BIR enables dialogue between its members and other experts, and how BIR co-ordinates its technical input to law-makers, remains to be seen. Some may observe that development of the basic waste legislation has been the easy part.'

Acclaimed guidance tools

The efforts of Mr Bartley and his support base have led to acclaimed industry guidance documents such as 'Tools for Environmentally Sound



To some, this is a waste, to recyclers it is a valuable source of raw materials.

Management (ESM)'. Launched in English at the BIR's 2006 Autumn Convention, the publication is designed to assist recovery and recycling companies in implementing an ISO-compliant Environmental Management System incorporating the OECD's Core Performance Elements. Mr Veys notes: 'Legislators and consumers in some countries use ESM as an argument to prevent shipments of recyclable materials and so, to help smooth shipments, we wanted to be ahead of the legislator. This document helps companies meet the highest requirements of the OECD.'

The international relevance of this step-by-step guidance manual is evidenced by the fact that it has already been translated into Spanish and Romanian, and will shortly appear in French. To the widespread admiration of international policy-makers, 'Tools for Environmentally Sound Management' has been made freely available to companies both within and outside of BIR membership.

Demand for ever-faster response

Rampant growth in environmental legislation is not the only modern phenomenon to which

BIR has mustered a strong response during Mr Veys' 27-year tenure as Secretary General and, subsequently, Director General. With the advent of the age of rapid worldwide communication, the Bureau's members and the media have demanded an ever-faster response on issues of the day. The responsibility of Communications Director Elisabeth Christ who joined the Brussels secretariat some 10 years ago, this facet of BIR activity has undergone a 'vast' improvement in recent years, according to Mr Veys.

But both Mr Veys and Ms Christ acknowledge scope for widening the communications service still further. The former observes: 'Most of our communication is with our members and with the specialist recycling industry press. We want the BIR to grow around the world and to be stronger and more recognised, for example, with the general press and in different parts of the world.'

Communication

Ms Christ confirms: 'We are trying to get wider exposure to the public because we are and always have been aware of the distorted image of recycling; for example, we need to continue conveying the strong message that the industry handles secondary raw materials and not waste.' With the help of a communications agency, BIR is targeting the environmental journalists of national and international newspapers, magazines and broadcast media.

Ms Christ points to the 'tremendous' importance of the media in helping to shape the image of an



Director General Francis Veys: 'There is some wish among consumers to stop exports of scrap.'



Communications Director Elisabeth Christ: 'We are working on widening BIR's communications service still further.'



Environmental & Technical Director Ross Bartley: 'BIR has been promoting international and national laws beneficial to recycling.'

industry that still has 'some bad connotations in people's minds'.

Another major communications development over the last decade has been the complete revamping of the BIR website into what Ms Christ describes as 'our communications tool number one'. She explains: 'We effect on average two updates per week and have extensively developed the "members only" area with important legal and commercial information. In particular with regard to information about the AQSIQ registration scheme (for China's overseas suppliers of recyclables), many of our members use the website almost daily.'

Membership explosion

Perhaps the most tacit endorsement of BIR's success in representing the interests of the global recycling industry lies in the fact that membership numbers have soared in recent years. The organisation exceeded its own expectations by signing up more than 100 new members last year to take the total beyond the milestone of 700 individual companies. In the mid-1970s when Mr Veys first joined the BIR, membership was drawn from perhaps 20 countries - a figure which has since leapt to approaching 70. Also, more than 40 national recycling federations and associations have become members. Mr Veys comments: 'This has been achieved without us having done any big promotions. Membership issues have now become a full-time job whereas they were not in the past.'

He could add that the geographical spread of the BIR membership has also widened appreciably in recent years. Starting out as an inter-

national federation comprising almost exclusively European members, the intention even in those early days had been to nurture the development of a global organisation. According to Mr Veys, 60% of the BIR's members are based on the European Continent while North America and Asia now account for 15% apiece. The remaining 10% are drawn from the rest of the world, including Africa, South America and Oceania.

Steady flow of applications

And membership numbers continue to swell. Mr Veys notes: 'Irrespective of whether the business situation is favourable or not, we receive two or three applications each week from prospective members around the world, including from countries where they have got efficient national associations representing the recycling industry. Perhaps because business is so global these days, companies see BIR as a valuable link.'

The close ties established with emerging countries in Asia - such as through the Administration of Quality, Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) in China and the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) in India - are of particular appeal to prospective members. 'We have had a lot of enquiries from members looking for help in getting licences to export,' observes Mr Veys. 'In addition, this has led to an improvement in our procedures for checking the credentials of companies wanting to join the BIR.'

Often forgotten is the fact that the world recycling body began developing relations with the Chinese authorities in the early 1990s, long



BIR's secretarial staff. Above, from left: Marcella Rodriguez, Raïssa Wolteche and Yolande Joret. Below: Claudia Vinciotti and Léon Verreydt.

before the likely scale of the Asian giant's impact on world affairs was widely appreciated.

Key successes

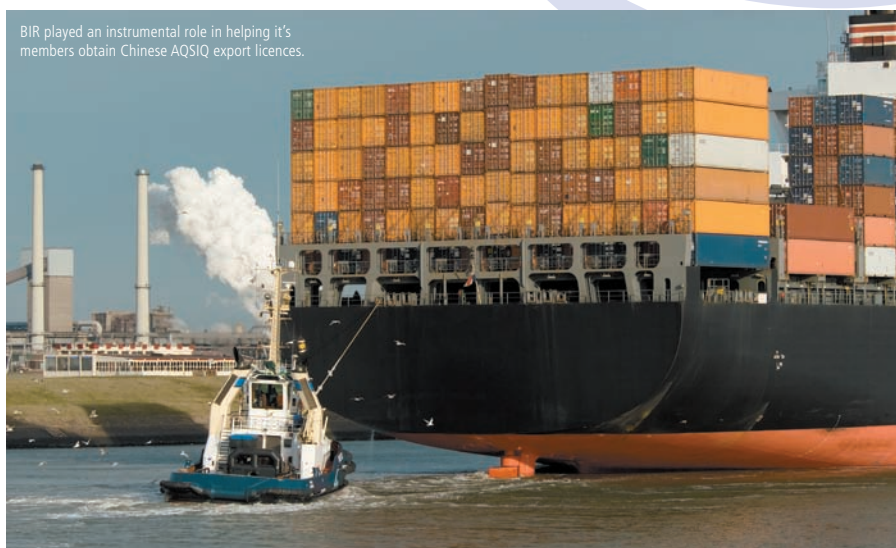
When AQSIQ first introduced the notion of a registration scheme for overseas suppliers of recyclables, the BIR enjoyed 'easy access to the right people with whom to discuss the issue'. Since then, most of the world's large recycling companies have secured not only their licences to export to China but also their renewals, while the BIR is continuing to offer its support to those would-be suppliers - whether large or small - who are encountering problems in obtaining the necessary permit.

And when the DGFT in India threatened to impose an import ban on all forms of unshredded metal scrap, the BIR played a lead role - alongside the US Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries and India's own steelmakers - in arguing successfully for the proposal to be dropped. A key player in this process was Ikbāl Nathani, one of a number of BIR Ambassadors whose role is to represent and boost the profile of the world recycling organisation in their own region. 'These Ambassadors are on the spot and can also deal with officials in their own language,' Mr Veys points out.

High-level profile

Indeed, the BIR's profile is now such that it is invited to the top table of global policy-making when recycling matters are under discussion. Pointing out that the BIR is routinely asked to participate in relevant meetings at United Nations and OECD level, Mr Veys says representation at the highest level has brought huge benefits to the recycling industry around the

BIR played an instrumental role in helping its members obtain Chinese AQSIQ export licences.





In the early 1990s BIR already established contacts with the Asian and Chinese recycling markets.

world. 'For instance,' he adds, 'at one stage the parties to the Basel Convention could have ruled out international trade in scrap and the role of traders, but we were able to ensure that trade continued in key commodities.'

Through its daughter organisations EFR, Eurometrec and the European Recovered Paper Association (ERPA), issues of specific relevance to recyclers in the European Union have received effective coverage for many years. By way of another example, Mr Veys notes that EFR and Eurometrec - whose interests lie respectively in ferrous and non-ferrous scrap - scored one of their most notable triumphs shortly after his arrival at the BIR when helping towards the progressive demise of EU quotas to the point that they were removed altogether. To win this particular battle, recycling industry representatives constructed a case to prove that, even when taking into account international exports, sufficient scrap would be available to processors. Concern among processors about a possible shortage of scrap has re-surfaced in recent times. 'There is some wish among consumers to stop exports of scrap,' Mr Veys acknowledges, 'and we have already begun liaison work to address this. Unlike in the past, we now have

consumers in BIR membership alongside scrap collectors, processors and merchants, so this allows for closer discussions.'

Services 'Toolkit'

New BIR members have also been attracted by the ever-widening range of services available to them, including market information, arbitration services, legal advice, networking opportunities and good practice guides for the industry. The full list of services has been collated in a 'Toolkit', about which Mr Veys comments: 'Just like with a club, a member won't use all of the services but this shows what he can get. We need to maintain an interaction with our members to review exactly what services they need.'

Of course, the secretariat's most direct interaction with its membership comes at the annual spring and autumn conventions. Noting that attendance records have been broken on several occasions in recent years, Mr Veys attributes the growing appeal of these massive enterprises to the development of more interesting and relevant meeting programmes, and to the introduction of workshops on matters of up-to-the-minute concern to members. Whereas past conventions were widely regarded simply as networking opportunities, 'more and more people are going into the meeting rooms which are now often full', he says.

And also in stark contrast to earlier years, the conventions are now being held throughout the world - not only in developed countries but also in emerging regions where delegates can gain a first-hand insight into local issues and opportunities. Notably in the last couple of years, the convention bandwagon has rolled into Beijing and Warsaw, and is scheduled to travel to Dubai in spring 2009.

Huge increase in workload

When Mr Veys joined the BIR some 33 years and more than half a life-time ago, the roster of the multi-lingual, full-time staff consisted of just five names. And despite a huge increase in its workload over the intervening period, the organisation has remained streamlined and still employs just eight full-time people in its Brussels headquarters. What has changed, however, is how those apparently meagre resources have been expertly deployed. Purely secretarial staff has disappeared completely and each employee 'has now got a specific area

of responsibility', explains the body's Director General. 'Staff is limited to a strong team, each of whom knows what the others are doing.' Helping to foster this secretariat-wide transparency in operations is the fact that BIR uses only one email address. Thus, Mr Veys - and anyone else in the Brussels office for that matter - can monitor every incoming message.

Looking ahead

As suggested earlier, Mr Veys and his team could never be accused of dwelling excessively on the past, although the lessons of yesteryear can prove extremely useful in planning for the future. For example, the detail of the proposal to form an International Trade Council will be informed by experience gleaned from the formation and development of the International Environment Council.

Also looking to the future, the BIR's Director General strongly supports the development of a statistical database that confirms the recycling industry's positive environmental contribution - one of the key objectives of Mr Maguin, as outlined in his contribution to the organisation's 2007 Annual Report. Indeed, the world body has already commissioned a study to demonstrate the contribution of the ferrous/non-ferrous and paper recycling industries to the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions.

Mr Veys comments: 'We need to highlight in figures the industry's carbon footprint. We need statistics that encapsulate the world recycling industry's achievements.' □



BIR's headquarters at the Avenue Franklin Roosevelt in Brussels, Belgium.