UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH
GLOBAL PLASTICS POLICY CENTRE

#BreakFreeFromPlastic

Global Plastics Treaty

POLICY BRIEF

ACCELERATING THE SCALING OF REUSE SYSTEMS IN THE GLOBAL PLASTICS TREATY

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This policy brief examines options to scale and increase the adoption of reuse systems that reduce reliance on single-use packaging and other items, within the Global Plastics Treaty. The policy considerations and enablers presented in this brief are based on extensive research by the Global Plastics Policy Centre, in collaboration with Break Free From Plastic, including over 55 expert interviews, analysis of stakeholder and country submissions to the INC Secretariat, and a literature review of over 100 peer-reviewed research articles, reports and white papers.

1. EFFECTIVE REUSE POLICIES MUST CONSIDER THE WHOLE REUSE SYSTEM, INCLUDING **MINIMUM DESIGN & PERFORMANCE CRITERIA, INFRASTRUCTURE, MEASURABLE TARGETS, OWNERSHIP, FINANCING, SCOPE, MATERIAL USE AND HEALTH IMPACTS.**

2. THE GLOBAL ADOPTION OF REUSE SYSTEMS REQUIRES **PACKAGING STANDARDISATION, DATA COLLECTION, FINANCIAL INCENTIVES, COLLABORATION AND GLOBALLY AGREED DEFINITIONS** OF REUSE SYSTEMS IN COMPARISON TO REFILL AND REPAIR SCHEMES.

3. THE TRANSITION TO REUSE SYSTEMS **CAN BEGIN IMMEDIATELY IN** SETTINGS THAT REQUIRE THE LEAST INFRASTRUCTURE CHANGE, LEAST NEW INVESTMENT, AND LEAST CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR CHANGE, SUCH AS IN CLOSED SYSTEMS.

4. A GLOBAL TRANSITION TO REUSE SYSTEMS REQUIRES SUPPORT FROM A **COORDINATED SUITE OF POLICIES,** AS STAND-ALONE POLICY MEASURES ARE NOT SUFFICIENT TO CATALYSE THIS TRANSITION ALONE.

1 REUSE AS A SOLUTION TO THE PLASTICS CRISIS

What is reuse?

Prioritising the reuse of products and packaging over recycling, in conjunction with reducing plastics production, is key to the transition to a circular economy that operates within planetary boundaries. Although there is currently no universally agreed definition of reuse, we define a 'reuse system' as a comprehensive system designed for multiple circulations of reusable products and packaging which remain in the ownership of the reuse system and are loaned to the consumer. The system accounts for the recovery of the reusable item, reverse logistics, cleaning, replenishing and redistribution [1].

Why is reuse needed?

Reuse represents a pivotal opportunity to break free from the prevailing linear take-make-waste packaging economy, which exacerbates the global plastics crisis. An effective reuse system offers a transformative solution to eliminate plastic pollution through significant reductions in single-use packaging, reducing demand for virgin plastics, promoting the circulation of materials, reducing waste generation and management, and the associated climate costs [2]. **In summary, the adoption of reuse systems can:**

Reduce new plastic entering the economy, by replacing single-use plastics with reusable items.

Support the circulation of materials (including but not limited to plastics) in the economy for longer.

How can policy support the implementation of reuse?

A coherent policy mix is necessary to make reuse systems the new norm for packaging amongst consumers, retailers and industry. Current plastics policies operate in a disconnected way, and lack the ambition and impact necessary to establish large scale reuse systems. Whilst multiple policies have the potential to support the transition to reuse systems, no single policy can achieve this shift alone. Policy frameworks for effective global implementation of reuse systems must consider the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, finance, infrastructure and logistical changes that the system implementation requires.

2 ESSENTIAL REUSE CONSIDERATIONS

When designing national reuse policies, there are a number of key considerations:

Scope and materials

A comprehensive reuse policy should define the scope of its applicability across market sectors and products, encompassing consumers, retailers and business-to-business transactions. It should also outline the range of materials suitable for reusable products, ensuring that materials are safe, durable, sustainable, and avoid toxic additives and chemicals of concern. The materials used should have readily available and safe end-of-life disposal options or be fully recyclable into the same or equivalent item, to eliminate negative impacts on the environment and human health.

Standards and minimum design criteria

Global reuse system and product design standards will drive business innovation, guide investments, and reassure the public on the safety and benefits of reusables. Clear and certified labelling and an international reuse symbol would help the identification of reusable packaging and indicate the reverse logistics or location of reuse return points. There is a need for clear health and safety standards for workers and operators of the reuse systems. The sustainability breakeven point, defined as the number of rotations required in order that the reusable item has less environmental impact than its single-use equivalent, is a critical measure for the evaluation of reuse systems. The sustainability breakeven point for reuse items must be defined, and mandatory and standardised data collection put in place to ensure that reuse systems are effective and advantageous compared to single-use.

Measurable and time-bound targets

Reuse policies should include well-defined, quantifiable and time bound targets for the adoption of reuse systems. Targets must include reuse collection and return rates, sustainability breakeven points, and should evidence decreased reliance on single-use plastics [3]. These will provide clear measures of progress and foster greater accountability. Return targets could, for example, be set to initially achieve 90% return within one year and their progress towards the target rate can be re-evaluated annually. The setting of targets will need to be ambitious but also consider the starting point and contextual readiness to change. Additionally, it is advisable for retail and food industries to set mandatory targets for reuse applications that are separate from recycling and composting targets in order to prevent greenwashing and implementation of ineffective or unsustainable reuse solutions. In developing these targets and criteria, independent science based expertise will be critical.

Infrastructure

A reuse policy should include provisions for infrastructure to support the collection, washing, sorting, replenishment, and redistribution of reusable items. Additionally, the policy should emphasise the implementation of robust traceability mechanisms and data reporting. For example, tracking returns and rotation cycles of reusables can be facilitated using smart technologies and barcodes such as RFID tags, QR codes, and apps. Some sector products have multiple end-of-use points (including at the site of purchase, in the home, in the street), each of which affects the return mechanism, rate, and environmental and financial costs.

2 ESSENTIAL REUSE CONSIDERATIONS

Financing

To ensure the success of reuse systems, it is essential that financial support and incentives are available. The establishment of collection points and reusable packaging processing hubs necessitates substantial investment. Government funding can play a pivotal role in facilitating the development of reuse hubs as well as expanding existing small-scale reuse systems (such as the Tapauware case study on page 6). Government cooperatives and corporate financing can play an important role in sourcing funding streams to support small businesses and organisations developing reuse schemes. Furthermore, removal of subsidies that lead to artificially cheap single-use plastic packaging will also stimulate support for large scale reuse systems.

Ownership and responsibility

A robust reuse policy should assign responsibility for the proper management and maintenance of reuse systems and reusable items to the appropriate stakeholders, including manufacturers, retailers, municipalities and consumers. Data gathering, including monitoring return rates and losses of items from the reuse system needs to be assigned appropriately, particularly in collaborative and pooled systems. The policy should also establish guidelines for tracking ownership changes throughout the lifecycle of reusable products.

Just transition

A just transition to reuse systems should involve policies that take account of the needs of all stakeholders, including local communities, guaranteeing flexible, fair, and safe employment opportunities and training [4]. Essential components for a just transition to reuse systems include:

- Identifying and addressing any impacts on waste pickers and other waste workers in informal or cooperative settings
- Social and economic protection for any job displacement, relocation, or those impacted across the plastics value chain
- Training and upskilling through support for enterprises/entrepreneurs
- Educational resources, awareness raising and knowledge sharing for consumers and businesses
- Accessible financial support for small businesses and organisations operating and promoting reuse schemes

People-centric

Reuse policy should ensure that consumers experience minimal disruption in their daily lives, with reuse systems displaying the same convenience as single-use systems, while the necessary changes occur behind the scenes. Supporting consumers to understand reuse systems through awareness raising campaigns is crucial, and well-trained staff can help to deliver consumer buy-in. The use of deposit return fees or other incentives such as loyalty points can motivate customers to return items, and help achieve required return rate targets.

3 ENABLERS FOR EFFECTIVE REUSE POLICY

To maximise the effectiveness of reuse policy, the Global Plastics Policy Centre has identified evidence to suggest that the following five enablers are needed:

KEY ENABLER #1 Globally agreed definitions of reuse systems, standards, and design requirements

Establishing universally accepted definitions for pivotal terms such as 'reuse', 'refill', and 'repair' as well as the formulation of global standards for health, safety, material suitability, and handling procedures, contribute to a cohesive foundation upon which globally accepted reuse systems can flourish. By creating a unified and well-defined approach to reuse that serves as a common starting point for all stakeholders, cooperation, trust and effective decision-making will be promoted. A harmonised approach will also help to ensure the plastics industry operates under the same sustainable practices towards collaborative goals and reuse targets.

KEY ENABLER #2 Collaboration and knowledge exchange across sectors

Establishing a global reuse organisation to support knowledge exchange for businesses, retailers, and organisations operating reuse systems to collaborate [4]. Resource sharing and pooling will be key to reducing the barriers to entry, operational costs, space and waste associated with creating new reuse infrastructure. Instead, offering shared resources and utilising existing provider's systems and infrastructure, could create a connected network of reuse facilities or 'hubs', for the sorting, washing and redistribution of reusables to multiple outlets. For example, given logistics companies' existing role in providing storage and distribution for producers and retailers, they are well-positioned to expand their operations to facilitate this reuse hub operation.

KEY ENABLER #3 Financial incentives to encourage the shift to reuse systems

National financial incentives can play a pivotal role in favouring reuse systems over linear single-use production and consumption patterns. Finance is imperative to develop the necessary reuse infrastructure, enhance operational capabilities, and provide training to facilitate workforce transitions in local communities. For example, allocating funds to create a network of community-based reuse operations that create job opportunities for skilled workers. To effectively attract investments in reuse systems, a cohesive vision, backed by collaborative strategies to engage public-private partnerships is required to mitigate risk for potential investors. Disincentivising unnecessary single-use packaging options through bans and charges will also help to level economic competition that exists between artificially cheap single-use options and reusables. Vital to this reuse shift are policy measures that not only facilitate the appeal and convenience of reusable packaging but also rectify the economic imbalance, rendering single-use options less financially appealing. Additionally, to remain within planetary boundaries, redirecting current investments in upstream production and flawed downstream solutions towards scaling reuse systems is essential.


Photo ©James Wakibia

3 ENABLERS FOR EFFECTIVE REUSE POLICY

KEY ENABLER #4 Reuse policy should be implemented in combination with other policy approaches

A range of policy measures can support the transition to reuse systems, including: bans on single-use packaging, removal of subsidies on cheap single-use packaging, enforcing obligatory reuse return targets, taxes on virgin materials used in packaging, and the incorporation of extended producer responsibility schemes that offer financial incentives for the use of reusable packaging. A strategic approach could involve securing cross-sector agreements to transition specific products entirely to reusable alternatives, followed by a gradual expansion of mandatory reusable packaging percentage targets. For example, Zero Waste Europe has proposed that EPR schemes should dedicate a minimum of 10% of budget to promote reusables and to finance reuse infrastructure [6]. EPR schemes should follow the zero-waste hierarchy, prioritising reuse over recycling [7]. Plastic policies are most effective when they are coordinated nationally and ideally internationally, rather than implemented in a piecemeal or fragmented manner.

KEY ENABLER #5 Early implementation in closed settings

Reuse systems can replace single-use packaging in all sectors with the ease of implementation often depending on the nature of the system and the reuse infrastructure required. Accelerating early reuse implementation will be most effective in closed systems (such as using reusable beverage cups and food containers in hospitals, concerts, festival venues, stadia and art galleries), lays a robust framework and business model for introducing reuse systems in other sectors. The food and drink on-the-go sector is also highly suited to early implementation of reusable packaging. Food and drink on-the-go outlets often replenish the food and drink at the point of sale and would require minimal change to infrastructure. This will increase the adoption behaviour and understanding amongst consumers, reducing any anxiety or lack of trust in system changes. A sectoral based roadmap for reuse implementation can be found in the full report 'Making reuse a reality', which is linked at the end of this brief.

4 REUSE SOLUTIONS IN PRACTICE

Innovative reuse and refill systems are already in place, including in countries most impacted by plastic pollution. The example below is of a reuse system that highlights the potential of community-driven initiatives to address plastic waste by partnering with local businesses, engaging the community, and offering practical solutions.

Tapauware, founded by Enviu in Malaysia, has established a thriving community-based reusable packaging system [8]. Recognising the prevalence of single-use takeaway containers, Tapauware collaborates with local eateries to offer reusable containers for takeout meals. Customers pay a small deposit for the container, which they can return for a refund or exchange during their next visit. This initiative reduces the reliance on disposable takeaway containers and encourages a culture of reuse. Through active community engagement and partnerships with various food outlets, Tapauware has contributed to waste reduction and sustainability while fostering a sense of environmental responsibility [9].

Image by Tapauware.

For further recommendations and information on scaling reuse systems, see our report **'Making Reuse a Reality: A systems approach to tackling single-use plastic pollution'.**

SCAN ME

or search
https://tinyurl.com/reuse-reality

CONTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

Based at the University of Portsmouth, UK, **the Global Plastics Policy Centre** is an independent knowledge broker to support effective plastics policy-making in government and the private sector. The Centre provides evidence-based support at the interface of government, businesses, citizens, and researchers, including supporting the process to develop a legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution.

Break Free From Plastic is the global movement working to achieve a future free from plastic pollution. More than 12,000 organisations and individuals around the world have come together to demand reductions in single-use plastics and to advocate for lasting solutions to the plastic pollution crisis. BFFP members work together to bring about systemic change by tackling plastic pollution across the whole value chain - from extraction to disposal - focusing on prevention rather than cure. For more information, visit www.breakfreefromplastic.org.

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ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief is based on the research findings from over 100 peer reviewed articles, a series of reports and over 55 expert interviews with individuals, organisations and businesses involved in operating and/or advocating for reuse systems. This research was conducted between October 2022 and May 2023 in collaboration with Break Free From Plastic and their members. In addition to this research, further analysis of the statements and submissions to both INC-1 and INC-3 was performed by the Global Plastics Policy Centre. Evidence was reviewed and analysed by the authors. Data, detailed methods and the full reference list are available upon request. For more information, please contact globalplastics@port.ac.uk.

Contributors:

UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH
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