

POLICY, PARTICIPATION, PRACTICE - ASSESSING SUSTAINABLE MODES OF SINGLE USE PLASTIC ERADICATION IN INDIA

Raghvendra Lahoti

GD Goenka Public School, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi

ABSTRACT

The issue of single use plastics and the damage and pollution caused by them is a global problem, and poses a real danger for the future of the planet and the environment. Given this, governments across the world are attempting to implement policies to eradicate single use plastics in favour of more sustainable alternatives. This paper will examine the issue of plastic pollution in India, the policies to address the same, and the participation by various stakeholders. The paper will then post policy recommendations for effective implementation and enforcement of these strategies.

Keywords: Plastic, Pollution, Environment, Policy, Participation, Practice, Plastic Eradication

INTRODUCTION

Like much of the world, India is struggling to dispose of its quantities of plastic waste and curb the issue of plastic pollution. According to data from the Central Pollution Control Board in 2012, India generates close to 26,000 tonnes of plastic a day. A little over 10,000 tonnes a day of plastic waste remains uncollected. Further, the plastic consumption of the country is increasing. The plastic process industry is estimated to grow to 22 million tonnes a year by 2020, from 13.4 million tonnes in 2015, and nearly half of this is in single use plastic, according to a study by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry. In addition, the rise in popularity of online retail and food delivery apps is contributing to the rise in single use plastic waste, at an estimate of 22,000 additional tonnes.

The 2016 Plastic Waste Management Rules were an attempt to improve the existing legislation on the issue and to effectively combat the growing problem. Under these Rules, every local body has to be responsible for setting up infrastructure for segregation, collection, processing and disposal of plastic waste. The Rules were further amended in 2018, and introduced the concept of extended producer responsibility, according to which the producers (which could be

manufacturers, importers or those used in plastic packaging) as well as brand owners would be held responsible for collecting the waste their products generate.

There have been reports of a new national framework on plastic waste management, which is in the process. These are reported to have more stringent targets on extended producer responsibility for brand owners and producers, and norms on the traceability of plastic waste. It will also introduce the concept of third party audits as part of the monitoring mechanism.

It is further reported that from October 2nd, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to launch a campaign with a ban on plastic bags, cups and straws in a sweeping measure to stamp out single use plastics.

Given the issue that arises with respect to single use plastics, this paper will examine the origins of their use, and the policies that exist to eradicate the issue of plastic pollution. The paper will then pose certain policy recommendations for effective and sustainable solutions, as well as recommendations for the community and for corporate practice.

BACKGROUND

Since the 1950s, the global production of plastics has outpaced that of any other material, with a global shift from the production of durable plastics to single use plastics. According to data from the United Nations, if the growth in plastic production continues at the current rate, the plastic industry will account for 20% of the world's oil consumption by 2050 (UNEP, 2018).

The Indian plastic industry began its growth in the year 1957, with the production of polystyrene.

The industry began gradually adding to the pool of polymers they were manufacturing: LDPE in 1959, PVC in 1961, HDPE in 1968 and Polypropylene in 1978. Over time, the fact that raw materials were available domestically became a core strength of the industry (Ministry of Environment, 2018). The potential in the industry motivated entrepreneurs to acquire technical expertise, achieve quality standards and build capacities. Consistent growth of the industry's plastics processing machinery sub-sector, coupled with growth in the petrochemical industry, facilitated the growth of plastics processors in the country. It also helped that plastics processors did not have to depend on raw material imports. Today in India there are about 22,000 plastics processing units and about 150 plastics processing machinery manufacturers (Bheda, AIPMA; Ministry of Environment, 2018).

Data on the Indian plastic industry is often inconsistent, as different industry bodies report different, and has been fragmented. However, it is clear that the single use plastics has been the

most rapidly growing industry, with the advent of e-commerce, online delivery and cheaper smartphones, among other catalysts (Ministry of Environment, 2018). It is further clear that there is a consistent issue with respect to the pollution in rivers and in cities. Companies such as Amazon, Flipkart and Zomato have all pledged to reduce their use of plastics and introduce eco-friendly packaging options (Aravind, 2019).

The state of Sikkim has been a pioneer in banning plastic bags, as early as the year 1988, with extensive community engagement programs which has proven to be immensely effective.

In the following sections, this paper will elaborate upon policy perspectives and the most effective ways in which the government can tackle the issue of plastic pollution.

DISCUSSION

The issue with the existing policy framework is largely implementation and enforcement. While the environmental legislation is ambitious in terms of its targets, the reasons frequently cited for lack of implementation is a lack of adequate infrastructure, absence of trained and adequate staff, overall lack of awareness and information asymmetry, among others (Vibhaw, 2018).

The issue of plastic waste management has also been brought up in several instances before the National Green Tribunal (NGT) and various high courts. In 2018, the Bombay High Court provided an extension of three months on the ban of the Maharashtra government on the manufacture, transport, distribution, wholesale and retail sale, usage and storage and import of certain plastic products. The NGT has also passed a number of orders reaffirming the plastic ban in various states, and has prohibited the plastic disposal in rivers and other water bodies, and providing for an imposition of fine on violators. However, there has been a continued issue with respect to implementation of these orders (Vibhaw, 2018).

Except for Andhra Pradesh, Sikkim, West Bengal and Puducherry, all the other states of the country may be liable to pay Rs. 1 Crore for each month of delay in the implementation of the waste management rules. Despite the introduction and amendment of the aforementioned waste management rules in 2016, there remains a lack of clarity on the exact methods and procedures for how some concepts such as producer responsibility will be implemented.

It is to be kept in mind that such legislation is a consultative process between the industry and the government, as well as consumers and the community. Successful policy must integrate elements of community participation, including corporate practice, for effective practice and compliance with the law. Further, there is a dearth of academic scholarship on the subject with adequate data and waste management models.

Public action has also been a driver of change with respect to plastic pollution. A case study of beach cleanup initiatives in Versova Beach in Mumbai showed a great success in promoting community engagement beyond the purview of government policy. However, it was found that to sustain the good results achieved through the beach cleanups, it is key to identify the main sources of pollution and take action to resolve the issue at source. In most cases, this linked back to the establishment of improved waste management systems and to education and awareness raising among local communities (UNEP, 2018).

Therefore, it is key for there to be a holistic approach to policy. A mixture of public-private partnerships, voluntary agreements, voluntary reduction strategies, and social pressure has been found to be as important as bans and levies. This is important for the Indian government to consider in the background of the imposition of a mass ban on single use plastics, to ensure that this is complied with (UNEP, 2018).

In a study conducted by the United Nations, it was found that public awareness is the common denominator for success in the above mentioned initiatives aiming at having a broader social impact. Awareness raising, monitoring and continued communication of progress to the public will help to build confidence and strengthen commitment to the cause.

Further, it is of utmost importance to assess the sustainable development impacts of preferred options. A ban might not be the most desirable option in all circumstances, given the social impacts on a large part of the population. In addition to bans, the government must also support the uptake of eco friendly alternatives, and fit for purpose alternatives. These should provide the same or better properties of the items that are to be regulated. For instance, the materials used for fresh food packaging are often scientifically tested and chosen to provide high quality barrier protection to keep the food fresh. If the available replacement doesn't provide the same benefits, a policy to reduce over packaging of fresh food could lead to unintended impacts such as greater food losses and waste. Another example is the issue of paper bags, which are considered the most effective alternative to single use plastic bags as they degrade much quicker. However, paper bags require more energy to be produced and are more expensive. Once discarded, paper bags take more space in collection trucks and landfills. Stakeholder engagement is a key factor, and this must be implemented in a wide manner (UNEP, 2018).

CONCLUSION

To tackle the issue of pollution caused by single use plastics, there are several measures that can be taken from the standpoint of public policy. Waste management systems must be improved and there must be segregation of waste at the source, and mechanisms for transport of segregated waste to landfills. There must also be incentives for cost effective recycling of materials. The

government must also promote eco friendly alternatives to phase out single use plastics. The government can introduce economic incentives including tax rebates, research and development subsidies, technology incubation support, and implement a public private partnership model for the phasing out of single use plastics. The stimulation of the creation of micro enterprises for the same purpose also drives job creation and economic growth (Ministry of Environment, 2018; Bheda, AIPMA).

There must also be awareness created right from the school level, about the menace and danger of plastic pollution. Awareness through such programmes also incentivize the growth of community models of reducing usage and incentivizing recycling, such as the promotion and adoption of reusable bags, and voluntary agreements between the government and retailers/producers towards the same effect (Bheda, AIPMA).

It is also important for the government to monitor the progress and effectiveness of the policy, and adjust it accordingly for the future. It is important for governments to keep the public updated on the progress and benefits achieved, to continue building consensus and demonstrate accountability. Progress could be monitored in several ways, including through audits, surveys, impact assessments and focus-group interviews. It would be advisable to review the policy instruments on a regular basis (UNEP, 2018).

In the case of a total bans as envisioned in India, law enforcement and monitoring of compliance are critical to ensure that the prohibited items are not illegally produced or imported from neighbouring countries (UNEP, 2018; Ministry of Environment, 2018).

There could also be amendments in legislation that particularly targets companies and corporate social responsibility, to incentivize companies to take responsibility for the menace of single use plastics.

When introducing a levy on single use plastic products, consideration should be given to how revenues from that economic instrument will be used. To maximize public benefits, the revenues from the levy could be ring-fenced and reinvested to support specific environmental project, boost the local recycling industry (end use markets), create job opportunities in the plastic recycling industry (through seed funding) and finance awareness initiatives which promote for instance waste minimization. To gather data on effectiveness, governments may consider including in the legislation a reporting obligation (providing a standard template to allow for comparability across years) to estimate the reduction in consumption. Once progress and effectiveness have been estimated, these would inform and form part of the new baseline scenario. The steps presented in the road map for policymakers could then be reviewed and

refreshed to ensure that the measures in place continue to be the most effective and appropriate for the country or local context (UNEP, 2018).

Policy must incorporate a combination of regulatory and economic instruments, such as bans along with levies on suppliers, retailers, producers and consumers for the use of plastics. Further, there must also be extended producer responsibility to ensure such plastics are phased out.

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