**Focusing on Plastic**

[Yasmeen Aftab Ali](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/yasmeen-aftab-ali/%22%20%5Co%20%22More%20Articles%20by%20Yasmeen%20Aftab%20Ali)@yasmeen\_9

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Plastic can be a deadly weapon to destroy the environment. How? Plastic decomposes over a long time. During the time it undergoes the process, it continues to release toxic substances into the environment. If plastic trash bags are burnt, they cause serious air pollution. Even today, 422 million tonnes of plastic are being produced each year. Plastics make up around 75 per cent of marine litter, although this can be up to 100 per cent at some sites. Plastic waste in the oceans transforms itself into microplastics. This is eaten in good quantities by commercial fish, which is, in turn, consumed by humans.When produced, plastics contain certain elements, some even in disastrous properties. A common one is an endocrine disruptor. These disruptors are linked to autoimmune diseases, cancer, infertility, birth defects and behavioural disorders.  Pakistan banned the use of plastic shopping bags. They have disappeared in supermarkets and larger stores of urban cities and brown paper bags and mesh net bags have taken their place. However, this has not yet happened in small towns and rural areas. The ban is a token gesture. Plastic continues to be produced in millions of other shapes and forms. Water by multinational and local companies is sold in plastic bottles. These come in 250ml, 1 litre, 18-litre bottles. Yes, they have plastic tops too. Likewise cold drinks, in different quantities, come in plastic bottles. Water bottles are usually one-time use only.

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It uses an element named polyethylene terephthalate {PeT}, which takes decades to decompose fully. Many products by food chains [local as well as multinational] are sold in plastic packaging and/or containers to save cost; making it cheaper for the end buyer. The list is long. Mayonnaise, rice, lentils, tomato ketchup, so on and so forth. Even sanitary napkins, pampers, tablet inserters. There is a serious lack of attention towards creating laws that contain this waste. The Basel Convention, to which Pakistan is a signatory, is one good piece of law. However, the law needs to be more stringent. The agreement also focuses on illegal waste business, which is a cover-up for illegal operations. Wealthier countries pawn off their waste at good costs to poorer nations. This is more lucrative than selling it within their own country. Recycled plastic waste is seen as a commodity in today’s world. The poorer nations, importing this commodity, usually have ineffective systems to deal with waste management and the end result sees a lot of it adds to oceanic waste.Pakistan also needs to create new laws customised to its own situation. One size does not fit all. Different types of materials are placed under the umbrella of “plastic.” More than 3.3 million tonnes of plastic are wasted each year in Pakistan. This is dumped in pits, around large areas of garbage cans, open plots, water areas all over, streets of slums, mixed with mud and slime.Pakistan has the highest percentage of mismanaged plastic in South Asia. “Mismanaged waste is material which is at high risk of entering the ocean via wind or tidal transport, or carried to coastlines from inland waterways. Mismanaged waste is the sum of material that is either littered or inadequately disposed of. Inadequately disposed and littered waste are different.”China banned the import of 24 types of plastic. This was in 2018. China was one of the large plastic waste importers. “By 2030, it’s estimated that around 110 million tonnes of plastic will be displaced as a result of the ban. This plastic waste will have to be handled domestically or exported to another country.”If exported to countries not having effective waste management structures, it is an environmental disaster just waiting to explode in our faces.Global chains must join hands to address this issue. At the national level, Pakistan can ban the import or production of goods supporting plastic. Unfortunately, our government must not make a decision one day and declare implementation from the next day. This is unrealistic and impractical. A gradual phasing out that allows industries to use alternative packaging is required. Products with microbeads must be shunned, may it be in toothpaste, facial scrubs and cosmetics to name a few.The point remains that banning plastic bags alone is no solution. Till some years ago, we had cold drinks in 250ml glass bottles with a silver tin cap. Medicine came in paper wrappers/inserts in a box. Why can other stuff like soup sachets, chips, salted peanuts and so on not come in paper sachets and cardboard soft containers? Why can jam and achar bottles of glass not switch from plastic caps to tin ones? There is so much use of plastic everywhere in some form or the other. Our government needs a serious rethink towards waste management. The first step of which is putting brakes on the production of plastic {where it can} and look into substitutes that can replace it.The writer is a lawyer, academic, political analyst and a published author.

*She can be contacted at yasmeenali62@gmail.com and tweets @yasmeen\_9*