

## What are Single-Use Plastics and how to tackle them?

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In some circles, there is currently a needless controversy about the definition of “Single-Use Plastics”. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report of 2018 titled “Single-Use Plastics: A roadmap for sustainability” defines Single-Use Plastics as:

“Single-use plastics, often also referred to as disposable plastics, are commonly used for plastic packaging and include items intended to be used only once before they are thrown away or recycled. These include, among other items, grocery bags, food packaging, bottles, straws, containers, cups and cutlery.”

The above definition is crystal clear. As the term itself is self-speaking, a single-use plastic is any item made of plastic that is intended to be used only once before it is thrown away or recycled. Obviously, the list is long. But some people think that only the items mentioned in the above definition given by UNEP are single-use plastics. This is not correct. The above definition itself uses the phrase “among other items”, which means the items included in the definition are given by way of example and are not the only single-use plastics. One can think of many more. For example, a plastic glove used by a medical practitioner is a single-use plastic. The fact that plastic plate is not mentioned in the definition above does not mean that it is not a single-use plastic. It is also used only once and then discarded. Therefore, a plastic plate is also a single use plastic. The plastic packaging or bags used by many e-Commerce portals for delivering sold items at the doorsteps of consumers are also single-use plastics. On the other hand, durable items like plastic buckets, chairs, etc are not single-use plastics.

The nations should not waste their time in defining single-use plastics. The definition is self-explanatory and it is already contained in UNEP’s report. On the other hand, the nations should identify and list all single-use plastics and chalk out a course of action for each item for ensuring that no plastic pollution is caused in the environment and that our terrestrial, avian and marine life is safe and protected and no harm is caused to the health of human beings. We must remember that our fight is not against all plastics but against plastic pollution.

While all single-use plastics should be phased out in the long run, as these are high consumption and problematic items from environment’s point of view, it is nobody’s case that all single-items should be banned now at once. UNEP has laid down an excellent framework for tackling the single-use plastics in its report mentioned earlier, which should be resorted to by all governments after tweaking it as per conditions prevailing in their countries.

We need to analyse what are those single-use items that are unnecessary and we can easily live without, as alternatives are available. One such item is plastic carry bag. Why should we expect a new bag to be given each time we go to a shop for buying anything? We should all carry our own eco-friendly and durable bag (made of cotton or jute) whenever we go for shopping. If at all shopkeepers have to keep few carry bags for meeting the requirement of such consumers who visit the shop without any carry bag, it should be an eco-friendly bag provided at a reasonable price. To inculcate this culture, the government should ban all kinds

of plastic carry bags at once irrespective of size and thickness, including the ones made of polypropylene flooding the market recently in the garb of cloth bags, which they are not, but are another plastic.

There is similarly no justification for continuance of plastic straws, containers, cups, plates and cutlery. Alternatives to them are now available. The production, storage, distribution, sale, purchase and use of these items should be banned as early as possible allowing just enough time to producers to exhaust their existing stocks. These items have been found to have caused maximum damage to the environment in terms of tolls they have taken of animals, fish, turtles, birds, etc and also human health. The UNEP report brings out health hazards of single-use plastics very succinctly. Styrofoam items contain toxic chemicals such as styrene and benzene. Both are considered carcinogenic and can lead to additional health complications, including adverse effects on the nervous, respiratory and reproductive systems, and possibly on the kidneys and liver too. Several studies have shown that the toxins in Styrofoam containers can transfer to food and drinks, and this risk seems to be accentuated when people reheat the food while still in the container. Styrofoam containers should therefore be banned simply on the ground of health as in the case of e-cigarettes.

Three-year timeline for getting our country rid of single-use plastics suggested by our Prime Minister is very reasonable. By 2022, production, storage, distribution, sale, purchase and use of all single-use plastics should come to an end.

Plastics bottle is perhaps the most debatable item. Drinking water is sold in bottles made of Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET) throughout the world. Most soft drinks are also sold in PET bottles. These are very high consumption items and are known to be very badly polluting the environment. The world community should definitely reduce its consumption as the present level of its consumption makes it very difficult to handle all of it. The governments, businesses, institutions and all other organisations can easily stop using PET bottles and serve drinking water in glasses. It perhaps remains a necessity only for tourists and pilgrims at the present juncture, as while visiting places away from home they may not be able to carry their own water. In the long run, more water ATMs will need to be developed to cater to the tourists. Therefore, PET bottle may not be identified as an item for immediate ban, but our overall reduced requirement with our changed habits can be easily handled through Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). In several developed and developing countries, the introduction of EPR and deposit-return schemes have proven effective in reducing littering from PET bottles while boosting the recycling sector. Fortunately, PET is recyclable. If PET bottle manufacturers may be persuaded to discharge their EPR, by introducing deposit-return schemes, all of the PET bottles produced can be recycled. For example, while selling water or soft drink in PET bottles, the seller may keep a deposit of reasonable amount which shall be returned to the consumer when she/he brings back the empty bottle to the shop. Unfortunately, some manufacturers of plastics have been painting a wrong picture of government asking them to collect their plastic waste. They portray it as if they are being expected to collect the plastic waste from municipal waste, while the intention is to collect it from the consumers in a systematic manner. This should be made clear in the EPR policy that the Central Government at present is reportedly preparing. This model can continue if the

PET bottle manufacturers agree to discharge EPR for collection of 100% of their produce, else banning its production too will be the only alternative left.

It is needless to emphasize that in our war against humongous plastic pollution on earth, we all – including Governments, Businesses, Institutions, Organisations, Media and above all the People – need to act in concert with complete clarity of mind, precise plan of action, and with a great sense of urgency.

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