

Anti-plastic pollution group welcomes adoption of reusable packaging system

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A group advocating against pollution from disposable plastic lauded the position of 115 health experts from 18 countries vouching for the safety of the reusable packaging system by employing basic hygiene.

Health and environmental groups under the Break Free From Plastic (BFFP) movement welcomed the statement, which addresses the safe use of reusable bags, containers and refill systems amid the ongoing coronavirus disease (Covid-19) crisis.

BFFP Philippines's Riedo Panaligan said it was a "very timely statement made by the global scientific community."

"Plastic pollution should not be a part of our efforts towards a 'Better Normal' future. Unless we turn off the tap and regulate the production, plastic will continue to contaminate our food supply and impact our ecosystems," Panaligan said.

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He said they are urging the public not to "allow chemical and plastic industries to capitalize on the Covid-19 crisis and continue their business-as-usual operations."

"It is time for nations to hold them accountable for the plastic pollution crisis," Panaligan added.

According to the BFFP, the experts' joint statement also builds on the movement's "Just Recovery" principles as it highlights the need to take a holistic approach to shifting to reusables, such as employing contactless systems and ensuring employee and worker safety and health.

In their statement, the health experts said reusable and refill systems can still be used safely by employing basic and stringent hygiene practices.

“Reusables offer more sustainable packaging solutions and are easier to clean with soap and water or even with commonly approved household disinfectants. Single-use plastics are not inherently safer than reusables; and not only do they contribute to environmental pollution, they have also been found to cause additional public health concerns once they are discarded,” according to Geminn Louis C. Apostol, one of the signatories to the statement.

Nevertheless, Apostol said observing physical distancing and limiting outdoor activities remain to be the most cost-effective measure to avoid transmission of Covid-19. He added these also minimize the need to use disposable personal protective equipment (PPE).

“Moreover, we must advocate for evidence-based, and well-enforced waste management policies and practices,” said Apostol, who is lead environmental health specialist at the Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health. He also emphasized the need for a concerted effort in addressing the problem.

While there are safe disposal solutions to Covid-related waste such as medical waste autoclaves, the best way to ensure personal and environmental health is the rational use of PPEs and a shift to reusable, the BFFP said.

The health experts’ statement stressed that available evidence indicates that the virus spreads primarily from inhaling aerosolized droplets, rather than through contact with surfaces and that disposable products present similar issues as reusable ones.

The health experts argued that reusable products are easily cleaned.

The health experts offer the “Best Practices for Reusable Products in the Retail Space,” which include compliance with food safety, use of additional hygienic practices against the spread of Covid-19, employing contact-free systems for customers’ personal bags and cups and ensuring that workers are protected.

In addition to investing in safe and accessible reusable systems, other steps retailers can take to protect workers include providing PPE, paid sick leave, reduced occupancy in stores and requiring customers to wear masks and practice social distancing, the health experts said.

Customers should handle their own reusable items when going to shops and stores, they added.

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