

# Better than burning: stories from communities fighting incineration



This Q&A is a companion document to the "Better than burning: stories from communities fighting incineration" [webinar](#) (2 October 2025), which was part of the [Better than Burning campaign](#). It further elaborates on questions asked by participants during the webinar and answers questions that the panellists could not address live.

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Is the problem with the approach itself, incineration, or with the imperfection of the technology? In Vienna, there is an incinerator in the city center, and the air is clean.

The core problem lies in the approach itself rather than simply in imperfect technology. Even the most advanced incinerators equipped with state-of-the-art filters and scrubbers inevitably release hazardous substances such as dioxins, furans, heavy metals, and acid gases (e.g., hydrogen chloride and hydrogen fluoride). These pollutants accumulate in soil and water over time, posing serious health risks, including cancers and developmental disorders.

A fundamental challenge is that municipal waste is highly heterogeneous, consisting of a complex mixture of materials with very different chemical compositions and combustion properties. This variability makes it extremely difficult to maintain the optimal and stable conditions needed for complete and safe combustion. As a result, incomplete combustion products and toxic pollutants are often formed even in modern plants.

Moreover, research (e.g. by the [French National Institute for Industrial Environment and Risks](#) (Ineris)) shows that certain pollutants, such as PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances), require significantly higher temperatures and longer residence times for complete destruction than conventional incinerators are designed to achieve. This means they can pass through the system and persist in the environment, contributing to long-term contamination.

Perhaps the real issue lies in the unethical practice of highly developed countries selling outdated incineration technologies to less developed countries?

Yes, this is a major part of the problem. Many highly developed countries built their incinerators decades ago, often before strong environmental standards or circular economy policies were in place. As those facilities age and stricter regulations make them less viable at home, companies frequently export outdated or second-hand technologies to less developed countries, where environmental laws and enforcement may be weaker.

What should we say to people who argue that opposing incinerators simply leads to more waste being sent to landfills — especially when they point to Western European countries (such as the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Denmark, etc.) where incineration appears to go hand in hand with high recycling rates?

This is a common argument, but it's based on a false choice. The real alternative to incineration is not landfilling: it's waste prevention, reuse, and recycling. Countries that prioritise these strategies (like Slovenia or the region of Flanders in Belgium) achieve very low landfill rates without relying heavily on incineration.

In fact, once an incinerator is built, it locks municipalities into a “deliver-or-pay” model: that is, they need a steady stream of waste to keep the facility financially viable. This can create pressure to divert recyclable materials into the furnace, undermining circular economy goals.

Many Western European countries that have high recycling and high incineration rates did so because they built incinerators decades ago, before recycling infrastructure was well developed. Today, these same countries are struggling to meet EU circular economy targets precisely because incineration capacity is too high.

If Waste-to-Energy is not a good option, then what can we do with the growing amount of waste? In Serbia, we generate about 3 million tons of municipal waste annually. In the capital, Belgrade, the first incinerator has recently started operating as one of the proposed solutions to this problem.

The goal should not be to simply “manage” growing amounts of waste but to reduce them in the first place - through prevention, reuse, and recycling. However, even in the most advanced zero waste systems, there will always be a fraction of residual waste that remains. The question is how to treat this fraction without locking ourselves into polluting and resource-destructive solutions like incineration.

A practical and sustainable alternative is the Material Recovery and Biological Treatment (MRBT) approach described in Zero Waste Europe's policy paper "[Building a Bridge Strategy for Residual Waste](#)". MRBT is designed to manage residual waste as part of a transition toward a circular economy, without undermining prevention and recycling efforts.

Key features and benefits of MRBT include:

- Material recovery: Residual waste still contains recyclable materials such as metals, plastics, paper, and cardboard. MRBT uses advanced mechanical sorting technologies (ballistic separators, optical sorters, magnets, etc.) to capture these before disposal, preserving resources and reducing the need for virgin raw materials; and
- Biological stabilisation: The remaining organic fraction is treated biologically (similar to composting) to reduce fermentability, odours, methane generation, and leachate impacts before landfilling. This significantly minimises environmental harm.

**How can we justify burning and destroying our valuable resources on a planet with finite supplies, and how can we hope to reduce emissions if we continue incinerating instead of separating and reusing materials?**

Burning valuable materials wastes finite resources and directly adds to emissions. If we want to reduce our environmental impact, we need to prioritise separating, reusing, and recycling over incineration. Smart material management conserves resources, lowers emissions, and supports a circular economy, turning waste into opportunity instead of pollution.

**Do you have any advice regarding airspace safety in relation to waste incinerator proposals with tall stacks that could materially impact nearby aerodromes?**

Yes, there can be. If built too close to airports, incineration plants with tall stacks may affect flight safety, radar systems, or air navigation. Each project should undergo a thorough aviation safety assessment, including consultation with civil aviation authorities, to evaluate potential hazards and ensure compliance with national and international safety regulations.

**Concerning the banks that finance incineration projects: have you conducted research on this, and do you know of any tools or resources for accessing this information?**

Yes, major banks and development institutions (e.g. EIB) often finance incineration projects, and tracking this is possible through tools like:

- BankTrack - monitors banks' involvement in environmentally harmful projects.
- ECA Watch - focuses on export credit agencies that finance waste infrastructure.
- Public procurement databases and project finance disclosures – often reveal investors and funders.

Advocacy campaigns targeting financial institutions have been effective in shifting investment away from incineration toward circular economy projects.

**What about incinerators using laser-based technology? Unfortunately, these more advanced technologies rarely reach practical implementation.**

So far, such “next-generation” technologies remain largely theoretical or at pilot scale. They do not solve the fundamental issues: they still destroy valuable materials, still emit greenhouse gases, and still create hazardous residues. Newer doesn't mean sustainable, it often just means expensive and unproven.