

Opinion/ Hong Kong

How Hong Kong's plastic waste fight can set the course for Asia's future

Hong Kong has a raft of measures planned to reduce plastic waste, including raising plastic bag levies and banning single-use plastics from restaurants

Progressive policies like these will not only provide examples for other Asian governments but also set the agenda for global initiatives at the United Nations



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Takeout packaging is piled high at a shop in Wan Chai. The ADM Capital Foundation's 2019 report on Hong Kong's takeout packaging estimated that 3.9 billion single-use takeout items were used and discarded in that year alone. Photo: Edmond So

Hong Kong will adopt a HK\$1 (13 US cents) levy on plastic bags from December 31, doubling the current fee. The levy will encourage consumers to bring their own reusable bags when shopping and reduce the amount of plastic waste entering the environment.

The levy also marks the start of a raft of measures the government will roll out to better tackle the scourge of plastic packaging and single-use plastic items on the environment. This mirrors trends throughout the world.

Items such as plastic straws, plates, cutlery and stirrers will be banned from restaurants. These items make up the estimated 8 million tonnes of plastic waste that scientists estimate enter the ocean every year. There are much more sustainable alternatives, such as bamboo, wood and other biodegradable materials. Reusable items such as steel straws are increasingly used in cafes.


The problem of marine plastic pollution is so bad that the United Nations has started treaty negotiations to address it. For example, scientists from Australia have estimated that nine out of 10 seabirds have pieces of plastic in their stomach, which can kill them.

The UN process will ideally seek to adopt the most progressive plastic pollution reduction policies already legislated. Hong Kong's progressive agenda will support the UN in achieving ambitious global goals.

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Countries agree to end plastic pollution in historic UN resolution

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Beyond the increased plastic bag levy and the ban on a range of single-use plastics, Hong Kong is proposing a drink container recycling rebate scheme next year. This is a significant move and a long overdue way to deal with this waste stream.

To ensure the drink container recycling scheme is a success, the Hong Kong government can replicate the plastic bag levy and apply a rebate of at least HK\$1 to encourage consumers to recycle plastic bottles. Any lower rebate runs the risk of having little value to consumers and not engaging them in the scheme.

Singapore is similarly introducing a plastic drink container deposit scheme with a proposed rebate value of around 10 to 20 Singapore cents (7 to 15 US cents). With Hong Kong and Singapore having similar income levels, it would be appropriate for Hong Kong to match Singapore's rebate value.

Importantly, Hong Kong's plastic drink container scheme, along with other packaging recovery and recycling schemes, will generate jobs and economic activity in the collection, transport and reprocessing of all this material.

A study in Australia suggested that 9.2 jobs were created for every 10,000 tonnes of waste collected, compared to 2.8 jobs if the same amount went to a landfill. Private-sector funds can also flow to new recycling collection and processing operations, along with the production of alternative packaging materials and higher rates of recycled content in packaging.

Hong Kong's only drinks carton recycler faces closure

21 Sep 2022



Ultimately, the waste and recycling discussion in Asia turns to the concept of extended producer responsibility (EPR) in dealing with the estimated 390 million tonnes of plastic packaging generated annually. EPR puts food, drink and other consumer goods manufacturers at the centre of designing, managing and funding the recovery and recycling of the plastic packaging they use.

It equally applies to used electronic goods, tyres, used chemicals, oils, batteries and other consumables. EPR programmes usually apply a small cost to producers for the packaging they use and put to market, with the money going to recovering the material for recycling.

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Philippine plastic waste crisis spirals as buyers choose cheap sachet packaging

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With these programmes being extensively considered in countries throughout Asia, Hong Kong can and should again help lead this agenda.

It has been highly encouraging to see the Hong Kong government move to make new laws and policies to reduce waste from single-use plastic items. Similarly, new packaging recovery and recycling schemes in Hong Kong are positive developments, and they should be enhanced for maximum effectiveness.

These programmes will also provide a guiding light to the rest of the region where so much packaging is consumed and wasted, requiring much better end-of-life management.

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