WEBINAR SUMMARY REPORT
COVID-19 & PLASTIC POLLUTION
WHAT DID THE REGION LEARN - A REFLECTION FROM ONE YEAR OF PANDEMIC
Regional Webinar Series #1: South Asia
WEBINAR SUMMARY REPORT

COVID-19 & PLASTIC POLLUTION
WHAT DID THE REGION LEARN - A REFLECTION FROM ONE YEAR OF PANDEMIC

Regional Webinar Series #1: South Asia

DATE: Friday, 26 February 2021 | 14.00 - 15.30 hrs.
VENUE: via live broadcasting from Asian Institute of Technology (AIT)

REPORT PREPARED BY:
Prof. C. Visvanathan
Asian Institute of Technology

DISCLAIMER:
The contents in this Webinar summary report are those of the presenters and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organizers - UN Environment Programme and the Asian Institute of Technology.
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## ACRONYMS

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1. BACKGROUND

It is already been one year on with the onset of COVID-19 pandemic and the world is still under its grip. As much as COVID-19 is a global health catastrophe it equally is a threat to the environment. Upsurge in single-use plastic (SUP) consumption as personal protective equipment (PPE), mostly plastic-based face mask and gloves, and plastic packaging from online shopping of essential items like food and grocery, during the pandemic further aggravated both health care and municipal plastic pollution problem.

Both developed and developing countries felt the burden of managing dramatic increase in COVID-19 related plastic waste. Developing countries which already were functioning poorly in terms of waste management, felt the heat even more. Inadequate collection, treatment and recovery and recycling facilities led to littering, open dumping and burning, and leakage of these pandemic plastic waste into terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

First in the Regional Webinar series, this Webinar explored how South Asia tackled and plans to navigate from the ‘plastic pandemic’ in post-pandemic times. Please refer Annex 1 for the Webinar agenda.

The objectives of the Webinar were to discuss:

1. challenges faced by the region to manage COVID-19 induced plastics and plastic packaging waste
2. innovations adopted by the region for achieving a sustainable plastic and packaging waste management
3. lessons learned by the region to tackle plastic waste in case of continued COVID-19 or future pandemics

2. PARTICIPANTS

The webinar attracted 170 registered participants from across the world joining the event via Zoom meeting. 1,341 viewers joined the Webinar through Facebook Live broadcasted by the AIT Entrepreneurship Center and their networks. Together with 33% of participants from South Asian countries, a significant number of participants from other regions attending the webinar shows an interest in exchanging regional learning and sharing of experience. The sectoral profiling of the participants involved a representation from academia, international and national NGOs, government, and private sector. Please refer Annex 2 for participants’ profile and other Webinar analytics.
3. PRESENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

Opening remarks

Kakuko Nagatani-Yoshida in her opening remarks admitting that COVID-19 increased the consumption of SUPs and worsened the plastic pollution situation, she said we, however, can not discount the fact that plastic pollution was already a planetary crisis even prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Surge in COVID-19 plastic usage and wastage, and improper disposal has further posed a risk to people, ecosystems, and species. In case of South Asia where open dumping and open burning is rampant, continuing such practices for tackling COVID-19 plastic waste posed a serious risk to air quality, aquatic and marine ecosystems.

Sharing the findings of UNEP project ‘CounterMEASURE for plastic free rivers,’ she iterated that ‘Knowledge’ – knowing more about how plastic is becoming waste – and what and how much is being leaked into our terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem is important to develop and enforce scientific evidence-based policy and practices. She also highlighted that Partnership with citizens, governments, academic, enterprises, financial institutions, in priority sectors is equally important to fight plastic pollution.

She introduced audience to a statement in the report ‘Making peace with nature’ that was launched at the UNEA 5 (held on 22-26 Feb) - which states COVID-19 crisis provides an impetus to accelerate transformative change. She ended her remarks saying, “I want to believe this. I want to see this COVID-19 as an opportunity to fight and win other crisis that we know they existed for longtime such as plastic pollution. It is up to us to ensure that investments and effort we are making to fight the COVID-19 are also helping us beat the plastic pandemic.”

Convenience was always a factor for the increased use of single-use products. COVID-19 now has added ‘hygiene’ concerns that would encourage, and at times even require us to use more products of single-use nature, most of which, if not all, are made up of plastic-based content.”
Assessment of COVID-19 plastic waste flows in South Asia

Amit Jain in his presentation shared COVID-19 and plastic waste management challenges, gaps and policy response and sustainable option opportunities to reboot the plastic waste management situation in South Asia in the wake of COVID-19 challenge. He said, South Asia with 25% of world’s population, high urbanization rate, increasing economy and increasing purchasing power, on one hand is driving the consumption of all sorts, including single use plastic products and packaging, and on the other hand still lacks waste management capacities and efficiencies.

He took the audience through the journey of plastics from source to sink i.e., from our homes and institutions through three major river basins in the region – the Ganges, Indus and Brahmaputra to 11,682 km coastline in the region. While there are some studies and assessments of plastic flows in the cities, he recognized the need for such quantification of plastic flows and baseline of interventions made to tackle plastic waste issues across countries extended to country-level and even across the region for a collective global fight against marine plastic pollution.

As measures to tackle COVID-waste, Amit presented that many countries in South Asia were able to quickly develop Guidelines on managing COVID-induced health care waste in addition to the existing regulations.

He ended his presentation with the need and possibilities of strengthening policy options including Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), sustainable design of plastic products that supports extended life, reuse and recycling, as well as a conscious shift in consumption behavior reducing unnecessary plastic items, practicing strict segregation and responsible waste disposal behavior, because, in the plastic value chain, plastic becomes problematic after the use/consumption phase.
Plastic & plastic packaging waste from online food delivery during COVID-19

Ganesh Kollegal in his presentation highlighted that E-commerce platforms and online food delivery (OFD) platforms were lifeline to deliver essentials like food and grocery items safely to million homes, when the country was under strict lockdown. While he agrees that food servicing industry (restaurants) and delivery platforms are one of the biggest consumers of SUPs, in case of India, the regulatory control has been able to reduce this SUP usage in this sector to a remarkable level. The Plastic Waste Management (PWM) Rules 2016 and an amendment in 2018 has been instrumental in replacing SUPs in restaurants and home deliveries of food with brown paper, Aluminum foil and reusable and recyclable food grade plastic containers. Currently, the food grade container greater than 50 micron is the only available alternative that is allowed under PWM Rules, and has proven to be a better option as Indian households often clean and reuse them or give it to recyclers. One unique thing with COVID-19 is that due to shut down of plastic and packaging manufacturing units, the availability of plastic packaging material was also limited. This has made the restaurants/brands to rationalize the usage of plastic packaging and brought "reuse" factor in the discussion.

Ganesh further shared that achieving elimination of SUPs requires responsible action from participating restaurants, consumers and OFDs. He said, Swiggy India has released advisory to its participating restaurants to comply with the PWM Rules. He ended the presentation saying that the EPR Rules which is anticipated in the future will provide more clarity and onus including online food delivery platforms.

“In India, with the Plastic Waste Management (PWM) Rules 2016 classifying the participating restaurants on the online food platforms as ‘waste generators,’ our restaurant partners have made the changeover towards eliminating SUPs, and have successfully been able to eliminate SUPs to a very significant level. This has been due to the sensitization by the platforms with the partners and the enforcement drive of the authorities. Our restaurant partners use food grade plastic containers, brown paper and aluminum foil, and no plastic cutlery in food packaging for the online food deliveries. We are also anticipating EPR Framework to be released in the near future, which will further guide the plastic usage and management.”

See FAO’s website at http://www.fao.org/

Dr. Inoka Suraweera presented the health care waste (HCW) management status, issues and concerns in Sri Lanka.

For managing infectious HCW, Sri Lankan hospitals are recommended to use incineration and MetaMizer (a hybrid autoclave technology that shreds and sterilizes HCW). Nonetheless, avoidance or minimizing plastic usage and strict segregation are the preferred policy guidance. Based on these guidelines, HCIs segregate wastes into different color-coded bins (health care plastics into the orange color bin). Thus, segregated non-contaminated plastics are temporarily stored at the hospital premises before sending off for recycling. A very few HCIs practice secondary levels of segregation by further disaggregating the plastic by its polymer types. She also shared good practices by some hospitals who provides reusable cloth bags to visitors and strictly prohibit single-use plastic bag enter the hospital premise.

Dr. Inoka said that the health care plastic waste use in health care institutions in Sri Lanka during COVID-19 has increased. She shared the Ministry of Health’s activities in helping health care institutions (HCIs) to manage COVID-induced HCWs. She said, “we have provided Guidelines to manage COVID-19 health care waste and conducted capacity building activities, and local and national level monitoring during COVID-19. The pandemic is the right time for sound and timely advice and motivation to practice strict segregation at source and pursue sustainable health care waste management systems.”

“Use of PPE during COVID-19 has definitely increased in health care institutions. Masks and gloves that were used only by curative health care professionals are now have become a necessity for public health care field staffs as well as general public visiting the hospitals. COVID-19 has not only increased the quantity of health care plastics but also brought health care plastic waste from unique sources and activities like COVID-19 testing kits, plastic bags for the burial of bodies of COVID-19 infected person, to name a few. In the near future health care plastics from COVID-19 vaccination will be of significant amount and concern.”

See FAO’ss website at http://www.fao.org/
Health care waste management during COVID-19 pandemic - observed trends, challenges and recommendations for policy and practice

Terrence Thompson presented statistics from Wuhan China, and projected increase in infectious HCW in other cities during COVID-19. Speaking of the challenges with HCW management, especially recycling of it, he shared that stigma, chances of mixing with infectious waste, and the economics as the main barriers. He said that HCIs can overcome most of these stigma and challenges by starting with HCW audit, practicing strict source segregation, reviewing procurement policies, developing HCW plastic circularity strategy, and if possible and available by joining the networks like Health care Plastic Recycling Council and Green Hospital programmes by Health Care Without Harm, and others that promotes the concept of circularity into health care plastic sector.

Summarizing the excerpts from the WHO Interim Guidance on Water, sanitation, hygiene, and waste management for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, Terrence said strictly following the WHO handbook on Safe management of wastes from health-care activities released in 2014 – also known as the ‘Blue Book’ is recommended in managing COVID-waste. “Looking at the WHO and other Guidelines on COVID-19 HCW management, I would say HCW from COVID-19 facilities is no different than waste from other health care facilities and that no additional measures are indicated other than following the WHO’s Guideline on infectious waste management. In simple word, follow the Blue Book! Of course, with the sudden increase in the quantity of HCW waste during COVID-19 the HCIs in developing countries which are already poorly functioning are burdened further. Hence, increasing their capacities for overall HCW management is necessary as made clear by this pandemic.

“About 85% of health care waste is non-hazardous, is almost a universally established statistic. However, in reality, poor segregation at health care institutions drastically reduces the non-hazardous waste. In one hospital in Lao PDR, ideally the non-hazardous waste should have been 73%, but it was only 50% in actual scenario, because poor segregation led to contamination with other infectious waste. So, strict segregation is critical for health care plastic waste management be it normal health care waste or waste generated during pandemic like COVID-19.”

Terrence Thompson
Consultant, Environment and Health

See FAO’s website at http://www.fao.org/
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COVID-19 & E-commerce plastic packaging

Prof. Visvanathan shared statistics showing an increase in E-commerce activities in South Asia in recent years, as the region has overcome digital access, connectivity and other logistics and regulatory barriers. Like across the world, South Asia, specially India saw an increase in E-commerce activities during COVID-19, with new consumers buying online and spending on essential items such as food and grocery.

Recognizing the fact that E-commerce uses excessive (protective) packaging than traditional brick as mortar shops, due to its longer supply chain, high rate of return etc., Prof. Visvanathan through Modor Intelligence's statistics showed that nearly 1 billion kg of plastic packaging was consumed by the E-commerce industry in 2019. Out of which, protective packaging including bubble wrap and air pillows made 35% of total plastic packaging weight, followed by 31% of plastic pouches and bags, 22% of other plastic products like foams or gel packs, and 12% of shrink films. He further pointed the need for studies to assess the increased volume and changed composition of E-commerce plastic packaging during COVID-19.

In his presentation, some examples of innovative voluntary measures taken by E-commerce platforms including frustration free packaging, biodegradable alternatives to plastic bubble wraps, and reusable packaging were shared. Sharing an example of Indian government’s SUP ban by 2022 driving Amazon India eliminate SUP packaging from its 50+ fulfilment centers and delivering 60% of its pantry orders in totes, he said policy options are required as voluntary measures alone are not enough. Prof. Visvanathan ended his presentation by saying, “I hope that the E-commerce industry will take this pandemic as a momentum to go ‘green and circular’ in its operation fighting plastic pollution. And, that all value chain actors - E-commerce platforms, express delivery services, government and consumers participate in realizing circular E-commerce solutions including sustainable E-commerce packaging.”

Prof. Chettiappan Visvanathan
Professor, Asian Institute of Technology

“Together with changed landscape of E-commerce with more new buyers shopping online, and shopping for essentials like food and grocery and increased E- packaging waste, COVID-19 has also has brough a discussion on the E-commerce packaging functionality where packaging is no longer only to protect the product inside but also for the hygiene and safety of the consumers. Thus, highlighting the urgency to innovate and reduce E-commerce plastic packaging in post-pandemic times by balancing hygiene and sustainability.”

2 See FAO’ss website at http://www.fao.org/
4. Q&A SESSION

Audiences sent questions on the COVID-19 and plastic pollution issues in advance via registration link as well as using chat functions during the Webinar. The questions were largely on health care plastic wastes, mostly about PPE usage and disposal, and technology and policy solutions to fight the plastic pollution, in general.

Answers to these questions and relevant resources/publications will be shared on the Webinar landing page. This is to initiate a post-Webinar interaction among participations in sharing their expertise, views and resources around the COVID-19 and plastic pollution queries and issues.

In addition to addressing the questions asked by audience and moderator’s request to suggest on how to Build Back Better (BBB) from COVID-19 towards resilient society, economy and environment, each speaker provided one message to the audience.

3 See FAO’ss website at http://www.fao.org/
“Problem of plastic pollution was an issue even before COVID-19, but COVID-19 has worsened it. We must channelize the knowledge, resources, technology, policy and finances properly to fight this planetary crisis of plastic pollution –
Kakuko Nagatani-Yoshida, UNEP”

“The COVID-19 pandemic has stressed the need for making responsible consumption choices. Change must start with us. We as an individual, as a family, and a society must reduce our SUP consumption and practice segregation, to the least –
Amit Jain, IRG Systems South Asia”

“As much as the manufacturers are responsible, the OFD industry requires consumers’ active participation, such as using less plastic and participating in recycling of food containers by cleaning it properly, segregating the recyclables and handing to the recyclers –
Ganesh Kollegal, Swiggy India”

“We need to look at plastic pollution in a holistic way rather than in silos. We need to understand the interconnectedness of the impact of plastic pollution into our health, and health of our environment – our soil, air, river and oceans, and develop coordinated actions at all levels starting from individual to national and even international and regional levels. In terms of health care plastic waste, we need to strengthen the entire HCW management system using both carrot & stick approach –
Dr. Inoka Suraweera, Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka”

“Plastic waste is an inter-sectoral issue that requires inter-sectoral cooperation that addresses social and environmental determinants of health. To bring HCIs onboard in the fight against plastic pollution, health authorities will need to marshal convincing evidence on the health impacts of plastic pollution (in fact, any and all kinds of pollution) and will need to be able to offer practical and cost-effective solutions. I think that the important thing here is to make a start. Hospitals should start with conducting plastic audits, set targets in terms of specific categories of plastic or specific products that will be reduced, how to identify and test alternative non-plastic or safer plastic products and how to measure and celebrate progress in order to stimulate further action – Terrence Thompson, Consultant – Environment and Health”.
Dr. Inoka Suraweera, Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka”

“Policy solutions including the EPR definitely helps the fight against plastic pollution, because it holds the value chain actors responsible for post-consumer packaging and the product after its active use-life. If we notice carefully, the problem with E-commerce packaging is the lack of ownership for the collection and recovery by either of the actors including brands, E-commerce platforms or Express delivery services. EPR enables incentives to create, accelerate and thrive circularity in E-commerce packaging sector. However, these EPR must be designed to hold accountable the small-scale E-commerce entities that proliferated during the pandemic –
Prof. C. Visvanathan, Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand”
5. WRAP UP & CLOSING REMARKS

Dr. Mushtaq Memon, wrapped up the event by thanking the speakers for insightful presentations, audience for attending, and AIT for co-organizing the Webinar.

Considering the interest of participants, he announced that a weblink will be created where all interested participants can share research and other information related to COVID-19 and plastic pollution and also exchange views, opinions, and promising ideas on policy, technology, science, investment, and partnership and collaboration to build back better and fight against plastic pollution.

Dr. Mushtaq also invited audience to join the second series of the regional webinar scheduled on 02 April 2021, where the focus will be learning and experience sharing from South-East Asia region.

Dr. Mushtaq Ahmed Memon
Regional coordinator for Resource Efficiency in Asia Pacific, UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

“I echo all our distinguished speakers who rightly pointed out that COVID-19 has indeed changed our lifestyles and consumption pattern to some extent. Increased use of SUPs and associated plastic pollution during COVID-19 can not be denied, but, hopefully, we will learn from this and do our bit by promoting sustainable consumption and production and embedding circularity to build back better a resilient post-pandemic future.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

http://www.offline-scp-course.ait.ac.th/

Dr. Mushtaq Ahmed Memon
Regional Coordinator for Resource Efficiency
UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific
Project Manager
Regional Policy Advocacy Component (SWITCH-Asia – the European Union funded programme)
Email: memon@un.org
ANNEX
ANNEX 1: THE WEBINAR AGENDA

Background:
COVID-19, a devastating global health challenge of recent times, threatened world’s economy and challenged global environmental sustainability. Mobility restriction, physical distancing and heightened care for hygiene and safety as measures to contain COVID-19 brought changes in lifestyles and consumption patterns. A surge in single-use plastic (SUP) usage as healthcare measures - disposable personal protective equipment and lifestyle changes - plastics packaging from E-commerce activities, was noticed during the pandemic. Plastics kept frontline medical professionals and even the general public safe from minimizing the risk of coronavirus exposure and transmission. However, it also resulted in additional medical plastic waste generation from hospitals, quarantine centres, and households. Similarly, a rise in E-commerce activities for daily essentials like food, and a false sense of safety in single-use plastics over reusable, caused a noticeable hike in municipal plastic packaging waste.

Inadequate and mismanagement of both medical and municipal plastic waste due to a dramatic surge in the volume of potentially infectious nature, followed by breakdowns or temporary disruption in the regular collection, treatment, recovery & recycling, and safe disposal aggravated the plastic pollution load into the terrestrial, aquatic and marine environment.

South Asia, where most municipalities and health care institutions already faced the challenge of proper waste management even in pre-COVID times, are further burdened with COVID-19 induced plastic waste. Already over a year, the pandemic is continuing with a looming danger of the second wave. This Webinar thus aims to explore how South Asia tackled and plans to navigate from the ‘plastic pandemic’ by discussing:

1. challenges faced by the region to manage COVID-19 induced plastics and plastic packaging waste
2. innovations adopted by the region (product, technology, financing and business model optimization etc.) for achieving a sustainable plastic and packaging waste management
3. lessons learned by the region to tackle a continued surge in plastics in case of continued COVID-19 or future pandemics

Agenda
14:00 - 14:10 Opening remarks
Kokuko Nagatazumi Yoshida
Regional Coordinating Officer for Chemicals, Waste and Air Quality, UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

14:10 - 14:20 Assessment of COVID-19 plastic waste flows in South Asia
Amit Jain
Director, RPI Systems South Asia Pvt. Ltd.

14:20 – 14:30 Plastic & plastic packaging waste from online food delivery during COVID-19
Ganesh Kollegel
AIP-Government Affairs & Public Policy, Swiggy India

Dr. Inoka Sarawera
Technical Head of the Environmental and Occupational Health Unit at the Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka

14:40– 14:50 Health care waste management during COVID-19 pandemic - observed trends, challenges and recommendations for policy and practice
Terrence Thompson
Consultant, Environment and Health

14:50 – 15:00 COVID-19 & E-commerce plastic packaging
Prof. Chettiyappan Visvanathan
Professor, Asian Institute of Technology

15:00 – 15:20 Q&A Session

15:20 – 15:30 Wrap Up & Closing remarks
Dr. Mushtaq Ahmed Memon
RC for RE in Asia Pacific, UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

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https://forms.gle/9tD3rBbXV4X6sPBK8

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ANNEX 2: WEBINAR ANALYTICS

1. Webinar announcement and outreach

Webinar announcement date: 11-26 Feb 2021

Announcement channels: AIT, EC, GC, AIT Solutions, AIT Student Union, AIT Alumni Association

Official pages

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2. Weblink broadcast

Zoom: https://ait-ac-th.zoom.us/rec/share/N0iF7gUNxvoVFz1pcA2J3GBa8nnEfiS9k_TFUNj-2BZejat-s9tc79eBiiKXDQIQ.dd7XIRjN8GpEiQS
Zoom registration: 353
Zoom attendance: 170

Facebook Live: https://www.facebook.com/ecAIT/videos/447592419772923
Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dylInj38i4Lc

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3. Participants profile

Participants profile by ‘geography’

Participants profile by ‘sector’
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ANNEX 3: SNAPSHOT FROM THE EVENT
Respecting participants interest to discuss more on the COVID-19 and plastic pollution issues, we are including the question and responses shared at the Webinar here. We highly encourage the participants to input, share their views, opinion, ideas and data and statistics among each other and keep the peer-learning/sharing active.

Thank you.

Q. What does it take to innovate and redesign and reuse of plastic in the strategic way?

- It takes clear governmental policies and economic incentives for waste collection and segregation and avoidance of unnecessary plastic production and use. These initiatives will encourage more innovation including re-designing. (Kakuko Nagatani-Yosidha, UNEP)

Q. Lack of quantifiable data on COVID-induced plastic waste from various sector/industry is observed across the world. How can we learn from this missed chance and conduct rapid assessment of plastic load/flow in case of future pandemics (either natural disaster or a health hazard like COVID-19)? In addition, how can we measure the quantity of stockpiled COVID-induced plastic waste?

- It would be ideal to track the plastic through the entire supply chain, from manufacturing of input materials (granules) to packaging manufacturer to the user. This way we can quantify the total quantity manufactured. Further, within this, we can quantify packaging manufactured for various sectors/categories such as food and beverage etc. The quantity manufactured when reconciled with quantity sold to various sectors can give us a broad assessment of the stockpile of pandemic induced plastic waste. (Ganesh Kollegal, Swiggy India)

- The pandemic plastic waste assessment should look into two types of waste generation in detail - (i) Household waste (ii) Medical waste, and establish the baseline generation rate in both types of waste stream prior to emergency or pandemic. Together with waste quantity, determining waste characteristics of both streams prior to emergency or pandemic both in terms of composition and weight is equally important aspect of the assessment. Once the plastic waste is determined, we should determine plastic leakage pathways from the source to the sink in a geography e.g. in a city’s context i.e. drainage, uncontrolled dumpsite etc. Finally, a mass-balance flow will give the clear picture.

I also encourage participants to refer to the “Plastic Leakage Assessment Toolkit” developed by UNEP & National Productivity Council of India for the CounterMEASURE project.


(Amit Jain, IRG Systems South-Asia Pvt. Ltd)
Q. How can we effectively create awareness on plastic pollution at household level/ family level?

- The awareness must be created through constant, persistent, sustained campaigns at various level viz. neighborhood, group housing societies, schools, workplace, through urban local bodies/city authorities/municipalities etc. We must use designated days of the week to use Social media tools, media tools for creating awareness. Using school children to sensitize at the individual house level and community level on designated days like World Environment Day etc. will add more power to the campaign. *(Ganesh Kollegal, Swiggy India)*

Health care plastic management – Questions to Dr Inoka Suraweera, Technical Head of the Environmental and Occupational Health Unit at the Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka

Q. The reported data shows a decrease in health care waste (as a whole) in Sri Lanka during the Pandemic. How do you see it with the increasing trend of PPE waste?

- We have not observed a significant reduction. However, COVID-19 situation would have had an effect on elective medical procedures which could have reduced the amounts if infectious waste. On the other hand, restriction of visitors to healthcare facilities, online systems of drug distribution which lowered the numbers of clinic patients specially having non communicable diseases, reductions of the numbers of patient visits to healthcare facilities to the most essential ones by themselves due to fear of contracting COVID 19 would have lowered HCW to a certain extent.

Q: What had been the lessons learned for Sri Lanka on health care plastic waste management during COVID-19 that other South Asian countries can replicate or get inspiration from? What would the country do differently in case of future pandemics?

- Establishing an Environmental and Occupational Health Directorate at the national level of the Ministry of Health and having a programme on healthcare waste management. This has helped in streamlining healthcare waste management in healthcare settings. Other initiatives by the Ministry of Health Sri Lanka include:
  - Introduction of regulatory instruments: Introduction of an Environmental Protection License and Scheduled Waste Management License for healthcare settings by the Central Environmental Authority of Sri Lanka to strengthen the streamlining of healthcare waste management process in healthcare settings.
  - Development of guidelines and establishing “Green and Healthy Healthcare settings” in Sri Lanka so that future pandemics can be faced effectively in terms of healthcare waste management.

Q: What are the innovations done to reduce plastic waste from disposable masks, face shields both at household and hospital use?

- Development of standards by the Sri Lanka Standards Institution for reusable masks so that the general public could use a mask several times. Development of guidelines and a policy for PPE use at healthcare settings have been done to manage unnecessary use of PPE by healthcare staff.
Health care plastic management – Questions to Terrence Thompson, Consultant Environment and Health

Q: Healthcare plastic suffers from stigma of being unfit for reuse and recycle as it is considered infectious, despite the WHO estimation that about 80% of HCW is non-hazardous. With COVID-19 outbreak, the hygiene and safety issue has heightened. In your opinion how has the COVID-19 pandemic pushed back or brought forward the Healthcare Plastic Circularity discussion – and what can South Asian learn from healthcare plastic circularity activities in other regions?

- My perspective on this issue is that of a consultant. Others may be able to address this with more insight from the perspectives of healthcare providers, regulators, or manufacturers and suppliers of healthcare equipment and supplies. Personally, I have the impression that the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed raised awareness about the problem of plastic pollution not only among environmentalists and other professionals but even among the general public. Stemming from that, one does see much more discussion about the circular economy concept in professional forums, for example, in webinars, on platforms such as Linkedin, in certain newspapers and magazines like The Guardian and The Economist, etc. But I do not think that the concept of circularity is well known among the general public and I do not see any political support for it. In the USA, for example, there is at present a raging public debate over climate change and energy policies, but no one is talking about plastic pollution. Again, others may have more encouraging perspectives than I do, but that is the impression that I do have at this point in time. Judging from what I see in the USA, the Healthcare Plastic Recycling Council seems to be the lead organization that is pushing for healthcare plastic circularity. One of the strong points that comes across in the Council’s publications is that positive patient outcomes must be of top priority. That has to be kept paramount in any discussion about recycling content into products or even into packaging. There can be no compromise on quality. The Council also acknowledges that driving down the cost of recycling to be competitive with the use of virgin plastics is a real challenge – although there is hope that new technologies may drive down costs in future. The Council seems to be heavily supported by manufacturing companies. I suppose that from a business perspective those companies realize that this issue is not going away, and they need to be in it for the long term.

Q: How do we involve the health care sector in addressing plastic pollution?

- Plastic pollution is an inter-sectoral issue and one which involves many players, not only in government but also in commerce, in industry and in the community. So, addressing this problem effectively will require collaboration among many partners. WHO’s Global Strategy on Health, Environment and Climate Change envisions that health authorities may strengthen their capacity precisely in this regard, that is, to promote inter-sectoral cooperation that addresses social and environmental determinants of health. To be successful advocates for inter-sectoral cooperation, health authorities will need to marshal convincing evidence on the health impacts of plastic pollution (in fact, any and all kinds of pollution) and will need to be able to offer practical and cost-effective solutions. Unfortunately, in many instances, environmental health units have insufficient capacity to do that – and that may be true whether we are talking about a health ministry or a health care facility. The environmental health unit is often one of the weakest and least regarded units within the organization. So that would be an important step: to strengthen the technical capacity of environmental health units at every level and to strengthen their role in policy development, planning and programming. Another part of this is to lead by example. Hospitals and other health care facilities can start by conducting plastic audits, eliminating single use plastics, seeking alternatives to plastic products, and managing plastic waste responsibly.
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Q. The recommendations from various publications on dealing with plastic waste due to COVID has been to implement rapid adaptation to the problem. How do we achieve this as single-use plastic is essential to healthcare?

I think that the important thing here is to make a start. Searching for perfection can sometimes be an obstacle to achieving what is good. One of the simplest measures to implement is separating plastic waste from other waste at source, meaning at the point where the waste is generated. Failing that, opportunities for recycling plastic waste are diminished. Other measures that may be quick and relatively easy to implement include, for example, banning Styrofoam in the cafeteria, substituting paper straws for plastic ones, and eliminating disposable plates and cutlery from the food service. We may find support for more ambitious objectives if we start small and achieve some modest successes. Health Care Without Harm’s Plastic Toolkit for Hospitals gives guidance on how to conduct plastic audits, how to set targets in terms of specific categories of plastic or specific products that will be reduced, how to identify and test alternative non-plastic or safer (e.g. non-PVC, free of phthalates, free of bisphenol-A; also, more durable plastics) plastic products, and how to measure and celebrate progress in order to stimulate further action. Of course, to increase our chances for success we should seek the support of hospital administrators and also ensure the active involvement of co-workers through some sort of inter-departmental coordinating mechanism.