

Plastic Waste – A Call for Action

The Swedish Chamber of Commerce is raising Plastic Waste as an issue that needs urgent action in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Government is called upon to refine its policies in this area, and to intensify its work with concerned stakeholders and society as a whole. This is an opportunity for Hong Kong to take regional leadership and further enhance its position Asia's World City. In doing so, quality of life for Hong Kong residents will be improved and business opportunities will be created.

Introduction

Every day Hong Kongers throw away 5.2 million plastic bottles¹ and two out of three use single use plastic dining ware.² While plastic waste may not be the largest category of waste in Hong Kong, the way it is being handled is still highly problematic. With only 14% of plastic waste recycled in 2016, reducing the amount of plastic waste generated and increasing the portion recycled would have a meaningful impact on overall waste in Hong Kong.³ The bulk of plastic waste ends up either in landfills or in our waters. As plastic takes hundreds of years to decompose, it poses a major problem to the health of the planet and humans alike.

With the January 2018 import ban from China on all types of unprocessed scrap plastic, Hong Kong has to radically change its way of dealing with plastic waste and create solutions locally. It has been argued that Hong Kong is lacking land for a buildout of recycling facilities. We think this issue needs to be revisited and analysed in detail, especially since the alternative solution of expanding existing landfills would appear to be a less constructive approach.

Since the beginning of 2017, the Sustainability Committee of the Swedish Chamber of Commerce has been focusing its work on plastic waste. In October last year, a round table was organised around the topic of reducing, collecting, sorting and recycling plastic waste in Hong Kong. Around 30 stakeholders from the Government, academia, NGOs and the business community were gathered for the discussion. This was followed up with a number of smaller niched meetings to obtain more in-depth information from key stakeholders.*

In this position paper, we outline the observations we have made during this process, coupled with suggestions on firm actions we would like to see from the Government to battle the escalating problem of plastic waste.

The purpose of this position paper is to drive change to make Hong Kong a regional leader, in innovative and responsible management of plastic waste, by

¹ Green Earth; <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/2116318/hong-kong-throws-away-52-million-bottles-every>

² Greenpeace; <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/2119870/two-three-hongkongers-use-plastic-disposables>

³ <https://www.wastereduction.gov.hk/sites/default/files/msw2016.pdf>

* Government representatives were invited but unable to attend.

influencing and accelerating Government decision-making on this issue, with the support of the wider Hong Kong business community.

Observations

- Plastic waste is pandemic in all areas of Hong Kong. It is destroying our beautiful nature. Plastic waste is however no longer a mere eye-sore or an environmental problem, but a serious threat to the health of marine life. More importantly, initial research suggests that micro-plastics are getting into our food chain⁴ through contaminated seafood.
- Public awareness around the problem of plastic waste is low and trust in the recycling system is understandably also low.
- Collection of recyclables is not seen as community service today, in contrast to waste collection which is 100% subsidized by the Hong Kong government. Recyclers are expected to make money only from selling what they have collected and manage to recycle.
- Volumes of quality recyclables (with low contamination) are insufficient. Coupled with high transportation costs, it does not make for a viable and sustainable business case for recyclers.
- Sorting facilities are scarce, manual and inefficient.
- Virgin plastic materials are relatively inexpensive and therefore suppress the demand for recycled plastic, which further exacerbates the situation for recyclers.
- Producers and retailers are not held accountable for what they produce and generate in terms of plastic waste. The fact that disposing municipal solid waste (MSW) at landfill is still free of charge, is a major problem for the system as it incentivises the wrong behaviour.

Recommended actions

TAKE A LEAD FOR CHANGE

1. Ban single-use plastics

Be firmer about reducing single-use plastic. Only the Government can make a real difference when it comes to reducing single-use plastic, through an outright ban. This cannot be left to the free market. A tax or a ban of an isolated single-use plastic product such as straws or Styrofoam containers, would not only help reduce waste volumes of this particular plastic, but also help raise overall awareness over the plastic waste issue. An incentive based approach such as reverse vending machine solutions for plastic bottles could have the same effect.

2. Accelerate the introduction of an effective fee for waste to landfill

There must be an effective fee for sending waste to landfill, otherwise there will never be a business case for recycling. Legislate around companies' responsibility for the disposal of the plastic packaging they

⁴ Nelms, S.E. et al. "Investigating microplastic trophic transfer in marine top predators", Environmental Pollution, Feb 2018
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0269749117343294>

produce and discard. Combined with an outright ban on plastics to landfill, or in the least a considerable fee, this would mean that e.g. supermarkets have to reduce the amount of plastic used in their daily operations. The planned MSW charge needs to help the public reduce their waste and encourage and incentivise correct recycling behaviour from both businesses and households.

3. Boost demand for recycled plastic

Boosting demand for recycled plastic needs to be reinforced through producer responsibility legislation around minimum recycled content, requirements on density, colour and/or taxing virgin material. Also, support businesses who repurpose plastics and make use of that raw material, through for example funding, land and/or real estate and legislation.

BUILD A STRONG RECYCLING INDUSTRY

4. Support separation at source with better disposal infrastructure

Separation at source is key for a recycling system to work properly. It must be simple and convenient for both businesses and households to sort their recyclables in order to achieve behavioural change. Collection bins must be wide-spread and well looked after (rather than overflowing). Proper sorting behaviour should be incentivised when the MSW charge is introduced.

5. Compensate recyclers for collection

Compensate recyclers for collection, as they carry out a community service that is also beneficial for the environment. Pay them market rates for keeping materials from reaching the landfills. Proper auditing of the recyclers' processes need to be carried out periodically, in order to eliminate irresponsible behaviour such as dumping.

6. Coordinate collection of recyclables by districts

Help recyclers reach volumes, possibly by dividing the collection into areas or districts and putting them up for tender. One operator collects all recyclables within that district, resulting in higher volumes and lower transportation costs. A possible side effect will be reduced emissions.

7. Invest in proper Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs)

Invest in proper Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs) to improve efficiency of sorting and recovery rates. An opportunity would be to turn three or four of the existing refuse transfer stations into state-of-the-art MRFs.

RETHINK THE STATUS QUO

8. Reclassify plastic waste

Consider the opportunity cost of not having an effective recycling system for plastics in place. The impact of not taking proper care of plastic waste is already dire and will only exacerbate over time. Therefore, rethink plastic waste and re-classify it as a special waste category, as proliferation

of plastic waste in our environment (especially our marine environment) poses a health threat to Hong Kong citizens. This is a radical move but one that would pave the way for real change and a comprehensive program of reduce (bans), reuse and recycle (e.g. reverse vending machines coupled with effective producer responsibility schemes).

9. Educate the public on reducing, proper sorting and clean recycling

With a wide reaching public education campaign already in the pipeline, there is an opportunity to teach how to reduce single-use plastic as well as how to *properly* sort and recycle all types of used plastic today, thereby reducing the volumes sent to landfill. It would be a mistake to teach people that lower grade plastic has no value. Instead, teach them how to properly clean and sort in order to increase quality recyclable volumes of all plastic. A wide-reaching campaign needs to show how the plastic is indeed taken care of and why it is important. Trust in the system must be built up over time.

The Mainland has already outlined its circular economy ambitions and the Hong Kong business community is also taking responsibility. The Swedish Chamber has taken the lead on a pledge to eliminate plastic bottles and cups from the workplace.⁵ Over 70 members, large and small, have already signed the pledge and other chambers of commerce are following suit.

We see the above actions as crucial steps for the Hong Kong Government to take leadership on the plastic waste issue. It is a splendid opportunity for the Government to make sure Hong Kong truly stays and evolves as "Asia's World City".

⁵ <http://www.swedcham.com.hk/news/swedcham-2018-say-no-to-plastic-waste-new-years-resolution>