

RECOMMENDATIONS

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THE PLASTICS FACTSHEET 4



On October 2 2019, the government of India clarified that plastic items would not be banned immediately. Instead, it has asked state urban departments and urban local bodies (ULBs) to shore up plastic waste management in states and cities respectively through heavy investment in source segregation and end-to-end waste management. States have been left free to introduce prohibitive action on single use plastics (SUPs) by identifying a clear list of products that need to be targeted. States and Union territories (UTs) have been asked to play a key role in promoting eco-friendly alternatives and promote projects that aim to upscale or recycle single use plastics and promote small-scale or micro enterprises. They have also been asked to focus on raising awareness about the harmful effects of plastic and achieve behavioural changes to reduce its plastic.

We agree that a blanket ban on plastics would not have been prudent at this stage. But the government must move quickly on measures to phase out problematic SUP items.

CSE recommends the following action agenda on single use plastics:

1. List and define single use plastics

It is important to identify the most problematic SUP items and assess the extent of their impacts before imposing bans. At this stage of action, policy makers should not give in to the common fallacy of conflating carry bags with all SUP contamination. Candy wrappers, multi-layered packaging items, straws, stirrers, disposable cutlery, and styrofoam items are some of the most common SUPs, constituting a major part of litter. They are as harmful – if not more – as carry bags.

A clear definition of SUPs in the Indian context is needed. It should be something on the lines of, ‘Single use plastics include all plastic and packaging

items that are intended to be used only once before they are thrown away, such as plastic carry bags (of all sizes), *gutkha* satchets, styrofoam items, one-time disposable cutlery, straws, stirrers, multi-layered packaging, PET bottles, containers, etc.’

2. Phase-wise plan

There is also a need for a national action plan or guidelines for phase-wise banning of plastic items. Plastic items should be classified on the basis of material qualities, recyclability, availability of alternatives, and livelihood security of the informal sector working with them.

Items that have no or very low recycling value and are the most problematic SUPs (e.g., disposable cutlery, styrofoam, straws, carry bags, etc.) should be phased out immediately and the government should draw up clear and actionable plans to push for alternatives to these items.

After this, single-layered plastic packaging items such as milk pouches and plastic lami tubes; PET bottles; and multi-layered plastic packaging items, should be phased out. While they are still in use, the manufacturing companies should be made responsible for them as per the principle of extended producer responsibility (EPR). Efforts to make these products part of the circular economy are also needed.

3. Incentivise effective waste management with focus on segregation, collection and recycling

Currently, most municipalities are struggling to implement existing plastic waste and solid waste regulations. In many cases, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds and initiatives by private companies, citizen activists and, in particular, the resourceful informal sector of waste pickers, have filled the gap. But it will not be enough.

Better waste management systems with focus on segregation-incentive models can create significant long-term impact. If cities segregate waste into three fractions – wet, dry, and domestic hazardous waste – and if municipalities create infrastructure such as material recovery facilities and sorting stations, dry waste can be sorted into different fractions. Once waste has been segregated properly, it has value and there is a market for the different fractions. We need to source segregate end-to-end.

In addition, legislative bodies in every state and UT must explore and formulate plans regarding the establishment and monitoring of domestic recycling units; incentivise recyclers in the unorganised sector; train low-skilled recyclers; set up effective grievance redressal mechanisms; and perform life-cycle and cost analysis of plastic alternatives. This will increase recycling efficiency in the country and catalyse sustainable solutions at every stage of banning SUP items.

4. Effective implementation of extended producer responsibility

At the very outset, there must be clarity regarding items that should be put under EPR regimes. Since plastic packaging items – multi-layered, PET bottles, milk pouches, sachets, etc. – that are not collected become waste instantly, ideally, all of them should be part of EPR.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) is currently formulating a national framework for implementing EPR under Rule 9 of the Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016. The objective of these guidelines is to make producers responsible for the environmental costs of plastic waste and to secure funds from the private sector to support municipalities and communities lacking the infrastructure to sort and recover plastic waste.

At present, plastic companies are expected to

work with ULBs to buttress waste management. However, CSE proposes an offset mechanism by which companies can obtain credits for plastic waste management if they support municipalities in implementing sustainable waste management approaches. This will provide the industry the necessary push. Under this mechanism, plastics collected and recycled (either directly or through ULBs or Producer Responsibility Organisations) will count in offsetting EPR targets of the company. All accounting of EPR targets should be done at the national level, irrespective of the state or UT where the products are sold or consumed.

It is pertinent to note that companies are getting together and setting up their own plastic waste collection and recycling schemes for items that have a high recycling value (of about 90 per cent, such as PET bottles), but an approach that integrates the industrial sector with the informal sector and ULBs would lead to better implementation of EPR.

5. Design and innovation

The government should invest money in and encourage setting up of ventures that provide sustainable products as an alternative to the non-recyclable products in vogue at present. It should accelerate business-driven innovations and help scale circular economies that focus on systemic stalemates in global material flows so that the need for disposal of materials is delayed.

6. Plan for remaining plastics

Incineration-based technologies are suited for non-recyclable dry waste fraction and contaminated plastics, etc. In scenarios where repeated recycling has degraded materials so much that they can serve no other useful purpose, or in the case of contaminated plastics that cannot be recycled, deriving energy is preferable over letting them pile up in landfill sites.