
KARINA CAMPOS

Separating the Good from the Bad—Governance in Waste Management



“Bad governance looks like a bin with a plastic garbage bag inside, surrounded by rubbish, whereas good governance is what assures that the rubbish will be inside the bin.”

This is no metaphor—it is the very real conclusion Karina Campos, MPP Graduate Class of 2013, drew after paying a visit to a brand new landfill outside the picturesque Argentinian town of El Bolson.

In 2010, the Argentinian environmental engineer was working for the Inter-American Development Bank when she went to see El Bolson’s new waste management system, supported by an IADB loan, and therefore paid by Argentinian taxpayers. What she found was shocking:

“All around the property and on the access road there were plastic bags and rubbish. There were people working inside the landfill, separating the garbage (to later sell the recyclable material and make a living out of it), and the density of the disposed garbage was much lower than expected in the designed plan,” she said. The eight-month-old landfill, meant to last five years, was nearly half full.

While Campos knew how to design and implement such a system, she realized that was not enough. Campos came to the Hertie School seeking policy

tools that would sustain her engineering solutions.

“You need the institutions, the policies, the right legislation and enforcement mechanisms,” she says.

After graduating, Campos returned to Argentina to work in the same waste management project, but this time as the technical coordinator of the execution unit within the National Secretariat for the environment, where she now helps set up systems to manage landfills—including the El Bolson facility. Part of her job is to create social inclusion policies – such as giving people who were sorting garbage under inhumane conditions proper jobs and equipment, binding them into the system and formalising their role.

“Today for us, it is obvious that the trash must be inside the bin but, a system and rules in place are what guarantees that. That’s what good governance looks like to me” says Campos.

An environmental engineer, Karina Campos wrote her MPP thesis on the role of political institutions in explaining the unsuccessful management of natural resources in Argentina’s economic development efforts.