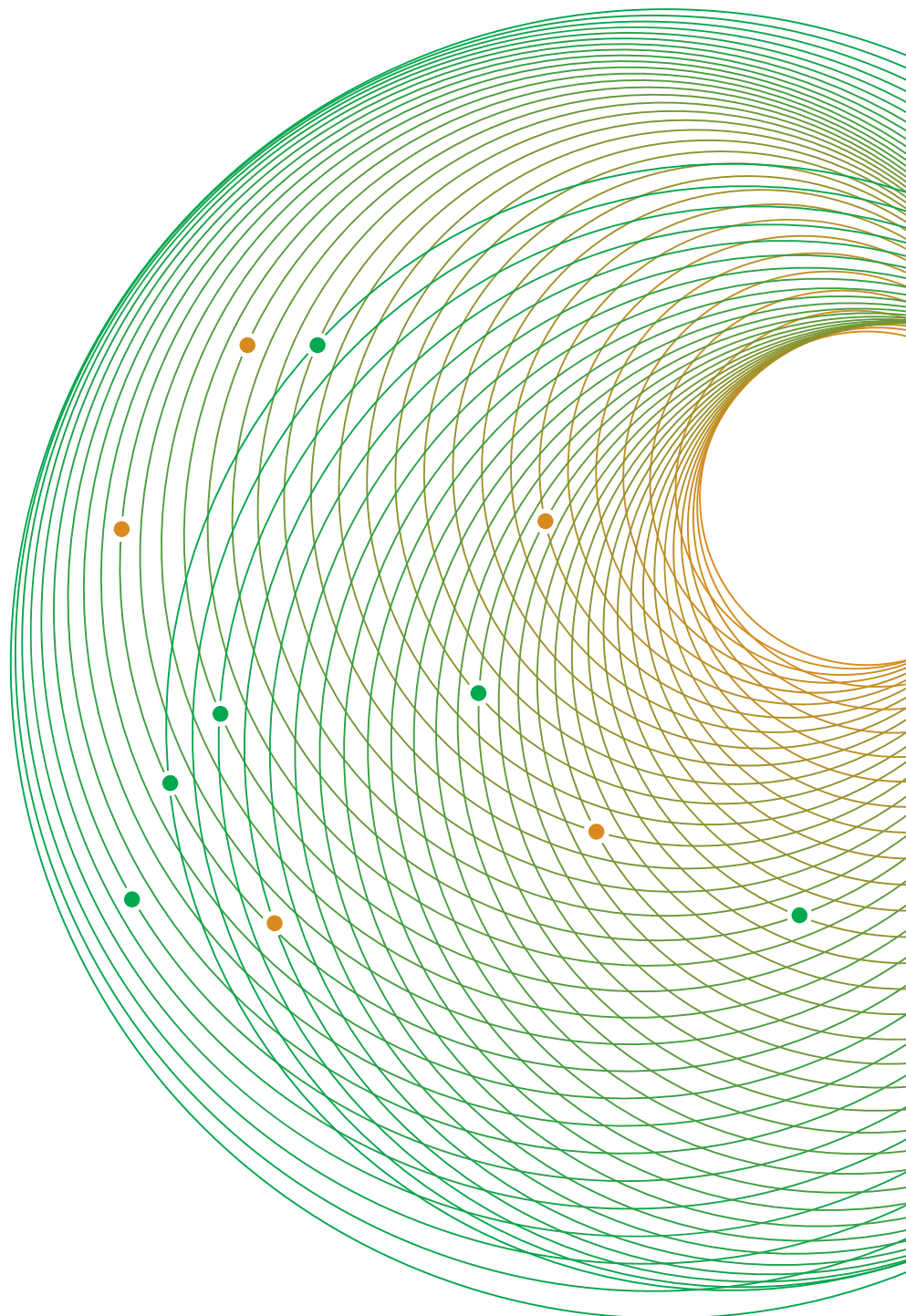




CONNECTING THE DOTS: Creating an Enabling Environment for SDG12 in ASEM
Stream 4: Single-Use Plastic | **POLICY BRIEF**

Single-Use Plastic Waste Reduction Efforts in Asia and Europe



1. Introduction: Single-use plastic waste reduction efforts in Asia and Europe.

The world produces more than 400 million tons of plastic per year - most of it used for single-use items designed for immediate disposal. The overconsumption of single-use plastics¹ and the mismanagement of resulting waste has led to an estimated 12 billion tons of plastic buried in landfills or dispersed in the natural environment, causing local and transboundary environmental problems.

In 2018, the Asia-Europe Environment Forum embarked on a 3-year research program to study implementation experiences with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 12) on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) in the member countries of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). As part of this programme, we explored the landscape of innovative projects addressing the single-use plastic waste challenge across the ASEM member countries to identify factors that can support the systematic upscaling of promising policies and initiatives. In order to understand what types of approaches exist to address the single-use plastic problem, our research reviewed relevant policies and initiatives across ASEM member countries. A comprehensive desk review identified over 100 such initiatives.

¹ Single-use plastics, commonly referred to as disposable plastics, are items that intended to be used only once before being thrown away or recycled (e.g. PET bottles; plastic straws; plastic disposable cups and cutlery; Styrofoam)

MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE ASEM RESEARCH ON SINGLE-USE PLASTICS

The study of single-use plastic initiatives across ASEM found that the majority of the identified have been working on improving plastic waste recycling or waste collection, delivering a change in product design or eliminating the use of certain plastic types; over two thirds of the initiatives were managed by businesses and more than half of the identified initiatives were developed by organizations employing less than 50 people. The studied projects were more likely to be operated at the city or at the national level, while international scope could only be identified in 15% of all studied cases. Concerning potential drivers and barriers for projects, the majority of survey respondents attributed significant importance to receive funding for project implementation (until scalability and thus profitability is reached), building technical and management capacities, accessing to state-of-the-art technologies and securing commitment from the government and the management of the organization. With regards to barriers to upscale existing projects, the survey respondents indicated somewhat more frequently the lack of or limited availability of regulation/standards; public and private funding to support; collection and recycling infrastructure as well as the lack of or limited awareness, interest or commitment from consumers and limited or lacking coordination along the plastic production chain.

Based on the outcomes of the Asia-Europe Environment Forum research work on single-use plastics, the 2020 EnvForum conference provided an important opportunity for the participant of the session to discuss how single-use plastic waste reduction efforts could be further promoted at the national level.

“ Concerning potential drivers and barriers for projects, the majority of survey respondents attributed significant importance to receive funding for project implementation (until scalability and thus profitability is reached), building technical and management capacities, accessing to state-of-the-art technologies and securing commitment from the government and the management of the organization.

2. How to promote single-use plastic waste reduction efforts at the national level

A. WHAT TO KEEP

Participants acknowledged the importance of awareness-raising and education efforts that member countries of ASEM are currently undertaking in connection to single-use plastic wastes and stressed the need to continue these efforts. In terms of regulatory initiatives, well-designed fees and taxes that can discourage the generation of plastic waste were recognised as important for reducing single-use plastic consumption and waste. Policies committing to a phasing out of plastics for specific products and plastics bans also were mentioned as instruments to create certainty for businesses and investors. On the other hand, the promotion of products made of natural and easily degradable materials, including traditional packaging, were also highlighted as having an important role in solving the single-use plastics problem. To handle unavoidable waste, source separation was considered essential.

B. WHAT TO DISCARD

Participants of the ENVforum conference stressed the importance of preventing open burning practices, the use of hazardous plastic additives and the production of mixed materials that are hard to recycle. The widespread use of misleading marketing practices should also be controlled and discontinued. In terms of behavioural changes, the responsibility of governments to shape mindsets and consumption choices should be realised. It was also suggested that solutions which are not based on a systemic perspective, can lead to problem-shifting.

C. WHAT TO IMPROVE

Efforts to foster dialogue between governments, private sector and civil society actors and improve collaboration between business and the science community, to develop more effective innovation systems should be further improved to address the plastics problem systemically (life-cycle based) and to concentrate on the root causes of the problem, including policy and production and consumption patterns. To be able to monitor progress, data generation and monitoring should be further harmonised, including definitions and sampling techniques. Product design that avoids or reduces single-use plastic materials should be promoted. Finally, it is important to further study where and how biobased and biodegradable plastics can have sustainability advantages.

D. WHAT TO SCALE UP

There are various measures which have been introduced in certain areas, but their utilisation is in the early stage of development. Such efforts include extended producer responsibilities (EPRs) and similar market mechanisms and requirements for packaging to be either easily recyclable or easily compostable, combined with requirements for products to contain recycled polymers. Source separation should also be further promoted while taking into considering impacts on informal collectors. Our research work also highlighted the importance of supporting SMEs that develop innovative alternatives or work on reducing single-use plastics by introducing appropriate regulations and standards. To level, the playing with existing established plastics-based businesses, securing access to finance on favourable terms is also of importance. Lastly, international cooperation, including partnerships and knowledge exchange, reflecting the global nature of plastics issues were highlighted as an important aspect of tackling the single-use plastic waste challenge.

HOW TO PROMOTE SINGLE-USE PLASTIC WASTE REDUCTION EFFORTS IN THE FUTURE

The ASEF research work on single-use plastics and the following discussions during the 2020 ENVforum conference showed that there is a potential to create synergies among various initiatives. To do so effectively, governance mechanisms and implementation arrangements need to be strengthened to better coordinate activities across the plastic production and consumption chains. In the future, policy approaches - such as regulatory instruments and market mechanisms - that governments have in their hand to support the shift towards a circular economy need to be better utilised across all ASEM member countries. Governments also have an important role in addressing the issues through their procurement as well as through cooperation with plastic producers and retailers (i.e. in the form of memorandums of understanding). Since the single-use plastic waste problem is a global challenge, local and national solutions should be further supported by international efforts addressing the plastic production and consumption chain. Cooperation between Asian and European member countries of ASEM could be an important starting point for such actions.

“ With most of production taking place in Asia, and most of consumption taking place in Europe, the allocation of impacts to consumers or producers returns a very different picture on who is contributing, and to what extent, to global issues such as climate change.

About the Asia-Europe Environment Forum (ENVforum)

Established in 2003, the Asia-Europe Environment Forum (ENVforum) is a partnership of: [Asia-Europe Foundation \(ASEF\)](#), Government of Sweden through the Regional Asia Environment Conference Support Programme administered by [Stockholm Environment Institute \(SEI\)](#), [Hanns Seidel Foundation \(HSF\)](#), [ASEM SMEs Eco-Innovation Center \(ASEIC\)](#) and the [Institute for Global Environmental Strategies \(IGES\)](#).

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” presents multiple challenges for countries to implement SDGs. One of the central issues impeding the success of the 2030 Agenda is unsustainable consumption and production pattern.

Consumption and production are the building blocks of the economy, and thus essential to economic growth and development. However, with the projected world population to reach 9.8 billion by 2050, current consumption and production pattern is detrimental to our environment. At this rate, the magnitude of natural resources required to meet the demand of the projected population is equivalent to almost three planets. As the shortage of natural resources looms, it is imperative to achieve SDG 12 “Ensuring Sustainable Consumption and Production” and transition from linear to a circular economy.

The ENVforum Annual Conference 2020, took place amidst a global pandemic. The conference titled “[Connecting the dots: Creating an enabling environment for SDG12 in](#)

[ASEM](#)” took place 9-11 November 2020 virtually, brought new perspectives on the topics of antimicrobial resistance (AMR); inclusive food value chains; sustainable garments; and single-use plastics, all with special consideration to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The 3-day conference provided a platform for representatives from various stakeholders including civil society organisations, governments, and businesses from Asia and Europe to exchange experiences, including challenges and best practices, on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and the transition into the circular economy. The conference was designed to promote exchanges on regional and international levels and highlight different multi-stakeholder initiatives or partnerships, including from the private sector, in promoting the adoption of SCP practices.

These were the thematic streams explored during the conference:

- » [Stream 1: Health Agenda Post COVID-19— Example of AMR and “mindful eaters”](#)
- » [Stream 2: Inclusive Food Value Chains as a Way of Transition to Circular Economy](#)
- » [Stream 3: Sustainable Garment](#)
- » [Stream 4: The Plastic Initiatives – 3R in action](#)

ASIA-EUROPE ENVIRONMENT FORUM



Consortium Partners:



In Collaboration with:

