

Evaluation and recommendations on Japan's plastic politics

This briefing aims to help journalists covering the G20 Summit to contextualize Japan's role in the international plastic politics by offering an overview of Japan's positions and actual performance in plastics pollution prevention, with a particular emphasis on its continued dependence on exports/recycling and polluting and wasteful disposal such as incineration.

Japan's plastic waste production per capita, plastic waste export trends and domestic solutions focus so far

According to data in 2017 from the Japanese Plastic Waste Management Institute¹, Japan generated 9.03 million tonnes of plastic waste, which translated to 71.2 kg per capita. At present, 6% of plastic waste is landfilled, 58% is incineration with energy recovery, 8% is incineration without energy recovery, while only 23% is mechanically recycled. Out of the 2.1 million tonnes of plastic waste destined for recycling, 61.1% (1.3 million tons) is exported.

According to UNEP report², Japan is number 2 after the USA in terms of plastic packaging waste generation per capita. A recent analysis by Greenpeace East Asia³ showed Japan is the second biggest plastic waste exporter in 2018.

As unprocessed plastic wastes accumulation have been growing in the country, the Ministry of Environment requested municipalities⁴ to accept industrial plastic wastes for incineration as an urgent measure. The governor of Tokyo, Yuriko Koike, has recently responded that it would be difficult for municipalities to accept those industrial wastes and those should be handled by industries with responsibility. Also, according to recent news⁵, the Japanese government's action plan on plastic pollution are solely focused on recycling and development of biodegradable plastic materials with insufficient focus on reduction and reuse other than small scale approach such as charging plastic bags.

¹ https://pwmi.or.jp/ei/siryoei/ei_pdf/ei48.pdf

² https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/25496/singleUsePlastic_sustainability.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

³ <http://www.greenpeace.org/eastasia/Global/eastasia/publications/campaigns/toxics/GPEA%20Plastic%20waste%20trade%20-%20briefi-v2.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/05/17/national/japan-ask-municipalities-dispose-industrial-plastic-waste-piles-due-china-zz4m>

⁵ https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/05/17/national/japan-ask-municipalities-dispose-industrial-plastic-waste-piles-due-china-7Q_U

Japan's role in International plastic politics in last few years

Japan participated in the **July 2017 G20 Marine Litter Action Plan**⁶ which was aim to address the urgent need for action to prevent and reduce marine litter in order to preserve human health and marine and coastal ecosystems, and mitigate marine litter's economic costs and impacts. The Action Plan still emphasized the 'end of pipe' approach (clean up and better waste management), with a secondary focus on the waste hierarchy and the '3 Rs' (reduce, reuse, recycle) approach, according to which waste prevention should be the first option, followed by reuse and recycling.

Japan (and the USA) did not sign up to the G7 oceans Plastic Charter⁷ which was adopted by only 5 countries at the G7 meeting in June 2018 Canada. And Japan played an ambiguous role in **March 2019 UN Environment Assembly (UNEA4)** discussions and resolution on addressing **single use plastic product pollution**⁸ including a proposal for a new global instrument (law)⁹ to set a global target to eliminate plastic pollution and support this with various measures such as global market restrictions. However, the need for reduction is recognized in the UNEA4 Ministerial Declaration¹⁰ which states "We will address the damage to our ecosystems caused by the unsustainable use and disposal of plastic products, including **by significantly reducing single-use plastic products by 2030,...**"

On the 6th May 2019, Japan, as part of the G7, adopted a statement¹¹ on plastic pollution (paras 48 - 50) that has clearly recognized the need for "**substantially reducing waste generation through prevention and through reuse and recycling**", tackling the "**projected significant rise in plastic consumption**" ... "**through a lifecycle approach, including design, production, consumption, end-of-life management and disposal of plastics**". Recognizing the importance of the agreement reached at UNEA4, on single use plastic products pollution. The statement goes on to reinforce that "**waste prevention is an essential element to limit plastic pollution**", especially it notes as there is "**increased public awareness offers opportunities for innovation and drives behavioral changes, which present important source reduction and improved waste management opportunities**".

Meanwhile Japan supported (co-sponsored¹²) an amendment to the Basel Convention on Waste Trade which was adopted¹³ by 180 countries on the 10th May 2019. The adoption of the amendments to the Basel Convention annex to include plastic waste is a major and significant step to addressing global plastic trade and pollution crisis, which has been pouring from the rich developed countries to overwhelm developing countries¹⁴, all in the name of "recycling", creating massive environmental, economical and social problem¹⁵. The amendments require exporters to

⁶ <http://www.g20.utoronto.ca/2017/2017-g20-marine-litter.html>

⁷ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000373849.pdf>

⁸ <https://papersmart.unon.org/resolution/uploads/k1900861.pdf#overlay-context=node/271>

⁹ <https://www.ciel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Thought-starter-for-a-new-global-convention-with-a-multi-layered-governance-approach-to-address-plastic-pollution-Nov-2018.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/27925/K1901029%20-%20UNEP-EA.4-HLS.1%20-%20Advance.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>

¹¹ https://www.ecologique-solidaire.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/Communiqu%C3%A9%20G7_Version%20EN.pdf

¹² <https://www.nippon.com/en/news/yjj2019022700342/japan-to-cosponsor-proposed-ban-on-dirty-plastic-waste-trade.html>

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/10/nearly-all-the-worlds-countries-sign-plastic-waste-deal-except-us>

¹⁴ <http://www.greenpeace.org/eastasia/Global/eastasia/publications/campaigns/toxics/GPEA%20Plastic%20waste%20trade%20-%20research%20briefing-v1.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://wastetradestories.org/>

obtain prior informed consent¹⁶ of receiving countries before shipping most mixed, contaminated, or unrecyclable plastic waste, finally providing importing countries the right to refuse unwanted or unmanageable plastic wastes.

The G7 and G20 governments (via their latest statements), the growing recognition at UNEA4 on the need for a global instrument and the wide support for the amendment to the Basel Convention, are demonstrating a shift of focus away from marine litter and 'end of pipe' waste management, to the need for an upstream prevention of single use plastic product pollution approach - including regulation of production and consumption of single use plastic products.

Solutions needed now are not relying on recycling and waste export

Globally plastic production is increasing, and alongside this plastic waste generation is projected to continue increasing with key countries like USA¹⁷ and Germany¹⁸ showing no signs of slowing down. Current practices by many Global North countries to export their plastic waste is not accountable and can never be guaranteed truly circular when it is lost in international trade, as is shown by the leakage into communities¹⁹ and the sea.

Over 90 percent of the plastics produced over last decades have not been recycled²⁰ and without much tighter standards and controls on the quality, sorting, and destination of plastics 'recyclables', there is a very high risk of downcycling²¹.

This issue needs to be tackled at the source: companies need to reduce their production of single-use plastics and governments need to hold them accountable for the plastics they put into the market.

To ensure successful plastic pollution outcome at the G20 Japan needs to build on this progress to reinforce the commitment of the wider G20 to **giving a clear priority to prevention and reduction** (in particular regulations and **targets for 50% reduction of single-use plastics placed on the market by 2025 and 80% by 2030** and the **responsibility for producers to set up reuse and refill systems**) over resource wasteful disposal methods such as incineration or simply shifting the problem to other materials. To show real leadership, Japan and the G20 must recognise that **the linear, throwaway destructive business model must end, and that we cannot simply recycle (or incinerate) our way out of the plastics pollution crisis or substitute one problematic disposable material with another one with other problems²².**

¹⁶ <https://recyclingnetwork.org/2019/05/16/new-un-rules-on-plastic-waste-exports-following-chinas-bans/>

¹⁷ Jan Dell, "U.S. Plastic Recycling Rate Projected to Drop to 4.4% in 2018," Plastic Pollution Coalition, last modified October 2018, accessed February 19, 2019, <https://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org/pft/2018/10/4/us-plastic-recycling-rate-projected-to-drop-to-44-in-2018>

¹⁸ German Environment Agency (UBA), *Kunststoffabfälle 2017* (BMU, December 20, 2018), <https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/daten/ressourcen-abfall/verwertung-entsorgung-ausgewaehlter-abfallarten/kunststoffabfaelle>

¹⁹ <https://wastetradestories.org/>

²⁰ Geyer, R. et al (2017) Production, use and fate of all plastics ever made. *Science Advances* Vol. 3, no. 7. <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/3/7/e1700782.full>

²¹ Downcycling means the material is of lower quality and/or functionality than the original material and further recycling is not easily possible

²² For more information on the risks of biodegradable or bio-based plastics please see Greenpeace position on Single-Use Plastic Products and potential bio-based material substitutes here: <https://storage.googleapis.com/planet4-international-stateless/2019/03/45b91dc4-greenpeace-position-on-single-use-plastic-products-and-potential-bio-based-material-substitutes-jan-2019.pdf>

The EU has already adopted²³ on a Single-Use Plastics Directive requiring EU countries to achieve ‘an ambitious and sustained reduction in the consumption’ of some SUP by 2026 compared to 2022, supported by an accompanying list of product phase outs and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). **The G20 countries must commit to bring forward at least equivalent regulation (ie timelines for reduction in consumption of single-use plastics, product phase outs and strong EPR) by 2020.**

The G20 countries must recognize that we cannot simply recycle our way out of this plastic crisis, to achieve a circular economy there first needs to be regulation to **shrink** (reduce and reuse) **and clean** (ban hazardous chemicals and materials, and simplify the number of materials) **the loop**. Giving priority to reduction and the ‘inner loop’ of reusability²⁴ will make it technically possible be able to close the loop.

This would mean that Japan and fellow G20 countries need to prioritize holistic national policies that target reduction of single-use plastic, institute extended producer responsibility to improve the design of the product for the whole lifecycle, including totally new delivery systems, and focus on circularity based on the ‘inner loop’, refill and reuse. At the end of the day - all countries should be self-sufficient in any sound waste treatment and recycling capacity and not export their responsibility to others.

In terms of domestic policy, we call on the Japanese Government, and all city authorities, to prioritize²⁵:

- 1) Significant reduction of single-use plastic production, import and consumption (in particular regulations and targets for 50% reduction of single-use plastics placed on the market by 2025 and 80% by 2030) .
- 2) Reduce the amount of waste sent to incineration (including thermal recovery) and landfill by 30% in 2025 (and 60% by 2030) compared to 2017.
- 3) Systematic change in Japanese society from one based on mass production, mass consumption and disposal to one that is based on reduce and reuse of plastic resources, through policy initiatives like extended producer responsibility and ‘polluters pay’ principle.

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²³ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-2631_en.htm

²⁴ See pp 5 of the Ellen McArthur New Plastics Economy global commitment: <https://newplasticseconomy.org/assets/doc/GC-Spring-Report.pdf>, already signed by more than 150 businesses, recognizes top priority should be given to elimination and reuse. “ While improving recycling is crucial, we cannot recycle our way out of the plastics issues we currently face. Wherever relevant, reuse business models should be explored as a preferred ‘inner loop’, reducing the need for single-use plastic packaging.”

²⁵ For details, please see: <https://www.greenpeace.org/japan/sustainable/press-release/2019/05/29/8709/>