

# Recommendations based on a study on plastic pollution in Azerbaijan and aimed at improving the situation in the country

## Introduction

Plastic packaging waste is one of the major contributors to plastic pollution. They do not decompose in nature for hundreds of years and their volume increases every year. Studies show that when improperly handled, plastic waste pollutes the environment and water bodies, penetrates deep into agricultural soils, inhibits normal plant growth and reduces agricultural productivity. In addition, the toxic smoke emitted from the incineration of plastic waste contributes significantly to air pollution. Therefore, mitigating the negative impact of plastic waste on the environment is a priority in the field of environmental protection.

The relevant paragraphs of the Action Plan for 2019-2020 "Reducing the negative environmental impact of plastic packaging waste in the Republic of Azerbaijan", approved by Presidential Decree No. 935 of February 7, 2019, include measures such as studying international practices in the field of plastic packaging waste management, conducting analyses and improving the legislative framework.

As a result of the Action Plan, the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Amendments to the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Environmental Protection" entered into force on November 26, 2020. This law prohibits the import, production, sale and distribution of plastic bags up to 15 microns thick, as well as single-use plastic items such as stir sticks, forks, spoons, plates and cups in trade, catering and other service sectors. Corresponding amendments have also been made to the Code of Administrative Violations of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

In addition, Cabinet of Ministers Decision No. 28 adopted on February 2, 2021, regulates the provision of lightweight polyethylene bags (15-50 microns thick), both with and without handles, for the transportation of goods and products in the provision of trade, catering, household and other services.

Surveys conducted among major supermarket chains for the 2023 initiative showed a decrease in plastic bag use by a 40-69% ("Tam Store" - 50%, "Grand Mart" - 50%, "AL Market" - 69%, "Neptun Supermarket" - 40%, "Me-gastore" - 40%, "RAHAT" supermarket - 46%). These results testify to the effectiveness of the measures taken.

However, monitoring and clean-up activities carried out by the NGO Ruzgyar indicate that the pollution of the environment, especially coastal areas, by plastic waste is still prevalent. Therefore, in accordance with international practice, it is necessary to expand the list of banned plastic products in our country, apply legal responsibility in this field and take measures for the development of circular economy.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme, about 19-23 million tons of plastic waste enter aquatic ecosystems every year, polluting lakes, rivers, seas and oceans. Without significant intervention, this figure is expected to triple by 2040, and by 2050, plastic will account for 15% of greenhouse gas emissions.

The June 5, 2019 European Union Directive on Reducing the Environmental Impact of Certain Plastic Products includes additional single-use plastic products such as plastic drinking straws, plastic cotton ear buds and balloon sticks in the list of banned products. In addition, one innovative approach to reducing plastic waste and encouraging recycling is to switch to the use of attachable lids. To this end, since July of this year, the import of single-use plastic beverage containers up to 3 liters in volume, whose lids are not attached to the container, has been banned in the European Union. The purpose of this decision is to prevent plastic bottle caps from becoming separate waste and to increase recycling. It should be noted that local companies trading with these countries have already started preparations for the introduction of this technology.

Over the past few years, as a result of bans imposed in developed countries, local companies and entrepreneurs trading with these countries have begun to adopt innovative approaches to plastic waste reduction, reuse and recycling, increased use of alternative materials. These approaches have made significant strides towards minimizing negative environmental impacts, increasing economic efficiency and social responsibility.

Currently, representatives of the private sector in Azerbaijan are actively cooperating with state authorities in this area, showing interest in measures taken to mitigate the negative impact of plastic on the environment. This cooperation also ensures the implementation of joint projects on environmental protection and promotion of environmental awareness campaigns. Expansion of such positive initiatives in our country is crucial for accelerating the application of environmentally friendly technologies.

This necessitates the production of alternative materials with less environmental impact. These changes are vital for ensuring environmental sustainability and

economic development of Azerbaijan, as well as for the fulfillment of international obligations. At the same time, it is very important to conduct environmental education campaigns for the population, reduce the amount of plastic waste and raise awareness of the importance of recycling. These steps will ensure the active participation of all segments of society in promoting environmental stewardship and create the basis for sustainable development in Azerbaijan.

**We are in the process of reaching an agreement with the relevant authorities to include plastic drinking straws, plastic balloon stands and sticks, plastic cotton ear buds, and disposable plastic beverage containers up to three liters with unattached lids to the list of plastic products, to the list of goods prohibited for circulation in Azerbaijan in accordance with international standards.**

It is expected that as the plastic packaging waste recycling system improves and becomes more efficient, a new market for raw materials will be created, the use of alternative packaging materials will expand, and a favorable environment will be created for potential investors and entrepreneurs to develop the plastic recycling system. These processes will be accompanied by improvement of the regulatory framework and strengthening of the recycling market based on modern technologies using international experience.

In the long term, significant improvements will be achieved in the plastic waste recycling sector, which will allow to expand the use of alternative packaging and significantly reduce the negative impact on the environment. At the same time, once an effective management system in this area is established, the raw materials market of the recycling sector will become even more attractive for local entrepreneurs and investors. This will not only preserve the ecological balance in our country, but also accelerate economic development.

## **Recommendations to improve the situation with plastic pollution in Azerbaijan**

**These recommendations are based on information obtained from a Survey of existing national legislation governing the production, import, export and consumption of single-use plastics; a Survey of current types of single-use plastics, including applications and types of polymers used; a Survey of available statistics on the production, export, import and consumption of single-use plastics by type and application; and a Survey of the availability of alternatives to single-use plastics by type of application.**

Single-use plastics are widely used in households, industry, agriculture, medicine and other fields. They include, for example, plastic products for the transportation or packaging of goods (e.g. plastic bags, stoppers, lids, caps and other plastic closure products), plastic food and kitchen utensils (e.g. forks,

knives, plates, glasses and drinking straws), other items, hygiene or toiletries, plastic bottles, containers, etc.

After the country's decisions to restrict the use of single-use plastics in 2020, entrepreneurs' interest in producing and importing alternatives to these products in the country has increased significantly. A competitive environment has been created for the production of goods made of paper. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment is receiving proposals to establish bioplastic production in the country. After the decision to initially restrict the use of single-use plastics, products that replace them (bioplastic products) are imported into the country. New legislative projects to expand the list of banned single-use plastics are at the stage of coordination with specialized agencies.

### **Public opinion on single-use plastic phase-out: what types of plastic do consumers consider important and why?**

Consumers are largely satisfied with decisions to restrict the import, production and consumption of single-use plastics used for the transportation of single-use plastics and other consumer plastic products. However, they believe that it is essential to have alternative products to replace them. According to a survey conducted by representatives of supermarket chains, 72.7% of respondents are against the ban of single-use plastic bags used for transportation of goods and products.

### **Stakeholder views**

Environmental organizations of Azerbaijan actively advocate for solving the problem of environmental pollution by plastic waste and demand strengthening of control over the disposal and recycling of plastic. Ruzgar Environmental Society, a non-governmental organization that highlights the problem of plastic waste pollution, demands strengthening of control over plastic disposal and recycling.

The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Azerbaijan emphasize the need for further research in this area. However, there is still a lack of data on the scale of the plastic pollution problem in the country, which makes it difficult to take effective measures.

The Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Azerbaijan implements various projects on plastic waste utilization and tries to introduce international experience. However, at the legislative level, the problem of the impact of plastic on human health has not yet been sufficiently studied, and specialized laws in this area have not been adopted.

Plastics manufacturers are facing increasing pressure from the market and regulators to incentivize investment in clean technologies. However, such companies,

like Azarplastik, are not fully prepared to phase out hazardous substances in plastics due to the high costs and extensive changes required in production processes.

Society and consumers are increasingly interested in environmental issues, especially in urban areas where awareness of the harm of plastic waste is growing. However, in rural areas, according to the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Science and Education of Azerbaijan, the level of awareness about the harm of plastic waste remains insufficient, which requires intensification of information and education campaigns in these regions.

## Recommendations to reduce production, exports, imports and consumption of single-use plastics:

- Increased public awareness and availability of paper and fabric packaging;
- Stronger steps need to be taken to raise awareness in this area;
- Expansion of production of bioplastic products (consumer bags made of corn starch);
- replacing plastic with environmentally friendly materials;
- Introducing special discounts to reduce the cost of fabric and paper bags;
- Application of economic instruments to reduce purchase prices for eco and bio bags.

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More information about the project:

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