

Tackling plastic pollution through a sustainable approach

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Plastic pollution has reached a tipping point, endangering our ecosystems, wildlife, and the very fabric of our planet. This World Environment Day marks the theme 'Solutions to Plastic Pollution' to address this urgent global crisis. By collectively committing to sustainable alternatives, responsible consumption, and stringent policies, we can drive the change necessary to combat plastic pollution and restore the health of our environment.

Government policies are crucial

Governments play a pivotal role in addressing plastic pollution by enacting stringent policies and regulations. Implementing extended producer responsibility (EPR) frameworks will ensure that manufacturers are accountable for the entire lifecycle of their products, including their end-of-life disposal. In addition, governments can incentivise sustainable practices, such as providing tax breaks to businesses that adopt environmentally friendly packaging or production methods.

Following are some of the policies and initiatives implemented in India to address plastic pollution: i) Plastic Waste Management Rules (2016) — this policy regulates the manufacturing, usage, and disposal of plastic products and emphasises the concept of EPR; ii) Ban on plastic bags — several states and union territories in India have imposed a ban on the use of plastic bags, especially those below a certain thickness; iii) Swachh Bharat Mission — this national campaign was launched in 2014 to promote cleanliness and sanitation via initiatives to reduce plastic waste through increased awareness, infrastructure development, and behavioural changes; iv) Plastic waste-free cities — this campaign was launched by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs to promote waste segregation, recycling, and proper disposal of plastic waste in urban areas; and v) Single-use plastic ban (2019) — this initiative calls for a ban on single-use plastic items, which have low utility and have been an environmental threat for decades.

Further, the Government of India has encouraged the establishment of plastic recycling units and provided incentives to promote the recycling industry. Efforts are being made to improve the collection and recycling infrastructure for plastic waste, particularly through partnerships with private enterprises and waste management agencies. However, the implementation and effectiveness of these policies vary across different regions in India, and plastic pollution remains a significant environmental challenge, requiring focused strategies.

Innovate for sustainable alternatives

Investment in research and innovation is crucial for developing sustainable alternatives to single-use plastics. Governments, academic institutions, and private sectors must allocate funding and resources to support research on bio-based materials, biodegradable plastics, and packaging innovations. Collaboration among scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs can drive the development and commercialisation of eco-friendly alternatives. Moreover, incentivising innovation through grants and awards will foster a culture of sustainable entrepreneurship.

Shift towards a circular economy

The linear 'take–make–dispose' model has fuelled the current plastic pollution crisis. Transitioning to a circular economy that prioritises recycling, reusing, and reducing plastic waste is paramount. Governments must invest in robust recycling infrastructure and systems while ensuring accessibility to all communities. Additionally, manufacturers should focus on designing reusable products with

recycled materials and minimise packaging waste. Consumer awareness campaigns can educate individuals about the importance of recycling and empower them to make sustainable choices.

Embrace the power of collaboration

To tackle plastic pollution effectively, a unified effort is essential. Governments, industries, non-governmental organisation (NGOs), and citizens must collaborate to develop innovative solutions and implement comprehensive strategies. Sharing knowledge, best practices, and resources will accelerate progress. International cooperation can facilitate the exchange of ideas, technology, and funding for research and implementation. Through partnerships, we can leverage collective strength and create a movement against plastic pollution.

On this World Environment Day, we must reflect on the devastating impact of plastic pollution and pledge our commitment to sustainable change.

Let us seize this opportunity to transform the crisis of plastic pollution into a catalyst for change, ensuring a cleaner, healthier planet for future generations.

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