

Big brands are 'failing to curb plastic sachet use'

May 24 2024, by Alladin Diega



Used plastic bags at a dump. An estimated 855 billion sachets are sold globally each year with Southeast Asia consuming nearly half of the total. Credit: Sohail Nawaz from Pexels

Small plastic sachets commonly used in low- and middle-income countries must be phased out and packaging reuse systems promoted,

urge campaigners and waste pickers, as new analysis reveals major corporations have failed to curb their use.

Pocket-sized individual portions of goods ranging from shampoo to instant coffee have become popular in lower-income communities for their affordability.

An estimated 855 billion sachets are sold globally each year with Southeast Asia consuming nearly half of the total and this figure projected to rise to 1.3 trillion by 2027, according to [environmental groups](#).

But the convenience of sachets comes with a heavy environmental cost as they end up as significant contributors to plastic pollution. Their commonly multi-layered design, using different materials, makes them hard to recycle.

Xuan Quach, coordinator of Vietnam Zero Waste Alliance, told SciDev.Net, "We need a multi-pronged approach, phasing out sachets alongside significant investments in reuse systems."

Consumer goods giants Unilever, Nestlé and Procter & Gamble are among the biggest contributors to plastic sachet pollution in developing countries in Asia, despite promises to reduce plastic packaging, according to a multi-country [environmental audit](#) report.

The community-based audit was conducted by BreakFreeFromPlastic (BFFP), a global movement of more than 13,000 organizations and individuals working for solutions to the [plastic pollution](#) crisis. It found that a number of global and regional brands were among the biggest contributors to single-use plastic sachet pollution across four countries in Asia, despite their pledges to reduce the use of plastics.

Between October 2023 and February 2024, BFFP's volunteers organized brand audits in 50 locations across India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. They collected and documented more than 33,000 sachets, which were traced to 2,678 different brands.

According to the report, published last month, from all the plastic sachets collected and audited, 86% were from packaged [food items](#) while the rest were household items, [personal care products](#) and other uncategorized packaging such as smoking products.

Aside from the big three mentioned, regional brands Mayora Indah, Wings and Salim Group from Indonesia, Wadia Group and Balaji Wafers from India, JG Summit Holdings from the Philippines, and Yes2Healthy Life from Singapore, are also producing substantial volumes of multi-layered plastic sachets, according to the report.

It said some corporations were trying to deal with the waste problem by burning sachets as fuel, creating further pollution.

Environmental groups in Asia have long been demanding firms to phase out their sachet packaging as the resulting waste is deluging the region's landfills and waters, says Emma Priestland, global corporate campaigns coordinator for BFFP.

During the UN Environmental Assembly in March 2022, a [resolution](#) was signed launching the [intergovernmental](#) negotiation process for a binding global plastics treaty.

In September of that year, the Business Coalition for a Global Plastics Treaty was born, a coalition of private companies, financial institutions, and not-for-profit organizations, to campaign for the plastics treaty. Unilever is part of the coalition, as well as other giant brands like Coca Cola, Kimberly-Clark and Colgate-Palmolive.

Tingi tradition

Asked about alternative solutions to sachets, considering their convenience and affordability, Priestland said that customers across Asia have purchased small quantities of daily products long before plastic sachets came along, such as the "Tingi" culture in the Philippines.

Tingi or small portions was a traditional way of buying products in small amounts or pieces. Buyers would bring their own containers for liquid products and the sellers wrapped dry goods either in pieces of old newspapers or other biodegradable materials.

But companies have "co-opted this traditional practice and flooded communities with harmful sachet pollution," Priestland lamented.

In some Asian countries there have been positive developments, however.

In India, under a [recent amendment](#) to the country's Plastic Waste Management Rules by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, municipal authorities and rural local bodies must highlight the role of waste pickers in plastic waste management, from collection to disposal.

Vidya Naiknaware, who works as a waste picker in India, told SciDev.Net, "This is a crucial step as waste pickers' contributions span social, economic, and environmental realms, forming the very bedrock of sustainable waste management, which includes the recovery of sachet waste."

Naiknaware is a member of the SWaCH Cooperative, India's first wholly-owned cooperative of self-employed waste collectors and other urban poor, based in Pune.

She says the tiny wrappers and sachets are practically impossible to collect because of their size and cannot be recycled due to their negligible value.

"We urge companies to produce packaging which we can pick up and send for recycling, or which can be composted," she appealed.

In the Philippines, there is a resurgence of the "tingi" or refill, in the form of zero-waste sari-sari stores. But this type of initiative should be assisted by banning sachets and single-use plastics, while incentivizing reuse and refill alternatives, according to Aloja Santos, founding president of the Philippine National Waste Workers' Alliance.

In Vietnam, recent [laws to protect the environment](#) mandated corporations to collect and recycle sachets and other plastic packaging. However, the country's limited recycling capacity makes it challenging to handle all sachet waste safely, according to Quach, of Vietnam Zero Waste Alliance.

In Indonesia, a [regulation](#) introduced in 2019 encourages producers to reduce packaging waste by 30% of the total production by 2029 and phase out sachets under 50 ml by 2030.

SciDev.Net reached out to the companies mentioned in the report and to the Philippines' Department of Environment and Natural Resources, however no comments were received ahead of publication.

Provided by SciDev.Net

Citation: Big brands are 'failing to curb plastic sachet use' (2024, May 24) retrieved 26 June 2024

from <https://phys.org/news/2024-05-big-brands-curb-plastic-sachet.html>

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