**Planet vs plastic**

Zile Huma

Saturday, Apr 27, 2024

Earth Day is celebrated every year on April 22 to highlight the environmental issues that are eating away our planet slowly and gradually.

The theme for Earth Day 2024, celebrated this Monday, was ‘Planet vs Plastics’ to raise awareness about the threats of plastic being faced by our planet, calling for a 60 per cent reduction in plastic use by 2040.

According to the UN Environment Programme, the world produces 9-14 million tonnes of plastics every year, and it is projected to increase by 23-37 million tonnes per year by 2040 if we continue with our unsustainable life patterns.

When we talk about environmental pollution in Pakistan, the most pressing challenge is plastic pollution. Pakistan is among the countries that produce huge quantities of plastic every year. According to SWITCH-Asia, 3.3 million tonnes of plastic waste are produced annually in Pakistan. The sources of this waste are households, industries, medical institutions, and even the agriculture sector.

Household wastes include shopping bags, food packaging materials, etc. Industrial plastic waste is produced by different kinds of industries like automotive, electronic, packaging, etc. The agriculture sector produces plastic waste like irrigation pipes, crop protection, packaging materials for seed and fertilizer, etc.

Plastic waste produced by medical science includes surgical gloves, syringes, cannula pipes, medicine coverings, etc. It is important to first analyze the problems and threats associated with plastic waste and then identify possible solutions.

First, the biggest challenge is the non-biodegradable nature of plastics. It takes thousands of years for a normal single-use plastic bag available in the market to decompose. As a result, it remains as tiny particles in our soil and water bodies, posing a threat to marine life and other plants and animals. It chokes the respiratory and digestive systems of animals.

According to the World Wildlife Fund, at least 100,000 marine animals die from plastic pollution every year. The second important problem caused by plastic waste is the blockade of drainage systems in urban areas, increasing the risks of urban flooding during monsoon.

Pakistan has already witnessed urban flooding in Karachi and Lahore –two major cities of Pakistan – over the last few years. While reasons for urban flooding in Karachi and Lahore include climate change and encroachments, experts say that blocked sewers with plastic and other waste are one of the main reasons for constant flooding.

The third important issue caused by plastic waste is an untidy and unhygienic atmosphere. Huge piles of plastics on roadsides or flying in the air during windy days affect the beautification of our cities. They are also the source of inviting and spreading many diseases. These are some of the causes and negative impacts of plastic waste in Pakistan and all over the world. It is essential to identify the solutions and implement those solutions through policies, better management, laws, and awareness campaigns.

The following possible solutions can help combat plastic waste to some extent. A very simple and basic solution is to reduce the unnecessary use of plastic in our lives. The habit of reuse is also important and should be adopted in our lives. The government and industries need to work to provide the cheapest alternative to plastic bags and packaging material in the market.

The world is already working on a global plastic treaty to end the use of plastics. Pakistan also has effective legislation in place to eliminate plastic use. Big brands and stores are either charging extra to provide plastic shopping bags or have options for alternative bags. The need is to target packaging material and small vendors like vegetable and fruit hawkers to prohibit the use of plastic bags.

But, first, it is important to give these vendors some cheap options of alternatives, raise awareness among them, and then give them time to replace. The Pakistani government also needs to take the initiative to place segregated dustbins in public places and collect garbage from doorsteps in a segregated manner. There should be proper, dedicated sites to throw garbage, and citizens not following it should be heavily fined.

Researchers and education institutions need to focus on green chemistry to find easy methods to decompose existing plastics and invent easily decomposable and commercially viable options. Such actions will help reduce both the demand and supply of plastics.

It is equally important to generate awareness campaigns through media and educational institutions to change the behaviour of ordinary people. Awareness in early classes will help children understand the threats of plastic use and adopt long-lasting habits of reducing, reusing, and recycling.

International organizations and governments should provide funding for academic research in this area to find local solutions to local problems associated with plastic waste. Academic discussions in the form of conferences, workshops, and seminars will help stakeholders collaborate and find out the best practices to eliminate plastic from our planet through collective wisdom.

The writer is a graduate of University of Oxford in Public Policy. She tweets/posts @zilehumma\_1