



Unilever

Time to lead us out
of the plastics crisis

GREENPEACE



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The problem with plastics

Every year, millions of tonnes of plastic waste is polluting our oceans, waterways and communities and impacting our health. Plastic packaging, designed to be used once and thrown away, is one of the biggest contributors to the global plastics waste stream.¹ The vast majority of the 8.3 billion tonnes of plastic that has ever been produced has been dumped into landfills or has ended up polluting our rivers, oceans, waterways and communities and impacting our health.² Every year, between 4.8 to 12.7 million tonnes of plastic enter our oceans,³ with only nine percent of plastic waste recycled globally.⁴ We don't know exactly how long oil-based plastic will take to break down, but once it's in the environment, it is impossible to clean up; and so the plastic waste crisis continues.

Much of this plastic tsunami is branded with the logos of fast-moving consumer goods companies, used to deliver their branded products, such as food, drink, cosmetics and cleaners. An increasingly vocal movement is demanding action and as a result, some of these companies have begun to acknowledge their role in creating the problem. Nevertheless, they continue to push mass production and consumption of single-use products, especially in developing markets, together with the limited solutions promoted by the plastics and fossil fuel industries such as litter reduction or increased recycling. However, recycling can never solve the plastics waste problem on its own,⁵ while plastic waste exported for "recycling" by high income countries is overwhelming countries in South East Asia, despite attempts to ban this trade.⁶ Only a massive reduction in the amount of single-use plastic produced and placed on the market every year will begin to solve this problem.

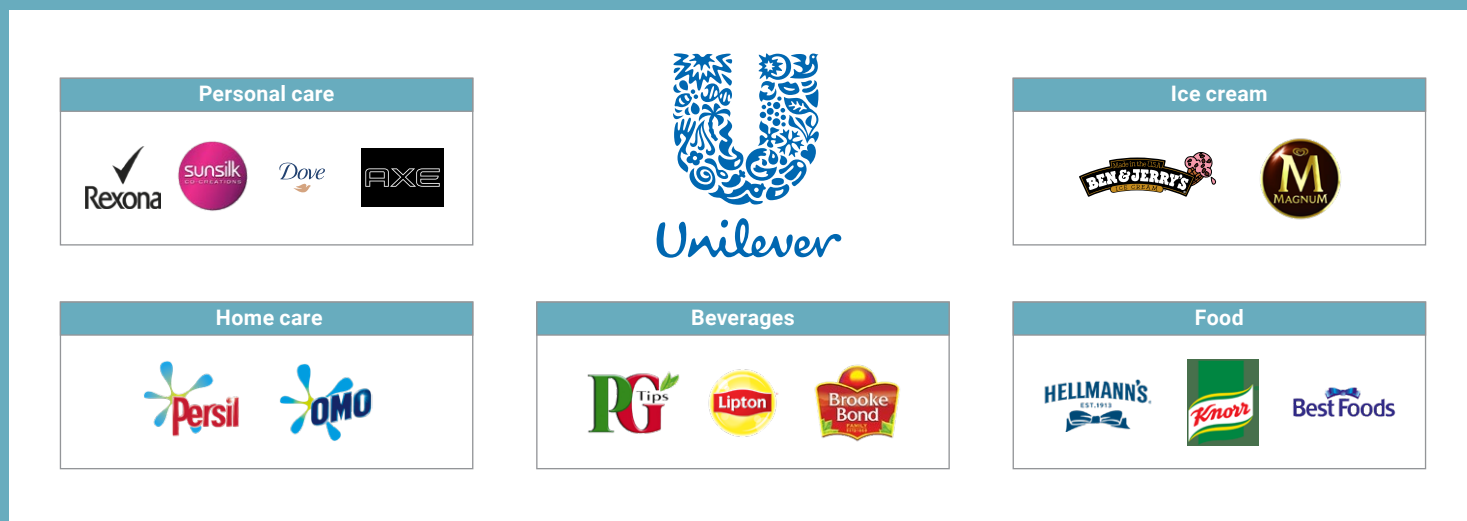
Unilever's plastic footprint and impact

A 2019 audit of plastic waste (brand audit) by NGO GAIA reveals Unilever as the second worst polluter in terms of collected plastic pollution in the Philippines,⁷ and it has featured among the top polluters in several other brand audits recently: Unilever was the number 2 polluter in a Manila brand audit in 2017, and number 7 in a global brand audit in 2018, which represented 239 clean-ups spanning 42 countries. Therefore Unilever has both a huge responsibility for the plastic pollution crisis, and an opportunity to tackle the problem at the source by reducing its use of single-use plastic packaging units.



- 1 Greenpeace (2018). *Crisis of Convenience*, p. 5. Referencing: American Chemistry Council and Trucost (2016). *Plastics and Sustainability a valuation of environmental benefits, costs and opportunities*.
- 2 Roland Geyer R, Jambeck J R, Law K L, Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made, *Science Advances* 19 Jul 2017: Vol. 3, no. 7, e1700782, DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.1700782. <http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/3/7/e1700782.full>
- 3 Jambeck, J.R., Andrady, A., Geyer, R., Narayan, R., Perryman, M., Siegler, T., Wilcox, C., Lavender Law, K., (2015). Plastic waste inputs from land into the ocean, *Science*, 347, p. 768-771.
- 4 Jambeck, J.R. et.al. (2015), op.cit.
- 5 Greenpeace (2018), *A Crisis of Convenience The corporations behind the plastics pollution pandemic*, 23 October 2018, see Box 2: The Recycling Myth; <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/publication/19007/a-crisis-of-convenience-the-corporations-behind-the-plastics-pollution-pandemic/>
- 6 Greenpeace International (2018). *The Recycling Myth*. <http://www.greenpeace.org/seasia/Press-Centre/publications/THE-RECYCLING-MYTH/>
- 7 Gaia (2019), *Plastics Exposed: How Waste Assessments and Brand Audits are Helping Philippine Cities Fight Plastic Pollution*, March 2019, <http://www.no-burn.org/waba2019/>

EXAMPLES OF UNILEVER BRANDS



About Unilever

Based in the Netherlands/UK, Unilever is one of the world's largest consumer goods companies, and is currently expanding into Asia and other developing markets, which provided 58%⁸ of its 2017 revenue of 53 billion euro.⁹

- Unilever uses 610,000 metric tonnes of plastic packaging annually, which makes up 30% of the 2 million tonnes of total packaging it uses, including paper, aluminum and glass.¹⁰
- Unilever does not disclose what percentage of sales was sold in single-use packaging (Unilever's peer Nestlé sells 98% of its products in single-use plastic packaging¹¹), nor does it disclose a breakdown of its plastic use by category/units.
- Sachets made with laminates are particularly harmful as they cannot be recycled and are overwhelming municipal waste infrastructure systems in South East Asia¹². In 2016, Unilever South Asia sold 27 billion sachets,¹³ marketed to low-income consumers in rural communities who are unable to afford these

products in larger containers, an example of a double standard which exploits global inequity.¹⁴ Innovating new delivery systems to replace sachets should be a priority.

- The company claims that it has reduced its overall waste footprint per consumer, however, **Unilever's volumes of single-use plastic and other packaging have remained flat since 2010**,¹⁵ which it has achieved through streamlining its existing packaging ('lightweighting'). This suggests that it is selling more products in single-use plastic packaging rather than reducing the overall number of plastic packaging units.
- Typical types of plastic packaging include HDPE (bottles for products such as Dove body wash and Tresemmé shampoo, Persil laundry jugs), LDPE (tubes, shrink wrap), PET/PETE (trays, cartons, containers of Hellmann's and Best Foods mayonnaise), polypropylene/PP (bottles, caps, pots, tubs and trays),^{16 17} and flexible packaging, including multi-layer materials such as laminates.

8 Unilever (2018). Annual Report 2017. P 19

9 Unilever (2018). Annual Report 2017. P 19

10 Unilever response to Greenpeace survey, 2018.

11 Nestlé (2018), response to Greenpeace for Crisis of Convenience

12 The Guardian (2014), Sachets help low-income communities but are a waste nightmare, 22 May 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/sachet-packaging-low-income-communities-waste-nightmare>

13 Greenpeace (2018), *Crisis of Convenience*. P. 10 op.cit.

14 Harvard Business Review (2016), How Unilever Reaches Rural Consumers in Emerging Markets, 14 December 2016; <https://hbr.org/2016/12/how-unilever-reaches-rural-consumers-in-emerging-markets>

15 Unilever (2018), response to Greenpeace for Crisis of Convenience

16 Unilever (2018), response to Greenpeace for Crisis of Convenience

17 Note that Unilever has stated that it has eliminated 99% of PVC from its packaging portfolio.

Unilever estimates that its top regions for single-use plastic are Europe, South East Asia and Australasia, and the United States,¹⁸ and that its products in the laundry, hair care and beverage subdivisions make up more than one-third of Unilever's total waste footprint.¹⁹ Personal care makes up the biggest portion of Unilever's revenue (39% in 2017),²⁰ and unsurprisingly, Unilever had the highest rate of plastic waste from personal care packaging in the recent GAIA brand audit.²¹

What Unilever promises - and its actions

Unilever has long aimed to position itself as a leader in addressing the plastic pollution crises, but its action to date falls far short. In January 2018, the company publicly called for accelerated action from the consumer goods industry in addressing the plastic pollution, emphasizing the need to "invest in innovation towards new delivery models that promote reuse."²² Later that year, the company signed onto the The New Plastics Economy Global Commitment, which prioritizes the elimination of problematic and unnecessary plastic, and investment in reuse models to reduce single-use plastic production. However, **the level of ambition signalled by Unilever's public statements has not been backed up with action.**

To achieve its commitments, Unilever states that it prioritizes three work streams: less plastic, better plastic and no plastic. But despite the seemingly holistic approach, **most of the company's efforts have been on lightweighting and recyclability, rather than reduction and innovation.**

- To use **less plastic**, Unilever has tended to focus on lightweighting measures, but given its own growth in product marketing and sales, the actual volume of plastics used in packaging has not decreased and has instead remained flat. This is insufficient to reduce the production of plastic necessary to reverse the plastics crisis. **Unilever will have to change its business model to operate within planetary boundaries.**
- For **"better" plastic**, Unilever has trialled some post-consumer recycled plastics, particularly recycled PET bottles for dishwashing liquid and other products in various markets, but **it is not clear how the company plans to scale up these innovations across its portfolio.**

18 Unilever (2018), response to Greenpeace for Crisis of Convenience. The company gathers somewhat limited data on its single plastic for a set of regions; these are the top regions for plastic use based only on that set of regions.

19 Unilever website (undated). 'Our Waste Footprint.' Accessed February 19, 2019. <https://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/reducing-environmental-impact/waste-and-packaging/our-waste-footprint/>

20 Unilever (2018). Annual Report 2017. P. 6

21 GAIA (2019), op.cit.

22 Unilever (2018) Unilever calls for accelerated action on packaging waste, 23 January 2018; <https://www.unilever.com/news/press-releases/2018/unilever-calls-for-accelerated-industry-action-on-packaging-waste.html>



- Like its overall plastics use, Unilever reports that its use of post-consumer recycled plastic is flat. In 2017 it used approximately 4,850 tonnes of post-consumer recycled plastic, which is less than 1% of its total plastic use. In 2017, the company claimed that 30% of its plastic was not recyclable.²³
- Unilever lags far behind in its aspiration to transition to **“no plastic”**. Unilever claims to have a “materials capability programme” to research alternative materials and models of delivery/consumption.

Examples include:

- Bamboo toothbrushes, “shower soap bars”, and cardboard packaging for deodorant sticks.
- Committing to join online shopping service “the Loop” which offers home delivery/pick-up of certain refillable products along with other companies. Unilever will offer nine brands on Loop; This service challenges throwaway culture. Unfortunately, it is still a small experiment with more exclusive products.
- Trialling refillable body wash and shampoo in certain regions.²⁴
- Unilever has not indicated how much single-use plastic use will be reduced through these initiatives, which are unlikely to address the scale of the problem.

Material substitution will not suffice and will either continue to impact the world’s oceans or shift impacts to the world’s forests and agricultural lands.²⁵

The way out - solutions to the single-use plastics crisis

To truly tackle the plastics epidemic, companies need to fundamentally rethink how they bring products to people and innovate away from single-use packaging altogether. It is important that as companies like Unilever innovate away from single-use plastic that the programs are well resourced, accessible to a wide range of customers in all geographic regions, are incentivized to customers, and well advertised to ensure success.

Some of the most promising alternative delivery systems, with examples of where these systems are already in existence, include:

- Reusable packaging with takeback infrastructure eliminating single-use (eg coffee cups that are returned or lunch services that take back containers);
 - Vessel, CupClub, GO Box, Loop, reusable milk bottles

- Refill Stations where you can bring your own packaging
 - Ecopod
- Redesigned products for less packaging (eg, reusable bottles that are filled with concentrates and mixed with tap water, solid soaps, syrups to make drinks at home);
 - Splosh, Lush shampoo bars, Soda Stream
- Alternative food provision systems (eg, hydroponics and local food); and
- Package-free delivery systems (eg, package-free grocery, laser labeling foods).

Unilever - time to walk the talk

To demonstrate real leadership Unilever needs to immediately commit to achieving ‘peak’ single-use plastic production and set year on year reduction targets for the total units produced, while massively scaling up investment in alternative delivery systems, and working with its supply chain and retail partners to bring them to life. Efforts to make its packaging lighter and more recyclable, combined with material substitution, will have a minimal effect if the company continues to produce more units of single-use plastic and perpetuates its current throwaway business model. Recycling is not even achievable for many plastics, it depends on municipal availability and will not alleviate plastics pollution in the places most saturated with plastic. Given the company’s progressive statements and publicly stated intentions, Unilever has a real opportunity to lead the industry on addressing the plastic crises by being the first to set overarching unit reduction targets and pioneering truly innovative plastic-free delivery systems with its retail and other partners.

To be a leader in reducing its use of single-use plastic, Unilever must do several things:

- **Increase transparency** - publicly disclose comprehensive information about its plastics footprint.
- **Commit to reduction** - set annual targets for continually reducing their single-use plastic footprint towards complete phase out.
 - Begin reduction efforts by eliminating most problematic and unnecessary single-use plastic by the end of 2019.
- **Invest in reuse and new delivery systems by the end of 2019**
 - invest in alternative delivery systems based on reuse and refill, work with a major international retailer to pilot a plastic-free retail environment and adequately promoting new plastic-free systems.
- **Avoid false solutions** - achieving ‘peak single-use plastic’ and year on year reductions is done through alternative delivery models, and not moving to alternative single-use materials. [For detail see Greenpeace Position on Single-use Plastic Products and potential bio-based material substitutes.]

²³ Unilever response to Greenpeace survey, 2018

²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/feb/02/packaging-plastics-pollution-recycling-unilever-dove-marks-spencer>

²⁵ For more information see: Greenpeace Position on Single-use Plastic Products and potential bio-based material substitutes.



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Greenpeace is an independent global campaigning organisation that acts to change attitudes and behaviour, to protect and conserve the environment and to promote peace.

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