

COMMENTARY

# Plastic waste: Beyond ‘lack of discipline’

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Waste and the act of littering are very visible in the country. Plastic waste is everywhere, and people discarding their garbage in public spaces is a usual sight.

This visibility makes it challenging to bring the discourse of plastic waste beyond the issue of littering. Many are convinced we simply lack discipline.

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But if it were just an issue of discipline, then why do other countries also struggle with waste? Richer countries have even illegally sent plastic waste to the country—proof that the issue is beyond us littering the streets and lacking discipline.

Fortunately, this visibility that makes it difficult for many to look beyond the obvious also exposes the type of waste that’s causing the problem—single-use plastics that can’t be sustainably managed, not even by their very producers. This allows us to see the real culprits: The corporations that are wantonly producing them.

Multinational corporations have long been flooding the Philippine market with single-use plastics, among them sachets. A 2019 study by the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) showed that we generate massive amounts of single-use plastics, of which 52 percent are branded sachets. But unlike other single-use plastics, sachets have so far escaped legislation.

The good news is that a 2020 GAIA report showed that 70 percent of Filipinos are willing to regulate single-use plastics, and 52 percent are in favor of banning sachets.

The convenience and accessibility sachets offer to consumers have been overshadowing an increasingly effective, and conversely extremely harmful, marketing tactic: They

serve as perpetual advertisements. Long after you consume the product you bought, the packaging it came in, marked with the product's brand and the name of the manufacturer, lingers and pollutes the environment for many years.

Worse, we're paying for the packaging of the products we purchase. Sometime last year, I compared the same product—a bread spread—that came in different packaging. Everything else was the same: brand, variety, quantity. The one in a bottle was more expensive than the one in a plastic pouch by a whopping P13. This means we're paying for the glass bottle. And the pouch? That, too—with our taxes.

How so? Single-use plastic packaging is destined for the landfill. The costs of collection, transportation, and tipping fee (the fee paid to dump a truckload of waste in a landfill) are paid for with our taxes. If the waste leaks into the environment, we also pay for the inconvenience it will cause and the hazards it will pose.

In short, the choice is either we pay for the packaging upfront (if we buy the bottled product), or we pay by shouldering the cost of its disposal (if we buy the one in pouch). Either way, it's not right.

It's time to tell corporations “enough!” and demand that they make their product delivery systems sustainable. We can't keep paying for the packaging we don't need. They need to stop producing products they themselves can't sustainably manage, and then pass the buck to the government, and ultimately to us. If small businesses can innovate, corporations should be able to follow suit—and do better—with their huge R&D budgets.

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If we want to solve the plastic waste crisis, we need to identify its root causes. To do that, it's essential to go beyond what's visible or obvious.

The true reasons we're in this deep plastic crisis have been disguised strategically by peddling the false narrative about overconsumption and the lack of discipline of consumers. Unless we realize this, we will continue taking the blame for plastic pollution and feeling frustrated with everyone for their supposed lack of discipline. Meanwhile, left off the hook, the real culprits will continue flooding us with their

problematic products, raking in billions in profits while also appearing as though they're the good guys.

Unfair? Then let's do something about it.

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