

Plastic Free July: Don't underestimate the importance of recycling

Plastic has undoubtedly become an integral part of our modern lives. Its versatility and convenience have revolutionised various industries, from packaging and transportation to healthcare and electronics. However, the exponential rise in plastic production has led to a growing concern - the environmental impact of plastic waste.

By [Xolile White](#) 10 Jul 2023



Image source: Magda Ehlers from [Pexels](#)

To honour Plastic Free July, we reflect on and address one of the most pressing challenges of our time, plastic pollution. The movement aims to discourage single use plastics and promote a shift in behaviour, towards developing new habits. Although the movement is observed during July, it serves as a reminder of the urgent need to continuously act against the environmental footprint of plastic. As it stands, only about 9% of all plastic waste ever produced has been recycled. The rest either ends up in landfills, incinerated or becomes litter.

Much of the world knows the aesthetic issue of pollution, and the inherent health matters. But not many of us have truly engaged on the lifecycle of plastic, and therefore, the significance of recycling as a part of climate action. In that conversation, the impact of individual actions is critical in quantifying our efforts as we collectively work towards achieving global net zero emissions by 2050.

Understanding the plastic footprint

The journey of plastics begins with the extraction of fossil fuels, such as oil or natural gas, which are refined into polymers. These polymers are synthetic matter whose building blocks take a repetitive form, and they can be manipulated into different kinds of material such as plastic, nylon, Teflon or epoxy. Polymers also occur in nature but in plastic production, they are unnatural. These polymers, in this process, are transformed into a wide range of plastic products, which can be for single use or multiple use. According to World Wide Fund for Nature, researchers estimated that by 2021, the production and incineration of plastic would release over 850 million tonnes of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This number could escalate to 2.8 billion tonnes by 2050.

Typically, especially in fast moving consumer goods, they deliver plastic that ends up in waste and is typically disposed of

three ways: landfilling, incineration, or recycling. Landfilling is the most common method of plastic waste disposal, but it comes with significant drawbacks. Plastics can take hundreds of years to decompose, releasing harmful chemicals into the soil and waterways. Incineration, while reducing the volume of plastic waste, contributes to air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. But when we consider circularity, there is hope.



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Recycling as a critical solution to plastic waste

The importance of recycling in addressing environmental challenges cannot be overemphasised. The intervention reduces waste, mitigates climate change by reducing harm to soil and soil life, and in turn, is key in fostering a more sustainable and resilient future for generations to come.

By recycling plastic, we can conserve natural resources, reduce energy consumption, and reduce pollution. The process of recycling involves collecting, sorting, cleaning, and processing plastic waste into new products or raw materials.

Recycled plastic, also known as post-consumer resin (PCR), can be used to manufacture a wide array of products, including clothing, packaging, and construction materials. By incorporating recycled plastic into the production cycle, we reduce the need for virgin materials and drastically reduce the environmental footprint associated with their extraction and processing.

How do individuals and corporates get involved

There is critical individual action, corporate interventions, and community contributions towards the global goal of recycling plastic. Individuals play a crucial role by reducing plastic consumption, adopting reusable alternatives, following proper sorting practices, and supporting recycling initiatives. They contribute to the overall reduction in plastic waste and the demand for new plastics.

Corporate intervention involves companies prioritising sustainable packaging, using recycled materials, and implementing responsible waste management practices. Key for business is also championing research and innovation on recycling, building recycling infrastructure, influencing policy updates to support circular economy principles. These interventions drive industry-wide changes and promote the adoption of more sustainable practices.

Both individuals' and business' collective efforts are essential for achieving the global goal of recycling plastic and creating a more sustainable future.



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Despite notable advancements in certain aspects, it is anticipated that crucial targets set for 2025 will not be achieved. As of 2021, the Global Commitment 2022, which was endorsed by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation in collaboration with the UN Environment Programme, stated that the percentage of reusable, recyclable, or compostable plastic packaging stood at 65.4%.

However, the target has always been to achieve 100% reusable, recyclable, or compostable plastic packaging. The target for increasing the share of post-consumer recycled content in all plastic packaging is set at 27%. By the end of 2021, the progress reached only 10% towards this goal. The objective of reducing the use of virgin plastic in packaging to 9.5% was not fully met by the end of 2021, as it stood at 11.9%.

Do more to create less

This emphasizes the need for businesses to expedite their efforts, particularly with solutions that include to reduce the production of new packaging, to re-use existing materials, and to repurpose packaging already in circulation by ensuring, production, that it is flexible in nature.

Individuals to play an active role in reducing plastic consumption, embracing reusable alternatives, following proper sorting practices, supporting recycling initiatives, and choosing sustainable products. Governments to take swift action to accelerate progress and advocate for ambitious measures.

The global challenge of achieving net zero by 2050 necessitates a collective effort, and tackling plastic waste is an integral part of this endeavour. It is, simply put, about reducing the carbon footprint of this ubiquitous material that is all around us. And that starts with understanding the lifecycle of plastic, the importance of recycling, and the impact of individual action so that we can make informed choices that contribute to a sustainable future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Xolile White, Technical Director, Nestlé East and Southern Africa Region (ESAR)

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