COMMON DONOR GREENING PRIORITY ACTIONS

PRIORITY ACTION 5
Phase out single-use plastics except where this would compromise the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

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Plastic - commonly used in single-use items and packaging - is widespread in humanitarian operations[1] and often remains the default material for organisations. However, the distribution of single-use items or goods packaged in single-use plastic (SUP) contributes significantly to pollution in affected communities. This impact is exacerbated by weak, insufficient, or disrupted waste management systems, which are frequently strained or rendered ineffective by crises and conflict.

Given that only a small fraction of discarded plastic is recycled - around 9% globally[2] - we cannot "recycle our way out of" the plastics problem. Moreover, plastics do not biodegrade; instead, they fragment into increasingly smaller particles known as microplastics, which pose significant risks to human health and the environment. Consequently, reducing unnecessary SUP in humanitarian distributions, wherever feasible, is a critical component of the do no harm principle and should be systematically integrated into organisations' waste management policies and operational strategies.

There is a growing body of legislation and regulatory frameworks worldwide addressing plastic pollution and the production, use, and disposal of plastics. Humanitarian organisations are required to comply with these regulations, which are already driving changes in operational practices. Furthermore, the United Nations Environment Assembly's resolution to develop a legally binding international instrument to end plastic pollution sends a strong signal from the international community that the current reliance on plastics - including SUP - must be fundamentally rethought.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Be aware that there are no "quick fix" solutions regarding SUP and single-use plastic products in humanitarian contexts. Instead, we need to rethink procurement systems, single-use cultures, and use of plastics.
- ✓ Be guided by the Waste Management Hierarchy or "5 Rs" (*see below*) focusing on - in order of priority - reducing, reusing, recycling, repurposing, and responsible disposal.
- ✓ Never compromise on the quality or the timely delivery of life-saving aid. Avoiding SUP items or packaging is not always possible. For example, food items may require this to ensure additional protection from moisture, UV rays and insects. Furthermore, SUP packaging may still be required in humanitarian health interventions providing life-saving medical assistance.

[1] See for example, Joint Initiative Packaging Baseline Assessment based on Humanitarian Emergency Responses in 2021 showed that 32% of the total weight of primary and secondary packaging was plastic. The baseline was developed using data from 13 humanitarian organisations, corresponding to the packaging of 6.77m metric tons of food and non-food items distributed by the organisations in 2021.
[2] OECD Global Plastics Outlook, 2022

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Reducing & reusing

- ✓ Work with suppliers to assess whether SUP packaging is necessary for the protection of the aid item and if not, remove it: *"The best waste is that which we don't produce."*
- ✓ Replace SUP packaging with more sustainable alternatives when available (e.g. cardboard).
- ✓ Avoid use of plastic bubble wrap, cling-film, plastic tape and plastic fillers and replace them with paper alternatives.
- ✓ Comply with national legislation and regulatory frameworks regarding plastic use and plastic pollution. Some countries have strict legislation which bans the use of certain types of plastic. For example, Haiti forbids the use of polystyrene food containers.
- ✓ Switch to reusable options whenever possible (e.g. glass bottles and metal cutlery during events and training rather than disposal, SUP equivalents).

Recycling & repurposing

- ✓ If products made from SUP are necessary, try to procure those which are mono material (i.e. made from *one type* of plastic) to facilitate the recycling process downstream. Items made from multiple types of plastic are technically very complex to recycle.
- ✓ If SUP packaging is necessary, optimise the packaging size to reduce the volume of waste to be managed downstream. This also saves space in containers, reducing transport-related costs and emissions.
- ✓ Explore the possibility of repurposing plastic items (e.g. sewing together SUP bags and strengthening them to convert them into durable "bags for life")[3]
- ✓ Work together with other humanitarian organisations to make recycling and repurposing more practical by combining efforts, resources and transport capacity. Collaboration can make it easier to access waste management facilities located at a distance from operations, allowing organisations to share transport costs.
- ✓ Assess whether local enterprises exist that are already recycling and revalorising humanitarian packaging waste e.g. Ready-to-Use-Therapeutic-Food packaging. (S*ee also PA 4 Guidance Note on Waste Management*).

Responsibly disposing

- ✓ Organise collection of plastic packaging waste at sites where relief items are being distributed, or in the offices, so that it can be adequately managed. This can prevent, for example, packaging waste left by populations on the move in areas far from distribution sites where humanitarian organisations are present.
- ✓ Consider pooling plastic packaging waste with other organisations where this makes collection more feasible or economically viable.

KEY RESOURCES

Guidance on the operationalisation of the minimum environmental requirements and recommendations for EU-funded humanitarian aid operations (Section on Waste pages 23-28)

- **Organisation responsible:** DG ECHO
- **Short description**: Detailed guidance on sustainable management of solid waste and chemicals in humanitarian settings.

[3]This and other examples can be found in the Joint Initiative's Options for humanitarian packaging reuse, repurposing and recycling (2023)

- **Accessibility**: English

Mapping of Waste Recycling Infrastructures in Humanitarian Operations

- **Organisation responsible**: WREC Coalition
- **Short description:** Online, interactive map providing information on existing country waste management and recycling facilities in humanitarian settings. Data such as the type of waste accepted, contact details and information on the recycling process is provided.
- **Accessibility**: English.

Managing waste sustainably: lessons learnt from humanitarian organisations

- **Organisation responsible**: The Joint Initiative for Sustainable Humanitarian Assistance Packaging Waste Management
- **Short description:** Compendium of case studies on the management of waste including SUP packaging. It draws on the experiences of humanitarian organisations that have eliminated or reduced the use of SUP in their programmes through behaviour change initiatives or the adoption of alternative solutions.
- **Accessibility**: English.

Alternatives to conventional (petroleum-based) plastics in packaging

- **Organisation responsible**: The Joint Initiative for Sustainable Humanitarian Assistance Packaging Waste Management
- **Short description:** This document explores a range of alternatives to plastic packaging and the challenges associated with them. It provides readers with key considerations to support informed and sustainable decision-making.
- **Accessibility**: English.

Humanitarian organisations delivering healthcare programmes are also exploring the phased reduction of SUPs while ensuring that any alternatives do not compromise the quality, safety or effectiveness of care, equipment and medicines. For example,

- MSF ran a successful pilot project in Lebanon to reduce the number of disposable gloves used in a health facility. This led not only to a reduction in plastics but also to positive outcomes in terms of improved hygiene practices. It also launched an initiative to find alternatives to single-use surgical face masks, one of the most widely used items across its projects worldwide.
- Climate Action Accelerator has a Single-Use Plastic Medical Items Factsheet on reducing the amount of disposable/single-use items in medical humanitarian aid.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

- Avoid seeing recycling as the answer: Recycling rates for plastic do not exceed 9% of plastics consumed globally.[4] These even lower in humanitarian contexts where infrastructure is limited, and recycling solutions are concentrated on PET/HDPE plastics, paper, cardboard and steel, with very few recycling opportunities for light and flexible plastics such as cling-film. Recycling also *creates* emissions from transport, energy use, and processing.
- A reliance on "quick fix" solutions including "alternatives" to virgin (petro-based) plastics. These alternatives include biobased, compostable or biodegradable plastics which are not necessarily more environmentally sustainable than virgin plastics. Indeed, their production is

[4] Global Plastics Outlook, OECD (2022) https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/global-plastics-outlook_de747aef-en.html

often carbon intensive and when these materials reach the end of their life span, they can become complex waste streams to manage. [5]

- Assuming that phasing out SUP items and packing will cost more. While this may cost more (e.g. where cardboard is used instead of plastic), some humanitarian organisations have worked with suppliers to reduce SUP at no additional costs. Others have even made savings through, for example, bulk distributions or more efficient use of freight containers due to removal of individual packaging on items.

GOOD PRACTICES

- Exchange with and learn from other organisations, for example engaging with the WREC Waste Management Coordination Group, or the REH Waste Working Group for example.
- Reflect internally to see what adjustments can be made to procurement to avoid SUP. Bear in mind that this can be used either in primary, secondary or tertiary[6] packaging. Removing SUPs from primary or secondary packaging may be easier than tertiary (which is used by transporters). Examples include removing SUP wrapping from individual blankets, using paper sheets instead of plastic to wrap individual items in a kitchen set, and placing items into cardboard boxes instead of plastic packaging.
- Initiate a dialogue with suppliers on SUPs, outlining expectations and embedding changes to packaging or items into product specifications for future procurement. Bear in mind that working with suppliers to improve environmental sustainability is not a linear process, and may require continuous discussions, adjustments and solutions adapted to each commodity.
- Share these specifications with other organisations to use (e.g. via the WREC Green Procurement Product Specifications Repository) thereby increasing demand for affordable, sustainable items and packaging without SUP
- Identify greener items that can be procured in large quantities (including through joint procurement), bearing in mind that it may be easier for suppliers to adjust their products and processes (e.g. changing from plastic to paper tape) for small orders.
- Distribute items in bulk whenever it is possible, to minimise individual packaging of items. This is particularly feasible in situations where distributions are not made to individuals but facilities (e.g. schools, health centres).
- When procuring and distributing reusable products such as buckets or jerricans, ensure that these items are genuinely reused to achieve the intended environmental impact. This requires effective awareness-raising activities and meaningful community engagement.

The INSPIRE+ Consortium is made up of IECAH, ODI, FAIREPROD and Groupe URD. It provides the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) with support in developing its policies via research, training, workshops and the dissemination of findings.

[5] For example, biobased need to be collected separately to the other waste streams, and there are very few recyclers of biobased items/packaging in humanitarian settings.
[6] Primary packaging is the packaging provided per unit distributed; secondary packaging' is additional packaging used to hold a group of items together and tertiary is the packaging used for transportation.