

# COMMUNITY VOICES

## Impacts of Single-Use Plastic Regulations on Philippine Coastal Communities



### Siquijor: Going Zero Waste

In Siquijor, an island province in Central Visayas, home to over 100,000 locals and composed of six municipalities, it is not uncommon to see people bringing their own bags when going to the public market and even to the grocery stores. In some parts of the province, you would even see folks buying takeout meals in restaurants using their own reusable containers.

Asked why, the residents and business owners would respond: "Because plastic is prohibited on the island."

Indeed, going around the island is a great experience. The paved roads are free of plastic litter. So are the beaches, parks, and even the public markets – places that are typically littered. **P2**

### Reasons Why Leaders Must Make Waste Management a Priority

- 1. Environmental sustainability.** Making waste management part of the agenda results in a win-win scenario for the community especially in highly urbanized and/or tourism areas with challenges in land space for sanitary landfills. The community gets to maintain the beauty of the place, invite more tourists while also saving money that would otherwise be spent on managing increasing waste.
- 2. Job generation.** A 2021 report by the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives showed that Zero Waste, which puts emphasis on waste reduction, reuse and refill, repair, and recycling, creates more and better jobs. Compared with incinerators and landfills, repair creates over 200 times more jobs; recycling, over 50 times more jobs; and remanufacturing, almost 30 times more jobs. Opportunities generated by Zero Waste systems are likewise more desirable: they can utilize skills beyond basic manual labor, provide higher wages, offer more permanent positions, and improve quality of life.<sup>1</sup>
- 3. Community participation in waste management.** Zero Waste programs require high community awareness of the environmental problems posed by unmindful consumption and ineffective waste management. A community with high awareness on issues affecting them that are presented with sound programs such as Zero Waste tend to have more co-ownership of the program, become more involved in the implementation, and compliant to policies and regulations.
- 4. Savings.** Instead of looking for expensive multi-million and dirty false solutions with known health, climate, and environmental impacts like waste-to-energy incineration, policy makers should prioritize green and inclusive programs which not only effectively solve the problem of too much waste but would also allow the city to make huge savings. The city could instead use these savings in providing their constituents with better social services such as education, livelihood, and health, among others.
- 5. Policy coherence.** Good management systems allow local leaders to address multiple concerns in a period of scarce resources brought about by the continuing pandemic. Policies on reducing plastic waste address the environmental, economic, social and climate vulnerabilities of poor communities especially those dependent on their natural endowments such as agricultural and island-tourism areas.

**FROM P1** But this was not always the case. According to locals, the sight of plastic discards – single-use plastic bags, styrofoam cutleries and utensils, empty pet bottles, sachets, and other types of disposables – used to spoil the natural beauty of the island. There was excessive plastic, and people unceremoniously discarded their waste everywhere. And when the island started receiving more tourists, the situation only got worse.

This changed in 2017 when the provincial government introduced an ordinance banning the styro products and regulating the single-use plastic as packaging for any local goods or products.

Since the implementation of these regulations, the province has become cleaner. Their waste management became systematic, and plastic use was drastically reduced. Case in point: the capital town, also called Siquijor, the most populous municipality on the island, known to have the strictest implementation of the aforementioned ordinances and thus records the highest compliance rate in the province.

Prior to the passage of their ordinance, collection in Barangay Poblacion (the town's center of commerce) was done daily with two garbage vehicles used – a dump truck and a compactor. Waste collection on the other 42 barangays was twice a month. Wastes were collected from the barangay materials recovery facilities (MRFs) and brought to the sanitary landfill for final sorting and disposal. Since the implementation of the plastic ordinance, waste collection in the central business area of Barangay Poblacion was drastically reduced to twice a week; in the other barangays, once a

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month. Biodegradable waste is already managed either at home or at the barangay MRFs and recyclables are recovered and sold to junk shops.

According to Engr. Lhermie Areja, Environmental Management Specialist/Municipal Environment and Natural Resources Officer, the province-wide nature of the ordinances was crucial in their implementation as municipalities are implementing the same rules and regulations.

She added that having the full support of the mayor tremendously helped in the implementation, noting that implementing the ordinances was very challenging, and would have been even more difficult without the mayor's endorsement. "Not everyone understood our mandate. Some

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<sup>1</sup>Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives. 2021. Zero Waste and Economic Recovery. <https://zerowasteworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Zero-Waste-and-Economic-Recovery-ENGLISH-2.pdf>

colleagues would expect exceptions from the segregation ordinance. But for the program to fly, everybody needed to do it. It's a good thing that whenever people would complain that we're too strict, the mayor would not side with them. Instead, he would tell them, 'that is the mandate of her office. We need to follow what she asks us to do,'" she shared.

She added: "What the people do not understand is that the waste generated at the household level may seem small, hence they may think it is no big deal if they don't reduce and segregate their waste. But when the waste gets to the landfill, the volume is significant, and actually poses a big challenge. Whenever a dump truck comes in, I'd ask myself: where will I put all this waste? Even now that only the residuals are being brought to the landfill, the volume is still significant."

The same question was posed by Engr. Cle Bern Paglinawan, the present Tourism Officer of the province and the man behind the introduction of the ordinances when he was still a provincial board member.

"The province does not have its own landfill. The area that we got was disapproved. The island is made of limestone and it has many caves. Underneath, there are also bodies of water, so it's difficult to find a space that would be suitable for a landfill. If we don't reduce our waste, eventually, we will not have a place to put them in," he said.

Although policies are in place in the entire province, the success of implementation varies per municipality. While there are municipalities that are effectively implementing the ordinances, some are lagging far behind.

In parts of the province where the execution of the policies is wanting, people point to lax implementation and lack of enforcement as the reason.

"In our barangay, people throw their waste everywhere. Compradors (people buying fish directly from the fishermen in bulk as they dock) would just throw their plastic waste unceremoniously on the shore," said Esver Buhian, Halason Fisherfolks Association in Barangay Catulayan, San Juan.

"I think if we become more strict with the implementation, people will comply. Our barangay should be more strict. Until someone gets apprehended, people will just continue dumping their waste everywhere," he added.

Engr. Cle Bern echoed the same concern about some local leaders' lack of willpower: "I wish all the mayors would truly support the campaign and make it part of their priorities. With the mayor's support, compliance would even be higher. It's different when it's the leader talking. People follow," he said.

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# San Carlos: Ingenuity and Citizen Participation

Sometime in 2019, vendors in a public market in San Carlos City, Negros Occidental became a source of inspiration when images of them using banana and taro leaves as packaging for their goods, including meat and fish, went viral.

At the time, conversations about the impacts of plastic on the environment have become mainstream, compelling some local leaders to make legislation regulating or banning the use of single-use plastic.

But for San Carlos City, the use of alternatives to single-use plastic packaging has been going on for some time since the coastal city had a head start in looking for ways to become more sustainable.

In 2013 and 2014, the city held a competition called Search for the Most Environment Friendly Market Vendor, which encouraged vendors to practice waste segregation and avoid using single-use plastic bags.

In 2014, the city passed City Ordinance 14-53, or the “No Plastic Ordinance aimed to regulate the use of plastic (cellophane), *sando* (or carrier) bags, and styrofoam as packaging materials for food and beverages.” The ordinance took effect in May 2015.

That same year, the city updated their Solid Waste Management (SWM) Plan to enhance its solid waste management services. They anchored their SWM ordinance on RA 9003 or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2000.

While it seemed easy on paper, implementing the ordinance was a great challenge. Vendors initially resisted the single-use plastic bag ban, especially those whose products were challenging to package in anything but plastic. Thus, the city held dialogues with the stakeholders which resulted in some amendments to the ban. As a result of the dialogue, a number of single-use plastic bags were listed as acceptable retail use of plastic, such as for ice wrapper, among others.

The local government conducted massive information campaigns then started strictly enforcing the ordinance by promoting incentives,

penalizing vendors found to be in violation of the law, and making alternatives available.

“We would go to far-flung barangays even at night time during satellite market days for enforcement. At first, market vendors were resistant but now they themselves advocate going plastic-free. Our frequent visits to households before the pandemic also paid off because they continue to use reusables,” said Analou Gomo of the City Environmental Management Office.

To become more responsive to the needs of the stakeholders, the local government established a Technical Working Group (TWG) composed of city officials and concerned government offices, including the Public Market and Slaughterhouse Department and the Public Information Office. The TWG convenes whenever issues related to the ordinance arise.

Just a year into their implementation, the city reported a significant reduction in the amount of non-biodegradable waste collected from April (over 208 tonnes) to June (more than 176 tonnes) 2014. In 2019, the city was recognized as an ASEAN Clean Tourist City for its best practices in sustainable protection of the environment.

Encouraged by the impact of the initial single-use plastic bag ban, the local government is planning to expand it to include the phaseout of disposable cutleries and polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles.

Once approved, the City of San Carlos, which has demonstrated its commitment to implementing its environmental regulations, will further cement its reputation as a leader in sustainability.

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# Dumaguete: No to Pyrolysis, Yes to Zero Waste

Dumaguete City in Negros Oriental is host to Zero Waste stores or establishments that sell their products via refill or through return and deposit schemes and do not use single-use plastics as carry-bags for their products. A number of restaurants also practice Zero Waste, serving their dine-in food in reusable utensils, and encouraging the usage of reusable containers for takeouts.

Moreover, five of its 30 barangays – Bantayan, Looc, Piapi, Calindagan, and Banilad – are in different stages of community Zero Waste implementation, with the first three embarking on their Zero Waste journey in 2018 with the help of the War on Waste-Break Free From Plastic-NegOr, a local NGO helping local governments implement a Zero Waste. Zero Waste is a comprehensive approach to waste management that prioritizes waste prevention, reuse, composting, and recycling.<sup>2</sup>

It is also home of Foundation University and Silliman University, which are known as Zero Waste schools.

The city is one of the first local government units in the country to regulate single-use plastic bags. In 2011, it passed Ordinance 231 which sought to regulate the use of plastic bags and ban styrofoam packaging in all business establishments.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, while enforcement was initially strict, powerful business interests successfully stopped its implementation.

In 2018, as brand audits were conducted in the city and three barangays started to embark on their enactment of the Zero Waste program, calls for re-enforcing the ban gained new momentum. By then, more Zero Waste stores started to pop up in the city.

***Pyrolysis gasification undermines the Zero Waste work that was already started in the pilot barangays. Instead of turning to waste-to-energy incineration, the city should expand the Zero Waste work that is already ongoing in the pilot barangays to cover the whole city.***

Sadly, like their first attempt to become Zero Waste, implementation of community Zero Waste was not embraced and adopted by most of the barangays. Instead, the local government unit (LGU) opted to operate a centralized MRF and acquired a pyrolysis gasification incinerator.<sup>4</sup> Pyrolysis is a burn technology that is being marketed as a Zero Waste solution – which it is far from being.

According to scientist, Dr. Jorge Emmanuel, former chief advisor of the United Nations Development Program and professor at the Silliman University, pyrolysis gasification, a form of waste-to-energy incineration, does not solve the problem of too much waste as they do not promote reduction of plastic consumption. On the contrary, it requires cities and communities to keep producing plastic waste to be used as fuel. These technologies also bring with them threats to the environment and to public health.

“Pyrolysis gasification undermines the Zero Waste work that was already started in the pilot

<sup>2</sup> Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives. 2021. Zero Waste and Economic Recovery. <https://zerowasteworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Jobs-Report-ENGLISH-2.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Raffy Cabristante. June 2, 2018. GMA News Online. Total ban on plastic bags enforced at the Dumaguete Public Market. <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/regions/655431/total-ban-on-plastic-bags-enforced-at-the-dumaguete-public-market/story/>

<sup>4</sup>Paghimugtud. Negros Island People's Alternative Media. Envi-group Decries Dumaguete City's Incineration Tech Investment <https://paghimutadnegros.wordpress.com/2020/09/04/envi-group-decries-dumaguete-citys-incineration-tech-investment/>

barangays. Instead of turning to waste-to-energy incineration, the city should expand the Zero Waste work that is already ongoing in the pilot barangays to cover the whole city," said Merci Ferrer, co-convenor of Wow-BFFP-NegOr.

Today, while models like the first three Zero Waste barangays, Foundation University and Silliman University, and the Zero Waste stores continue with the program, it is business as usual for most parts of the province.

Merci remains hopeful. The voice of civil society is loud in the city, and it keeps getting louder as they are joined by local experts and the community in calling out the city for embarking on non-sustainable initiatives such as the acquisition of pyrolysis gasification in addition to their reclamation project.

In fact, they have just scored a major win at the provincial level after two years of lobbying. According to Merci, the province of Negros Oriental passed a province-wide ordinance banning single-use plastic.

"Implementation is yet to start because of the disruptions caused by the elections, but the candidates for local elective positions have committed to fully implementing the law should they win. A province-wide ban would put pressure on the Dumaguete city leadership to strictly implement their own regulations," she said.



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© April 2022 Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives  
Unit 330, Eagle Court Condominium  
26 Matalino Street, Barangay Central  
Quezon City, Philippines

AUTHOR: **Sherma E. Benosa**