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Single Use Plastic in Shelter NFI Response: Scope of the Challenge and Ways Forward

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This Information Sheet incorporates a Case Study and background research by Sue Webb.

Key Takeaways

- **Providing unnecessary plastic reduces funding to aid disaster-affected populations.**
- **Humanitarian actors must act quickly to acknowledge unnecessary plastic used in relief and other operations is an ethical issue and end use of all but essential plastic packaging.**
- **Not ending unnecessary usage creates an opportunity for negative public perception and related PR risk.**
- **Changes must be made to specification and procurement practises to ensure plastic is only used when absolutely essential.**
- **Principles of 'reduce or reuse' must take precedence over 'recycle' in the specification of packaging and other items given the lack of suitable disposal or processing facilities in many parts of the world.**
- **Environmental considerations should be given greater attention in all aspects of organisational thinking and practise so broader environmental impacts are mitigated in everything we do.**
- **Environmental issues impact the most vulnerable in society – plastics pollution is impacting health, livelihoods and quality of life for millions of people.**
- **Excuses for not acknowledging the contributions of our work to broader environmental issues and their impacts on the communities we aim to work with are running out.**

The Problem of Single-Use Plastic Bags

An increasing number of countries¹ and communities are either banning or introducing taxes on single-use plastic bags and packaging. These efforts are intended to reduce plastic pollution and a range of attributable issues such as the blocking of waterways, damage to agricultural land and ingestion by livestock and wildlife.

Plastic degrades slowly. As it does it breaks up into smaller particles or 'micro-plastics' which are increasingly being found in drinking water, fish and even air². There is growing evidence

¹ Kenya, Mali, Cameroon, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Malawi, Morocco, South Africa, Rwanda, Botswana, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Taiwan, among others, have bans or taxes on plastic bags in place. <https://study.com/blog/which-countries-have-banned-plastic-bags.html>

² The Lancet October 2017 [Microplastics and human health - an urgent problem](#)

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to suggest this is likely to have a range of as yet unknown health implications on human populations³.

More than 8.3bn tonnes of plastic waste have been produced since the 1950s. Given this waste does not biodegrade but simply disintegrates into smaller particles and accumulates in the environment, roughly one tonne of plastic currently exists in the environment for every person alive today, with more added every year.

A Global Shelter Cluster (GSC) member advised the GSC Environment Community of Practice (ECoP) of how Kenya's recently introduced [rules](#) on single use plastic packaging had led to delays in importing emergency shelter kits following devastating flooding in 2018 (see **Kenya Case Study**, below). This incident raised issues about (1) the use and volumes of (unnecessary) plastic packaging (often) used during humanitarian shelter response, and (2) The obligations of shelter actors to behave responsibly and reduce the unnecessary usage of such items wherever possible. These issues are relevant across the humanitarian system.

Single-use Plastic as a Challenge to Humanitarian Principles

When considering the issue of single-use plastic, it is important to acknowledge that not only should the humanitarian community be aiming to lead by example and reduce its environmental footprint, but that it is likely to be judged more critically when action is not taken against obvious poor practice. Given the current and growing global outcry about plastic pollution, the humanitarian community has a brief window in which to position itself as having considered and taken action to address the issue.

Addressing the challenge of single-use plastic should be a positive example of change rather than another example of hypocrisy and inaction due to bureaucratic inefficiency. Removing all non-essential plastic packaging from our relief assistance is, in essence, a PR no brainer, but also essential if we as a community are to be viewed as in anyway practising what we preach.

Plastic Use and Disposal Guidelines in the Humanitarian Sector

A literature review on environmental guidance in the humanitarian sector yielded scant specific references to plastic. The bulk of relevant guidance available do not mention plastics or merely suggests they should be disposed of properly or recycled. There is scant acknowledgement of the complexities of processing plastic waste or indeed the relative scarcity of appropriate facilities in developed western nations, let alone crisis affected nations of the global south.

The Word Cloud below shows the relative importance of various words related to the environment in the OCHA/UNEP **Humanitarian Action on the Environment** (2007) guidance section on [Key environmental issues in humanitarian response clusters](#). Plastics does not feature at all, likely reflecting the low salience of the issue a decade ago compared to the level of concern today.

³ Report of the NJDEP-Science Advisory Board Human Health Impacts of Microplastics and Nanoplastics. Prepared by the Public Health Standing Committee, <https://www.state.nj.us/dep/sab/NJDEP-SAB-PHSC-final-2016.pdf>.

general can and should incorporate 'corporate social responsibility' thinking into how they aid people and communities stuck by disasters.

Further Opportunities

If interest in the issue of single-use plastic extends beyond the Global Shelter Cluster, a proposal for a joint research initiative involving shelter actors and research organisations will be developed to support more substantive and detailed work on this topic.

Given the current public interest and the current ground swell of public opinion against plastic, further efforts are justified to investigate how much unnecessary plastic the shelter sector, and potentially the larger humanitarian response community, is responsible for depositing around the world and what can be done to reduce – and indeed eliminate – this unnecessary and negative impact on the environment and human life.

Kenya Case Study

Addressing National Single-Use Regulations in a Shelter Response

In July 2018 ShelterBox® mounted a project to deliver shelter to 2,000 families in Kenya affected by flooding. Kenya had significant restriction on single-use plastic bags in effect since 2017. Given the need to deliver humanitarian aid, ShelterBox decided to remove the unnecessary single-use plastic from 2,000 Shelter kits and thousands of other NFIs in warehouses in Dubai and Belgium. The pictures below provide clear evidence that a significant proportion of this plastic packaging was unnecessary.

ShelterBox's video on their website (www.shelterbox.org) highlights the logistical problems they faced in importing IFRC standard Shelter Kits, kitchen kits and other NFIs and celebrates the eventual successful delivery of aid.

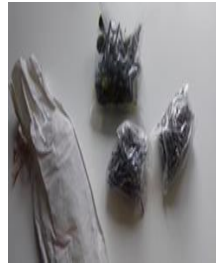
Shelterbox commented: *"Our effort came with some unique challenges. Kenya has a strict plastic ban, so we've manually removed all plastic from the Shelter Kits before sending them to the country. This helped us get aid to families who needed it quicker, and without importation problems"* (www.shelterbox.org/kenya-flooding).

Details are not available on the costs related to the removal of packaging, time delay in delivery or carbon footprint caused in overcoming the restrictions created by the single-use plastic bag ban (and the arguably inappropriate out-dated yet industry standard shelter kit packaging).

ShelterBox have kindly shared these details with other humanitarian organisations to prompt changes in packaging used in the kits and to help avoid similar problems in the future in other countries with plastic bans.



Tool Kit with Plastic Packaging



Kitchen Set with Single-Use Plastic Coverings.



Tool Kit with Plastic Packaging Removed



Single-Use Plastic Remaining After Removal.

Photos provided by Frances Walker, ShelterBox.