

Blog 2: Cheap and virtually indestructible

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Plastics have many desirable properties. It's lightweight, durable, easy to mold and shape in different forms and inexpensive. Furthermore it's versatile. Plastics are used in a wide range of products like medical devices, automotive parts and electronics. Besides these specialized applications it's also widely used for everyday items such as food packaging and bottles. It has become difficult, or even impossible to avoid the use of plastic.

When plastic is used for packaging and bottles it's often used for single-use. This means that this virtually indestructible material is discarded just after one use. This causes enormous amounts of plastic waste. Recycling is an alternative for some types of plastic, depending on the local conditions, but in practice only a very small percentage of the produced plastic is recycled.

There are several reasons recycling is very challenging, which is especially the case for small island developing states:

1. Lack of infrastructure: collecting and processing plastic waste for recycling requires infrastructure. Collection centers, recycling programs, facilities and trained personnel are necessary but often lacking in small island developing states.
2. Contamination of the recyclables is a major issue. It makes it difficult, or even impossible, to recycle effectively, because it negatively impacts quality and hence value of the materials. Contamination can have a variety of sources, like food waste, dirt and other non-plastic materials. In addition to reducing value and quality of the materials, contamination can also create safety hazards for workers. For example when the contamination source is chemical.
3. Economic: recycling is expensive. In decision making producers often chose for the most cost effective option. Producing virgin plastic often costs less than producing with secondary materials. This makes recycling less attractive.

However, even though recycling is challenging, it is an essential strategy that is of vital importance to move towards a plastic waste free system.

As waste, plastic has extremely negative environmental impact. It accumulates in landfills, oceans and other natural habitats, causing harm to wildlife and ecosystems. And it's not only at the end of life, where plastic is harmful to the environment. The growing plastic market requires the use of fossil fuels, such as oil and gas, for its production. The extraction, transportation and processing of non-renewables to make plastic all have environmental impact. Plastic production also is a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.

Moving away from virgin plastic, to more sustainable alternatives like recycled plastics, can help mitigate the problems created by the excess plastic waste that has been generated over the last decennia. There also might be other viable alternatives, like biodegradable or compostable plastics.

Obviously using extremely durable plastics for everyday items that are discarded immediately after use, has created a global crisis that needs to be addressed without further ado.



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