

SINGLE-USE PLASTICS

SUCESSES AND CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL BANS

What are single-use plastics, and why is it important to ban them?

Single-use plastics are disposable plastic items designed to be used once and then discarded. Often, they are disposed of immediately after use. [These include items like plastic bags, straws, cutlery, bottles, wrappers, produce stickers, and food packaging.](#) They are primarily made from fossil fuel-based chemicals and represent a significant environmental concern due to their persistence in ecosystems, toxic chemical content, and contribution to pollution.

Most used plastics go to landfills or incineration. This is especially true for single-use plastics, particularly small items such as straws, bags, and cutlery, which pose significant recycling challenges. These items often slip through gaps in recycling machinery, making them difficult to process. As a result, many recycling centres do not accept them.

The manufacturing of single-use plastics is particularly resource-intensive, consuming approximately 6% of the global oil supply. [If current trends continue, this figure is projected to surge to 20% by 2050.](#)

Statistics on Single-Use Plastic Production and Use

- Global Production: [Since the 1950s, approximately 8.3 billion metric tons of plastic have been produced. Of this, around 91% is single-use plastic.](#)
- Annual Production: [Of over 380 million tons of plastic produced annually, up to 50% of that is for single-use purposes](#)
- Waste Management: [Only about 9% of all plastic waste ever produced has been recycled. The majority, approximately 79%, ends up in landfills or the natural environment.](#)
- Plastic bottles: [Over 1 million plastic bottles are sold every minute world-wide.](#)
- Plastic bags: [Nearly 2 million single-use plastic bags are distributed world-wide every minute, and less than 1% of them are recycled.](#)
- Plastic in landfills: [Pollution from single-use plastics accounts for over 50% of the plastics found in landfills.](#)



- Ocean Pollution: [At least 14 million tons of plastic enter the oceans each year. This pollution is primarily caused by the growth of plastic production and inadequate waste management infrastructure in many countries.](#)
- Future Projections: [By 2040, the annual flow of plastic into the ocean is expected to triple.](#)

Implementing widespread bans on single-use plastics can substantially reduce plastic waste. Shifting towards a circular economy, where materials are reused and recycled, can help reduce the need for single-use plastics. [This approach requires collaboration between governments, industries, and consumers.](#) Many countries and regions have already seen positive impacts from such bans. However, a significant majority of people support a global ban on single-use plastics, which could lead to more uniform and effective policies.

National single-use plastic bans

Countries around the world have implemented various bans and restrictions on single-use plastics, prioritizing plastic bags. These measures vary from outright bans to imposing taxes or fees on plastic bag usage. Countries like Kenya, Rwanda, and Bangladesh are noted for their stringent bans on plastic bags. Kenya, for instance, has one of the strictest bans, with severe penalties for violations. Several European countries have also implemented bans or restrictions. The European Union has set targets to significantly reduce plastic bag consumption. These and other examples of national single-use plastic bans demonstrate clear success in reducing plastic bag usage and pollution in some regions.



Antigua and Barbuda: This Caribbean nation was the first to ban single-use plastic bags in 2016.

The experience from Antigua and Barbuda demonstrates the importance of clear and consistent communication about which products are banned and when. In this state, phased bans on plastic bags in 2016 and 2017 helped build support for banning other plastic products between 2017 and 2018. In both cases, the initial step was to restrict the importation of these products, followed by a ban on their distribution. This allowed suppliers time to find alternatives and deplete existing stock.

Armenia: In January 2022, Armenia began banning the sale of polyethylene bags and sacks with a density of up to 50 microns.

The main goal of the Ministry of Environment is to reduce the use of plastic and raise public awareness of the harmful effects of polyethylene. Those economic entities that, from January 1, 2022, continue to use polyethylene bags with a density of up to 50 microns, except for bags and sacks made of secondary raw materials, as well as bags intended for packaging, are subject to an administrative fine in the amount of thirty times the established minimum wage.

Azerbaijan: Banned import, production and use of disposable plastic spoons, forks, knives, plates and cups starting 1 July 2021.

The ban was introduced based on the decree “On Amendments to the Code of Administrative Offenses of Azerbaijan,” signed by the country’s President on November 26, 2020. It is concerned that such products are not eligible for utilization and recycling.

Canada: Plastic grocery bags, straws, stir sticks, six-pack rings, cutlery, and certain food take-out containers are banned.

The Regulations ban the production, importation, and sale of single-use plastic items such as checkout bags, cutlery, foodservice ware containing problematic plastics, ring carriers, stir sticks, and straws. However, an exception permits the availability of single-use plastic flexible straws under specific conditions to ensure accessibility for those who need them.

European Union: Banned single-use plastic items such as plates, cutlery, straws, balloon sticks, and cotton buds.

Starting July 3, 2021, single-use plastic plates, cutlery, straws, balloon sticks, and cotton buds cannot be sold in EU Member States. This ban also extends to cups and food and beverage containers made of expanded polystyrene, as well as all products made from oxo-degradable plastic. The EU approach confirms that if the goal of a policy is to address specific single-use plastic items that often end up as litter, implementing bans can be more effective in ensuring their complete removal from the market. This also encourages the use of reusable products or alternative materials. The EU has adopted this approach by banning commonly littered plastic items that can easily be replaced with other materials.

Georgia: Disposable plastic bags of any thickness made of polymers, namely their production, import and sale, have been officially banned in Georgia since April 1, 2019.

The bag ban law [was adopted in October 2018](#). Entrepreneurs who violate it face a fine of over \$180 and the confiscation of goods. The fine will be doubled if the violation is repeated.

Kenya: Banned single-use plastic bags in 2017 and prohibited single-use plastics in national parks, forests, beaches, and conservation areas in 2020.

In response to a presidential directive issued on World Environment Day in 2019, a ban on plastic water bottles,

cups, disposable plates, cutlery, and straws was enforced in National Parks, beaches, forests, and conservation areas starting June 5, 2020. This initiative builds on Kenya's pioneering nationwide ban on single-use plastic bags, which was implemented in 2017.

United Kingdom: Banned plastic straws, stirrers, and cotton buds, and introduced a tax on plastic bags.

The prohibition on distributing plastic straws, stirrers, and plastic-stemmed cotton buds was implemented in England in October 2020, representing an advancement in the Government's efforts to combat single-use plastic waste, safeguard the environment, and clean up oceans. This ban was introduced just one month after ministers announced the increase in the single-use plastic bag charge to 10p, extending it to all retailers. Annually, the UK is estimated to use 4.7 billion plastic straws, 316 million plastic stirrers, and 1.8 billion plastic-stemmed cotton buds, many of which end up in the oceans.

Vanuatu: In 2018, Vanuatu banned single-use plastic bags, straws, and polystyrene food containers.

Local communities creatively replaced banned plastic bags and polystyrene containers with natural, locally made alternatives, such as palm leaf bags and food containers. The Vanuatu experience shows that single-use plastic bans must ensure accessible alternatives, phased implementation, public support, and a comprehensive approach to the entire plastic lifecycle.

What are the key challenges in making national policies effective?

Despite substantial efforts by countries to reduce pollution by banning the production, import, and use of single-use plastics, they also face significant challenges in enforcing these bans. These include resistance from businesses, the need for public education, and the need to address illegal trade. For example, [in Kenya, after the ban was introduced, plastic bags were illegally imported from Uganda and Tanzania](#). Thus, weak enforcement can lead to banned products still entering the market.

Moreover, the impact of banning single-use plastic items is confined to the area where the ban is enforced unless it sparks a broader change in public or commercial behaviour across borders. While these bans are a step in the right direction, they must be part of broader efforts to reduce plastic production and use, as well as to improve waste management systems. Without additional measures or treating the ban as the start of a larger effort to cut plastic production, simply banning certain items does little to alter the mindset that supports a disposable culture.

For example, [all 16 countries of the Southern African Development Community \(SADC\) have announced policies on single-use plastic bags](#). Despite progress in policy development to reduce single-use plastic bags, there is little evidence of their enforcement or effectiveness. Five SADC member states have implemented a total ban, two have opted for a partial ban, three have chosen a partial ban with a levy, two have had their policies revoked, and four are still discussing their policies. These policies are primarily driven by waste management concerns. However, ten member states have not launched any awareness campaigns related to their policies. Nine member states used a top-down approach in decision-making, with limited input from civil society or other stakeholders. This limited involvement could undermine the success of these policies, as civil society support is crucial for effective enforcement, and their participation in policy design could result in more practical and country-specific solutions.

In 2022, the Global Plastics Policy Centre at the University of Portsmouth conducted a [review](#) of 100 policies from



around the world that target plastic pollution, aiming to identify the factors that contribute to their success. The review reveals a significant data gap that hinders the assessment of plastic policies, which is incompatible with the urgent need to address plastic pollution. Among the policies lacking available evidence for analysis, 65% were from 2019 and 2018, while 20% were from before 2018. It was surprising to find that policies from before 2018 had so little evidence available for analysis despite being in place for over five years. This highlights a lack of monitoring and reporting on the effectiveness of these policies. Additionally, 31% of the reviewed policies had a limited evidence base.

The analysis of policy reviews revealed that many national policies addressing plastic pollution are implemented in a fragmented and often reactive manner, typically targeting specific items like bags, straws, and cups. The study identified two main types of policy interactions: those targeting plastic consumption (e.g., taxes and bans) and those addressing end-of-life stages (e.g., recycling). End-of-life policies are more complex and require coordination across all stages of the plastic lifecycle to be effective. For instance, a deposit return scheme or a fully recyclable product is only effective if a robust recycling system is in place.

Effective plastic pollution management necessitates synergy between upstream and downstream interventions. Prioritizing policies that cover the entire lifecycle of plastics can address a broader range of potentially negative impacts. An integrated policy framework is essential, incorporating diverse policy mixes that span the entire plastics value chain and intersect with other policy areas such as health, climate, biodiversity, and the economy.

The review identified challenges and gaps in current plastic pollution policies, highlighting the need for stronger, more unified global action. For example, the fragmented approach utilized in many countries can lead to inconsistent results and may not effectively address the broader issue of plastic pollution. Moreover, the review found a significant data gap, with many policies lacking sufficient evidence to assess their effectiveness. This is particularly concerning for policies that have been in place for several years but still lack adequate monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

A globally standardized approach to reporting will help evaluate the successes and challenges of policies aimed at reducing single-use plastic production and use, and support informed decisions. It is also important to have an integrated policy framework that accounts for all stages and actors across the plastics value chain. This framework should include policies that operate across boundaries and synergize with other areas, such as health, climate, biodiversity, and the economy.

Given these challenges, the argument for stronger, more unified global actions becomes clear. A global ban on single-use plastics could be a crucial component of a comprehensive strategy to address plastic pollution. Such a ban would help reduce the production, consumption, and trade of these significant contributors to plastic waste. Additionally, a global approach would ensure consistency and coordination across countries, making it easier to implement and enforce effective policies.

How did the public react to single-use plastic bans?

A recent [survey commissioned by WWF and the Plastic Free Foundation](#) found that 85% of people worldwide support banning single-use plastics, which contribute over 70% to ocean plastic pollution. The survey also revealed strong support for banning harmful chemicals in plastics and ensuring that plastics can be easily recycled.

A [Greenpeace study](#) echoed these findings, showing overwhelming public support for ending single-use plastics. With 430 million tonnes of virgin plastic produced annually, 60% of which are single-use, and only 9% recycled, the public wants urgent measures in the treaty to address this crisis. The survey highlights the need for a comprehensive approach, including redesigning the plastics system to ensure reuse and recycling and mandating manufacturers invest in these systems. Strong support also exists for providing all countries with the necessary resources for a just transition.

WWF and the Plastic Free Foundation emphasize the urgency of creating globally binding rules to phase out harmful plastics and support a just transition as negotiators work toward finalizing the treaty by the end of 2024. Public opinion strongly supports a transformative approach to managing plastics, shifting from a linear “take-make-dispose” model to a circular economy, and urges governments to act decisively.

How do single-use plastic bans affect local economies?

National bans have significantly reduced the use of single-use plastics, leading to less plastic waste and cleaner environments. However, businesses often face higher costs when switching to alternative materials. This can impact profitability, especially for small businesses.

Several strategies could be considered to help businesses adapt to single-use plastic bans. For example, it is important to raise business awareness about the [availability of sustainable alternatives](#) to single-use plastics, such as paper, bamboo, or reusable materials. It is also helpful to work with suppliers to source eco-friendly products. The demand for sustainable alternatives can create new economic opportunities, including innovations and jobs in sectors like reusable bag production and biodegradable packaging made from natural materials. For example, an [ice cream shop in California](#) invented edible spoons made from wheat, oats, corn, chickpeas, and brown rice. It later expanded its edible product range to include straws and forks, available in various sweet and savoury flavours. These products maintain their shape for 30 minutes in both hot soups and cold desserts.

Building trust and understanding between businesses and customers is also critical. Providing customers with information about the importance of switching to reusable, sustainable alternatives and the reasons behind such changes can foster support and understanding. In addition, making alternatives accessible and affordable and

providing discounts or loyalty points to customers who bring their own bags or containers can promote sustainable habits and gain customers' support.

At the same time, implementing fees on single-use plastics discourages their use. The revenue, inter alia, can be invested in improving waste management. Additionally, introducing an extended producer responsibility scheme that holds manufacturers accountable for the entire lifecycle of their products incentivizes the design of reusable and recyclable products instead of single-use plastics.

Moreover, some governments support small businesses in substituting single-use plastic. For example, the Australian government has launched the [National Plastics Plan](#), which includes grants to encourage innovation in sustainable packaging and provides resources for businesses to transition away from single-use plastics.

These findings highlight the complex balance between environmental benefits and economic challenges. However, by adopting the suggested strategies, businesses can not only comply with regulations but also contribute to a more sustainable future. Overall, reducing plastic pollution can lead to long-term economic benefits by improving public health, reducing cleanup costs, and boosting innovations. While there are initial costs and adjustments, the long-term benefits outweigh these challenges.

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