Reusable Packaging and COVID-19

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ZERO WASTE EUROPE

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The EU policy landscape on packaging

To address the growing problem of plastic pollution, the European Union (EU) has decided to ban single-use plastic items for which reasonable alternatives exist, from straws to disposable cutlery, starting in 2021. Up to 500,000 tons of European plastic waste makes its way into our oceans each year, with significant impacts for both human health and the environment. The Single-Use Plastics Directive (SUPD) represents a first step towards curbing plastic pollution and pushing governments, businesses, and society in the direction to a true circular economy.

Moving away from single-use plastics and towards reusable alternatives is a clear objective of this Directive and of European policymakers. In the "European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy", the European Commission asserts that "all plastics packaging placed on the EU market should be designed to be either reusable or recyclable." Furthermore, Article 5 of the revised Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive (PPWD) obliges Member States to take measures to increase the share of reusable packaging placed on the market, as well as systems to reuse packaging. Such measures may include "setting up of a minimum percentage of reusable packaging placed on the market every year for each packaging stream."

The European Commission, through their Communication on the European Green Deal[1] and the new Circular Economy Action Plan[2], has also confirmed their intention to focus on prevention and reuse, including the adoption of a sustainable product policy to support new business models and systems that prevent environmentally harmful products from being placed on the EU market.

Reuse and COVID-19

Across Europe and elsewhere, the novel coronavirus outbreak has led many states, cities, and stores to suddenly delay and/or reverse bans on single-use items, and in some cases even prohibit reusables out of fears that they contribute to the spread of the pandemic. The UK government, for example, has announced that because of the outbreak, its ban on single-use items, which had been scheduled to come into effect at the end of April 2020, will now begin in October.[3] At the EU level, the European Plastics Converters (EuPC) has called on the Commission to "lift all bans on some of the single-use plastic items" and to postpone the deadlines in the SUPD "for at least another year."[4]

However, and as expected, the Commission wisely dismissed the health and safety argument put forward by the European plastic industry, affirming that "good hygiene practices should be applied to all products, including substitutes of banned SUPs,"[5] and there should not be any delay on the implementation of the SUPD.

[1]Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions (2019). The European Green Deal. Brussels, COM(2019) 640 final, Brussels, 11 December 2019. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/communication-european-green-deal_en

[2] Circular Economy Action Plan for a cleaner and competitive Europe. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/environment/circular-economy/pdf/new_circular_economy_action_plan.pdf

[3]Evans, J. April 15, 2020. "Plastic straws and stirrers ban delayed because of coronavirus." *Financial Times.* Available at https://www.ft.com/content/8182d6db-f903-49a1-9e68-43341ad932ce

[4]Simon, F. April 15, 2020. "EU dismisses industry calls to lift ban on single-use plastics." *Euractiv.* Available at https://www.euractiv.com/section/circular-economy/news/eu-dismisses-industry-calls-to-lift-ban-on-single-use-plastics/

[5] Euractiv, EU dismisses industry calls to lift ban on single-use plastics, Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/circular-economy/news/eu-dismisses-industry-calls-to-lift-ban-on-single-use-plastics/

It's not clear how long the outbreak could go on for and uncertainties remain on how long the virus can survive on different surfaces. What is clear is that the plastics industry is using this serious health crisis as an opportunity to link reusable packaging to the spread of infection while asserting that single-use plastics are necessary to maintain hygiene, health, and safety.

This ongoing attempt by industry to delay and weaken the implementation of the SUPD is not based on science, and there is no evidence that single-use packaging contributes to the spread of COVID-19 any less (or more) than their reusable counterpart.

COVID-19 is known to transmit from person to person, primarily through the droplets that are generated when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or exhales.[6] Although studies have shown that the virus can persist on surfaces from a few hours to up to several days, the World Health Organization (WHO)'s interim guidance for food businesses states that it is "highly unlikely" that the infection is transmitted through food or food packaging.[7] The U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) has also affirmed that "there is no evidence of food or food packaging being associated with the transmission of COVID-19."[8] This is true for both single-use and reusable packaging. Whether it is used only once or 100 times, any container or bag, if not properly handled in accordance with the health authority recommendations, could be a potential vector. The best way for consumers to protect themselves is by adhering to the guidance of public health authorities regarding good sanitation practices, including regular hand-washing.

Reusable Packaging Systems are Clean and Safe

Properly managed reuse and refill systems, meaning those with well established washing and cleaning processes in accordance with the rules by the health and safety authorities (e.g, glass and PET refillable bottles industry), **have and continue to ensure a high level of health and safety**.

According to the Statement issued by the Cooperative German Fountain (GDB) - a pool reusable system of the German mineral water - "the processes for cleaning refillable glass and PET-bottles, which have been established and continuously developed for decades, have always taken hygienic aspects into account with regards to potential contamination with bacteria or viruses. During the industrial cleaning process, refillable bottles are submerged for about 10 minutes in 1.5 to 2 percent caustic soda, which is heated to 60 ° C for PET or 70-75 ° C for glass. These sterilization procedures are established worldwide and are considered safe".

Such well established reuse and refill systems have been running through many years all over the world, ensuring safety and eliminating unnecessary single-use items.

Benefits of Reuse

Reusable packaging is a critical part of the solution for achieving a circular economy. By keeping material in the production cycle for as long as possible, it conserves resources, reduces waste, and mitigates the environmental

[6] European Commission Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety. April 8, 2020. "COVID-19 and food safety: Questions and Answers." Available at https://ec.europa.eu/food/sites/food/files/safety/docs/biosafety_crisis_covid19_qandas_en.pdf

[7] Whitworth, J. April 14, 2020. "WHO and EU Commission publish coronavirus food safety advice." Food Safety News. Available at https://www.foodsafetynews.com/2020/04/who-and-eu-commission-publish-covid-19-food-safety-advice/

[8] Reusable Packaging Association. March 20, 2020. "RPA Statement on Coronavirus and Reusable Packaging." Available at https://reusables.org/rpa-statement-on-coronavirus-and-reusable-packaging/

impacts associated with production, consumption and end-of-life management of packaging. Aside from the environmental benefits, reuse and refill systems offer tremendous economic benefits in terms of material cost savings and job creation, which are multiplied with each reuse cycle. Reuse systems represent the implementation of extended producer responsibility (EPR) at its finest, especially through the EPR fee modulation system, under which producers are encouraged to rethink product design so as to reduce life cycle impacts and minimize their costs.

Final Thoughts

This a historic opportunity for the EU to show its global leadership in addressing one of the biggest challenges of our time. In the current situation, **we believe that a strong focus should remain on continuing to introduce policies that promote reuse and to remove economic, administrative, and tax barriers to reuse vs. single-use at a national and local level, using notably the ambitious transposition and implementation of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive (PPWD), Waste Framework Directive (WFD), and Single Use Plastics Directive (SUPD) as the means.**

While the primary concern for all of us during these times is the health and safety of our communities, COVID-19 should not become an excuse to pollute or roll back environmental policies. For decades, reuse and refill models have proven that achieving a real circular economy is not only possible, but has many positive impacts. We cannot allow industry to take advantage of current circumstances to bring us back to a world full of single-use items for their own financial gain. Both the scale of the plastics crisis and the widespread support for an ambitious SUPD, underline the importance of continuing with its implementation and moving forward with overall efforts to reduce waste.

The impact of Coronavirus has shown how unresilient our system is. Building a green and just economic recovery is critical to address environmental challenges but also to ensure resilience when global crises, like COVID-19, happen. In this context, the **EU recovery fund can be a great opportunity to help build more resilient economies and communities by supporting effective circular economy businesses** like third-party operated reuse schemes based on short-supply chains and closed loop mechanisms that would comply with all hygiene and safety measures while preventing waste and boosting the local economy.

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Zero Waste Europe is the European network of communities, local leaders, businesses, experts, and change agents working towards the same vision: phasing out waste from our society. We empower communities to redesign their relationship with resources, to adopt smarter lifestyles and sustainable consumption patterns, and to think circular.

Reloop is a broad platform of like-minded interests that share a common vision for a circular economy. With members coming from different sectors across Europe, the platform aims to work as a catalyst in order to generate economic and environmental opportunities for all stakeholders in the value chain. Reloop is born to connect these stakeholders, facilitate information-sharing, and influence decision makers to adopt policy that works towards the implementation of policies and systems that promote a circular economy.

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