

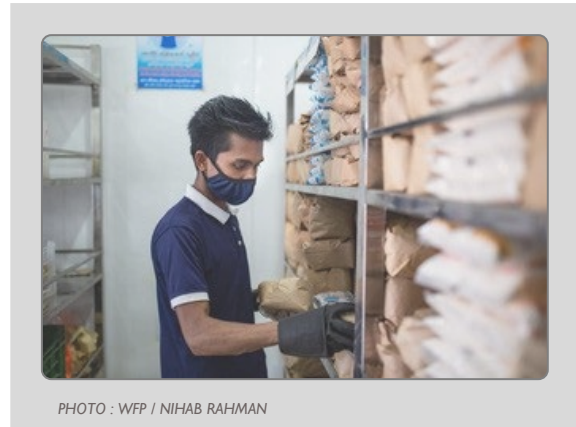
MANAGING PACKAGING WASTE SUSTAINABLY - LESSONS FROM HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

PLASTIC FREE E-VOUCHER SHOPS IN COX'S BAZAR, BANGLADESH

THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME'S EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

With an annual consumption of around 87,000 tons of single use plastic (SUP).¹ Bangladesh and its refugee camps are no exception to the global plastics crisis. As in many places in the world, innovative yet simple solutions are piloted to support the transition away from plastics.



The case study presented below illustrates the role that organizations can play in mainstreaming environmental sustainability into their life-saving humanitarian responses. It is part of a wider effort led by the Joint Initiative for Sustainable Humanitarian Assistance Packaging Waste Management (Joint Initiative) to compile best practices from aid organizations in their efforts to eliminate unnecessary packaging and support more sustainable packaging waste management.

PROCESS

In Cox's Bazar refugee camps, the World Food Program (WFP) provides 100% of its food assistance through e-vouchers. Each month, beneficiaries receive e-vouchers with which they can purchase essential commodities² from selected local and national retailers inside the camps. While such programs are essential to promote the local economy and to empower and restore the dignity of refugees, significant packaging waste is generated through these retailers. In 2020, it was estimated that 400,000 plastic bags³ per month were generated by WFP as a result of its e-voucher program.

In 2020, encouraged by the enforcement of plastic bans by the government of Bangladesh, as well as WFP's plan to phase out 90% of SUP by 2026, WFP decided to step up efforts to reduce its environmental footprint and to explore alternatives to SUP.

¹ <https://esdo.org>

² Oil, sugar, salt, rice, fruits/veg etc.

³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/plastic-free-wfp-food-assistance-outlets-towards-durable-sustainable-solutions>

In its food assistance program channeled through 12 retailers in various locations in Cox's Bazar camps, WFP worked with the retailers to put into place a zero-plastic policy. Retailers receive commodities in large quantities and then **repack them individually for households in either jute or paper bags or simply without any packaging when possible. Rice is distributed in large reusable Polypropylene bags (PP bags)**, and eggs are distributed using reusable buckets. Beneficiaries are also encouraged to bring back this reusable packaging for their next visit to the retailer.

Only for a small number of items, such as salt, anchovies and flour, retailers working within the WFP e-voucher program are still using the original plastic packaging in order to protect these products from humidity especially during the monsoon season. **Oil is also being distributed in PET bottles because no sustainable alternatives have yet been found.**

BENEFITS

- The transition away from SUP has had significant impacts on the local environment. WFP estimated that this shift **helped save approximately 5 million plastic bags per year**, possibly even more considering the probability that some items were previously double-bagged.⁴
- Despite some initial resistance, beneficiaries have welcomed the shift to reusable packaging as a contribution to keeping their local environment clean. **Some recyclable waste is also being collected and sold to the local recycling markets** (e.g., PET plastic oil bottles and cardboard), which has contributed to generating a small income for some beneficiaries and local entrepreneurs.
- This transition away from SUP has influenced other stakeholders to adopt green practices (e.g., retailers/vendors have in some cases followed the same policy of waste control in their own warehouses) or has been applied to non-food items (e.g., soap distributed without packaging).
- By respecting local legislation and supporting the government's effort to move away from SUP, this shift has also contributed to WFP's acceptance within local governments, in a complex operational context.

CHALLENGES

- This experience has shown that transitioning to reusable alternatives or no packaging is not a straightforward process, and that **disposable packaging is sometimes still required**, particularly for quality, health, and safety reasons. As mentioned previously, in some WFP's retailer shops, SUP is still needed for food items such as salt, anchovies, and flour, which need to be protected from humidity during the monsoon season.
- Shifting to **alternatives to conventional plastics has a cost**, and WFP has had to subsidize part of this transition to biodegradable paper bags to ensure initial local retailers' buy-in. In the case of Cox's Bazar, paper bags cost 1.7 times more than plastic bags.⁵ Similarly, jute bags are 3.5 to 4 times more expensive than plastic bags. This cost needs to be anticipated by humanitarian organizations.

⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/plastic-free-wfp-food-assistance-outlets-towards-durable-sustainable-solutions>

⁵ 0.15 taka per kg to 0.25 taka per kg

- In light of the size of WFP's programs, this shift has had a considerable impact on the local environment, but remains quite limited in the greater scope of things. Despite the national ban, plastic is still largely used by private-sector retailers inside the camps, and widely in local communities. **The plastic packaging challenges in Cox's Bazar, as everywhere else in the world, can only be solved if addressed in a holistic manner.**

LESSONS LEARNT

One of the lessons learnt from WFP's experience in working with shops in Cox's Bazar, is that **alternatives to conventional plastics are not "silver bullets", or automatic fixes.**

- **The use of substitutes such as wax-coated paper bags and jute bags, is not always straightforward to implement**, and raising awareness and providing information for beneficiaries is necessary. In addition, **these substitutes or alternatives present their own environmental challenges, which need to be mitigated.** In this case, wax-coated paper bags are made of mixed materials (wax and paper) that are not easy to recycle (both from a technical and economic perspective). The same also applies to jute bags, which, in addition to not being sufficiently available in various countries, present a high overall environmental impact. For example, producing jute is carbon dioxide-intensive and involves significant water consumption).
- WFP's experience in working with retailers also showed that **suppliers are often flexible to changes and have a strong capacity to adjust their practices, particularly when they are already strongly established private sector companies.** In Cox's Bazar, WFP has had strong purchasing power, and as a result, has had significant leverage in encouraging its suppliers to adopt sustainable practices. And with the large scale, small measures, such as recycling all plastic packaging used by these retailers could result in a considerable volume of waste to sell to recyclers.
- **Encouraging beneficiaries to bring back their reusable packaging (rice sacks/jute bags/PP bags) each time they go shopping is not easy and requires changes to knowledge, attitudes, and practices that can take a long time.** In a difficult and humid context, such as Cox's Bazar where living conditions are harsh, it is not always possible for beneficiaries to keep reusable bags clean and dry. **Reusable bags are only a sustainable alternative to SUP if they are regularly reused.** Otherwise, the environmental footprint⁶ and financial cost⁷ of producing the materials does not necessarily justify the investment.
- WFP's transition away from SUP was made possible and easier and was more effective **because of the project modality that was used** (i.e., e-voucher assistance). Had it been in-kind distributions in the camps, this would have been more challenging and potentially more expensive to organize (as there is potentially a need to be more rapid and efficient in distributions). Furthermore, working with a set of specific retailers meant it was easier to influence their practices in a positive way, a change that will hopefully continue after the departure of the organization.

⁶ Depending on the material used, reusable packaging production can be water and carbon intensive.

⁷ Jute bags are, for instance, 5 times more expensive than plastic bags (reference: NGO Forum for Public Health, an NGO involved in the production of jute bags in Bangladesh).

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CONCLUSION

WFP's zero-waste approach in its e-voucher programs illustrates how modest, low-technology changes can considerably reduce an organization's environmental footprint, and can possibly be replicated in other areas or by other actors.

Moving away from SUP in Cox's Bazar has helped WFP to significantly reduce the amount of waste generated by its operations. As a result of this success, the organization has started adopting this approach in other locations, such as Afghanistan.



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