

## Talking Points

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### Plastics Waste Should be Addressed in our Post-Covid19 Recovery Plan

#### Introduction

- Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives or GAIA advances successful, community-driven waste solutions through systems change and policy advocacy. Our efforts focus on three initiatives: promoting zero waste, reducing problematic waste streams like plastic, and putting an end to the ineffective and hazardous practice of burning waste. We are a worldwide alliance of more than 800 grassroots groups, non-governmental organizations, and individuals in over 90 countries whose ultimate vision is a just, toxic-free world without incineration. In Asia Pacific, we have more than 200 members from 20 countries, address unsustainable production and unsustainable consumption; municipal, healthcare and hazardous waste management; toxics and pollution; and environmental injustice.
- Over the past 50 years, global production and consumption of plastics have increased more than 20 times over, and plastic production has reached 320 million tonnes a year. **1** It was so grave that In 2011, the UN **Human Rights** Council affirmed that hazardous substances and **waste** may constitute a serious threat to the full enjoyment of **human rights** and expanded the mandate to include n the whole life-cycle of hazardous products from manufacturing to final disposal. Today, we have SDG 12 on sustainable production and consumption and a host of international environmental conventions that protect our rights from the adverse impacts of plastic waste.
- Plastic is a persistent material. Once in the environment, it does not go away, it will take centuries to degrade. To have an idea, one single water bottle can remain on the planet for around 450 years. What's more, plastic is 99 percent made of fossil fuels and contains toxic chemicals. Plastics can impact human health, climate and ecology in different ways throughout the entire life cycle and yet getting rid of the waste remain externalized by corporations to governments, communities and individuals. *In the Philippines, almost 48 million shopping bags are used throughout everyday or roughly 17.5 billion pieces a year.* Many governments resort to burning plastics waste believing that the waste truly disappeared and quite recently packaged by International Financial Institutions as innovative energy source by converting waste to energy has been a dangerous advise among which they peddle through loans for waste management infrastructure or as climate-resilient projects. These Waste-To-Energy incinerators are more harmful than coal and should be considered as obsolete in a post-covid19 recovery.

**Just how affected are we from plastic waste? In the Philippines? Very bad and even worse during the pandemic.**

- 1. Production is not aligned with sustainable development. Industry-wide changes have to be discussed now if we want to prevent another disaster.** Single-use plastics which are found in our everyday lives like shampoos, detergent powders, instant coffee, plastic bags among others. These packets give some of the poorest people in Asia access to

everyday household essentials. For the multinationals that manufacture them, the drive for profit is the bottomline. Making these goods accessible to us is only a means to an end. But for all of us, who are now for a healthy and safe life, ending single-use plastics is an urgent need should we prevent another disaster from happening.

We have successfully made some efforts in reducing single-use plastics but we now see a step-back in major wins because of misunderstanding on hygiene requirements during the pandemic. We need to revisit those again. Here's why:

- Such sachets are sold in most developing countries but the number consumed in the Philippines is staggering – 163 million pieces a day. That's almost 60 billion sachets a year, or enough to cover 130,000 soccer fields. We have successfully made some efforts in reducing single-use plastics but we now see a step-back in major wins because of misunderstanding on hygiene requirements during the pandemic. We need to revisit those again. In 2019 alone, five days of coastal clean-up on the Manila Bay island last month yielded a total of 16,000kg of trash
  - We studied the waste along coastal areas and landfills from our cleanups and found that 60 per cent of it came from just 10 brands led by Nestle, Unilever and Procter & Gamble. Imagine that these three companies are putting our marine life, health and budgetary allocations for waste management in peril just because there is profit from doing it cheaply. This is a clear violations of our national laws, community rights and individual rights to be healthy and safe.
  - During the pandemic, despite millions of people being told to use face masks, little guidance has been given on how to dispose of And as countries begin to lift lockdown restrictions, billions of masks will be needed each month globally. Initially, discarded masks may risk spreading coronavirus to waste collectors, litter pickers or members of the public who first come across the litter. We know that in certain conditions, the virus can [survive on a plastic surgical mask](#) for seven days.
  - Without better disposal practices, an environmental disaster is looming. Remember that the majority of masks are manufactured from long-lasting plastic materials, and if discarded can persist in the environment for [decades to hundreds of years](#). This means they can have a number of impacts on the environment and people.
  - Over the medium to long term, animals and plants are also affected. Through its sheer mass, plastic waste can [smother environments](#) and break up ecosystems. Some animals also cannot tell the difference between plastic items and their prey, subsequently [choking on pieces of litter](#).
  - We cannot continue to ignore the impacts on the environment, health and public coffers this kind of production has on our national and individual lives especially after the pandemic.
2. **We are an importer of plastic wastes from other countries.** Customs data from 2018 shows more than three million kilograms of plastic recyclable waste were imported to the Philippines [from the US alone](#) – declared in customs documents as waste, parings and scraps of plastic. The waste found in industrial areas such as Valenzuela City is usually mixed with locally sourced raw materials. Of course we have witnessed the spat with

Canada. Civil society also rejected JPEPA some years ago because of the importation of waste. As a developing country, this is against our collective and individual rights. In the time of pandemic, we will expect developed countries from rapidly sorting to greater production due to the recession and cheaper public management including waste management ---- we should not allow developing countries like the Philippines to accept their waste as a method to their recovery plans

3. We are easy preys for false solutions dubbed environmentally friendly solutions. One of these is the Waste to energy which means we burn plastics and hopefully convert them to plastic. Looks simple and seductive for the ones who are not educated on climate-friendly solutions. Once these plastic wastes are burned, they emit toxic chemicals out in the air and leakages can affect food and water systems.

### **Who are most affected?**

4. **Waste workers and poor communities around the world are taking the heaviest toll**
  - a. Waste and recycling pickup work is physically demanding and usually exposes workers to occupational hazards – even more so during this pandemic. Collecting and emptying bins in bin trucks exposes waste workers to diseases. During coronavirus, we saw the importance of wasteworkers in our lives. We welcome them with glee now. Among waste workers, there are formal and informal workers. The waste trawlers – the ones who goes through your garbage outside your door with a cart are the most marginalized in this sector. They are not salary-based and depend on the quality of the scraps. They are noticing an unusually large amount of plastics yet they cannot sell this because the recycling companies or junkshops have closed down. Their routes have also been limited due to the restrictions during the pandemic. Most of all, they don't walk with PPEs and masks and yet they make our communities clean, while these companies continue to produce plastics at scale. Unlike healthworkers but like them who serve as frontlines, they don't have social protection.
  - b. **Communities receiving these wastes that lie along coastal areas or near recycling factories.** every year some 47,000 people die as a result of acute poisoning from hazardous chemicals, while many others develop life-threatening diseases such as cancer. There is a community in Valenzuela for example that cannot enjoy fresh air. They have to rub vicks vapor rub and spray cologne. Most residents have recurring lung problems because a recycling factory receives imported plastic waste .
  - c. **Fishing communities that depend on marine resources for a living.** About 14 million people live in Metro Manila , much of the trash ends up in the sea. After China and Indonesia, the Philippines ranks as the world's third biggest polluter, with [2.7 million metric tonnes of plastic waste](#) generated each year. Up to [74 per cent of plastic](#) in the Philippines that ends up in the ocean is from waste that has already been collected and this is because of lack of resources for waste management.
  - d. **At the larger scale, everyone is affected now and in the future as recovery plans if we do not align them with international human rights instruments including development goals such as the SDGs. .** Governments and industries will

make up for lost time and profits during pre-coronavirus to recover from the recession. We have to watch our government on trade and industry incentives that may come with aggressive regulatory rollbacks that are related to environmental and health protection. We have seen recovery loans from IFIs that are disbursed without requirements for environmental review and public input on new mines, pipelines, highways, and other projects which we saw happened during Yolanda in recovery loan packages and is happening again.

### **Our Asks**

**Immediately:** We need to social protection for waste workers who remain to be neglected frontliners in the fight for COVID19.

**In the long term:** We need to policies that put a cap on unsustainable production as any change in consumer behavior and community-based waste management cannot be effective unless industry-wide changes in the plastics industry is not implemented. The integrated social, environmental and economic planning that SDG warrants for the new world can no longer be ignored.

We fear that the recession will push industries to make up for lost time and profits by doubling production efforts. There's a serious risk that polluters could emerge from this crisis bolder and potentially more profitable than ever. We need to ensure that a post-COVID19 recovery plan does not promote dirty and false solutions. Already, we are seeing emergency assistance loans packages with faulty green projects such as waste-to-energy incinerators. Waste is not just a litter, it indicates quality of life and management of it fundamentally affects the achievement of basic human rights.

We did see a lot of government and multilateral government organizations acting on the pandemic and we only hope the same attention can be made to reduce inequities particularly induced by unsustainable production and consumption systems. We call the government to prevent having another disaster by pushing for social protection, environmental sustainability, and human rights as the pillars of its recovery plan.

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