

BREAKING THE MOLD: RETHINKING PLASTIC RECYCLING

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ONCE hailed as a remarkable material in the 1960s, plastic has steadily become an environmental nuisance. The world has manufactured more than 10 billion metric tons of plastic since its commercial production started, about half of which has ended up as waste. Due to human intervention, plastic has reached the heights of Mt. Everest and the depths of the Mariana Trench. Alarming, researchers have indicated the presence of micro plastics in human blood, breast milk, placentas with a possibility of occurrence in the brain. Despite their versatile uses, unsustainable production, consumption and disposal of plastics remain the key issues. The same has been highlighted in the latest UN report on ending plastic pollution, which proposes a 'system change scenario' to address the causes rather than just the symptoms.

The effects of plastic pollution are particularly pronounced in countries with weak legislative mechanisms, including Pakistan. We are unable to handle our copious waste generation, and yet, are burdened with wastes from the Global North in the name of 'aid' or 'waste to energy raw material' – a situation called 'toxic colonialism'. Southeast Asian countries like China, Malaysia and Vietnam, which had become hotspots for such dumping, have recently banned waste imports, urging exporting nations to explore alternate sustainable solutions.

Pakistan is no exception with its discarded plastic that gets land filled, incinerated, or tossed out, ending up in the waterways, ultimately polluting the delicate marine ecosystems. With more than 3.3 million tons of plastic waste created each year – amounting to two K-2 mountains – Pakistan needs a proactive approach to the issue. While worldwide, commercial producers, consumers, law-making/enforcement and regulatory authorities have stakes in perpetrating plastic pollution, in reality, the unintelligent corporate production of plastics favoured by the legal system takes the cake. Corporates have cleverly shifted the burden of responsibility to the public – a tactic that has interestingly enabled the public support for legal frameworks that impose hefty fines on individual litterers. In fact, consumer behaviour is a consequence of corporate business decisions.

Stakeholders' attitudes which impact the creation, use, and fate of plastic pollution are nevertheless critical. A study conducted by the writer on

Karachi city's maritime pollution reaffirmed that big companies that produce plastics are the major perpetrator. It was argued that the consumers are left with little choice as product packaging is pre-decided. Moreover, 80% of the respondents favoured stricter regulations and effective enactment on production and usage. In addition, lobbying production companies and regulating authorities were also deemed suitable.

Promisingly, World Environment Day 2023 called for global actions to address the issue of plastic. Speaking of, recycling is frequently touted as a solution to plastic waste. Big Oil and corporates with stakes in the plastic business wholeheartedly promote domestic recycling which allows them to continue the business-as-usual case. In reality, encouraging individuals to recycle more might not be the solution until the mass production of single-use plastic is curtailed. Besides, plastic recycling is limited, resource-intensive and entails environmental and health hazards. Virgin plastic's affordability overshadows the leftover recycling potential, discouraging companies from utilizing recycled plastics.

Many countries have made a feeble attempt to contain plastic pollution by slapping a ban on the use of plastic bags. Under the government's "Clean Green Pakistan" initiative, Pakistan also banned the selling and use of non-biodegradable plastic bags in its capital which proved futile because the production was left under-addressed. Plastic roads are another experiment that has negative externalities, as they introduce micro plastics into the environment through wear and tear. Similarly, the placement of plastic segregation/recycling bins by Corporates as CSR is a poor attempt to show concern – a ploy known as green washing. The grim reality is that the waste collected from such methods also usually ends up in a landfill.

Given humankind's intellectual bandwidth, spatiotemporal constraints, and systematic limitations, relying solely on individual efforts as the primary solution to plastic pollution is unfair. The radical solution is to advocate for regulations that restrict the production of new plastics with the introduction of sustainable alternatives to single-use plastics. To enable that, all stakeholders must be taken on board by incentivizing and providing ease of business for formal and informal businesses across all tiers.

It is pertinent to mention that ahead of WED 2023 – which is focused on solutions to plastic pollution – stakeholders gathered in Paris for the second round of negotiations on a legally-binding Global Plastics Treaty which would aim to potentially phase out plastic production and prevent pollution.

Furthermore, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and a circular economy that does not rely on the myth of recycling plastics may prove useful as single-point solutions would not work. Attitudes of 'rethinking' and 'reducing' should be promoted as compared to 'recycling'. A collaborative and intelligent approach involving policymakers, industries, consumers, scientists and innovators, with consideration of regional/global dynamics and societal attitudes, is crucial in devising pertinent solutions to the menace of plastic pollution.