

“We have to work much closer together to represent, protect and enhance the recycling industry” – Alexandre Delacoux

Alexandre Delacoux, who took over as Director General of BIR (Bureau of International Recycling) in 2013, is spearheading this organisation and guiding BIR towards new horizons. Swaliha Shanavas had the chance to catch up with the leader to learn more about the latest developments and his thoughts on the global recycling industry.



It's been two years since you assumed responsibility as BIR Director General. How has the journey been so far?

“The journey has been an interesting one. When I entered BIR I was asked to make the organisation evolve, but not to revolutionise BIR. At the time I agreed, and in the meantime I realised what that means. We've been in activity since 1948 and there are some fundamentals that need to remain true. We are defending the licence to operate of our members, and first and foremost free and fair trade. And the situation from that perspective is the same as it was when we started in 1948. There are visionaries wanting to open markets and today we have a situation where most of the markets close again for a number of reasons, creating barriers to trade for the materials we represent. So we need to evolve back to a defence position that we did not have in the super cycles of these past years. This is my main experience in these two years,” says Delacoux.

Are there any steps being taken to resolve this issue?

You are right to mention steps; we can only make changes step

by step. It's like a big cargo ship in the middle of the ocean and you're trying to make it turn (in a certain direction). It takes time and you have to do it slowly and carefully. The first thing I have embarked on is to restructure the Secretariat of BIR. We have new people joining us; it's the first cycle of observation and in a second cycle changes are being implemented. I'm very happy to report that out of ten persons in the secretariat, only two have left and two new people are joining us – one as a convention director and the other in an administrative position. We can move to a second step with the convention director adapting the conventions to the 21st century and then continuing to develop the service and processes of our work to be more productive, more intensive. In fact, it is not revolutionising anything; we're evolving exactly the same services and making them more professional in a certain way.

What are the reasons for choosing Dubai to stage BIR this year, and what issues will the Convention seek to address?

First of all, Dubai is an important business hub. You have access to Asia, India and most of Europe,

which makes Dubai a natural hub for us to be in. We have been interested in the Indian market for quite a while and so are our members, and it was natural for us to choose Dubai for the conference, with focus notably on the Indian market.

We will talk about the markets, of course, including the situation in India and the Middle East. We will discuss the current conditions of pricing of materials, of restrictions, etc. There will be an interesting keynote speech on long term economic trends and many other features. So the conference is going to be distinct, because it will build on the hub that is Dubai to really show links with India and Asia as well, and complement what MRAI and BMR are doing.

A number of Chinese delegations will be present and we are organising that these delegations can actually talk with everyone present. There will be simultaneous translation into Chinese and Arabic in the meeting rooms, and every effort is being made to enable people to speak to each other overcoming language barriers, for instance.

What is the current state of the global recycling industry?

From an economic standpoint

the situation is not good. We're in the midst of a very difficult situation marketwise, it's been enduring since 2008. There has been some improvement since 2012-13, but it's very unsteady ground with volatile markets and prices. Some commodities as steel experience an over capacity that no one knows how it will resolve itself, and you have very low prices overall. China is not the super engine that it used to be. We really hope that India will come up. Emerging economies in general have not done very well. The interesting thing with the recycling industry is that because we are at the beginning and the end of the lifecycle of products, we're often in the best position to feel where the market is going. The situation in the recycling market is quite difficult; it hasn't been for a while and it's probably not improving fast. What we are looking towards is perhaps a larger restructuring of the recycling economy.

What is your forecast for the industry in the short term?

We will operate as always, doing our best. There's still some trading going on, but it is far from the numbers and volumes that we used to have. In the short term, there's a very high and natural pressure on quality – we've seen it in China, in India and a number of large economies. But the move towards quality is starting to make an impact in the short term. This will have an effect in the longer term because there will be companies that are able to rise to the expectations, while others may not be able to do so. So there will be a triple movement of companies – some will go down, simply not able to deliver quality material; there will be partnerships forming to ensure that quality material is produced; and there will be

medium sized companies buying up on the other scale and then the bigger companies taking over smaller ones to grow further.

What you see in recycling is quite unique in that perspective – there are periods of consolidation as the one we are likely to see now. But this goes on to a certain point and then it goes down again and forms a number of small players and a new cycle starts. So it's cyclical and recycling as we know is here to stay and will increase.

“The move towards quality is starting to make an impact in the short term.”

What's your normal day at work like?

My normal day of work is coming to office about an hour-and-a-half before office starts to deal with the emails, matters that need more thought than the usual. And then at 9 am when everybody's in we start our usual day-to-day duties that which take up the whole day. For me it's a way of working. It is often spending hours of the weekend in the office simply because I get no phone calls or emails, and I just sit and think and do some ground work that I do not get to do otherwise. I have the incredible luck to have found the job that I love and that is really fulfilling.

What's most interesting about your job?

I like the international and multicultural realities of the job; they provide a work environment that requires me to be as steady as adaptable. I come from a multicultural background and I feel much more at ease in such settings

rather than in a single culture. And when you are used to that multiculturalism you develop a lot of respect for others, and become a better listener and broad minded as well.

Earlier, I was a consultant in EU affairs and then I moved to the corporate sector. I've also worked with trade associations. I was intervening a lot in the world business council for sustainable advancement and slowly realised I wanted to work for an industry, and if I could move one industry an inch forward, it would be a major contribution. I am now with BIR that represents an industry of the future, so I'm pretty much on track with my long term goals. That is notably why I feel good in my job.

What are your hobbies and interests?

I used to play the saxophone in a Brussels concert band (started playing at the age of 16). I read and walk a lot. I walk for about 15 hours a week and I call it active meditation. As you walk alone you tend to think deeply over what you have in mind and slowly your thoughts settle down and you find yourself in a state of active meditation.

Do you have any specific message for the industry?

I have a message to pass on to the associations. We have to work much closer together to represent, protect and enhance the industry. I have around me 40 national federations and everyone needs to work together and embrace the fact that the decision makers of this world need us to bring the recycling industry to light. We have a huge role to play together in achieving that. And if I manage to work this network and move it one step further we can change an amazing number of things – first of all the proper recognition of the recycling industry and the cause of sustainability. 🌱