

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes the issues associated with the lightweight thin-walled plastic carrier bag, which has become a commonplace adjunct to modern shopping. The plastic bag is now often taken to serve in an iconic role, a proxy for modern consumerism.

Plastic bags can be found in virtually every shop or supermarket on earth. They are lightweight, cheap, durable and provide excellent functionality for their main purpose: carrying purchases between shop and home. They can also carry colourful images and brand identities, and serve as useful forms of advertising. For more than half a century, customers have been happy to use these serviceable items.

Arguments supporting further use reduction

- to change attitudes towards resource use, moving from a 'throwaway' society to more sustainable lifestyles
- alternatives are readily available
- possible environmental benefits of long-life bags (including plastic bags) compared to thin-walled bags
- to reduce littering and associated social impacts
- to reduce other impacts, such as possible effects on infrastructure (e.g. blocked drains), or ingestion by wildlife
- to respond to public pressure for action against plastic bags
- to improve waste management by focusing on prevention and re-use, rather than options further down the waste hierarchy (including recycling).

Arguments against further use reduction

- when reused, thin plastic bags have a better environmental performance than alternatives when using a life cycle approach
- some alternatives are less hygienic and not waterproof
- thin-walled bags can be (and are) re-used
- thin-walled bags are fully recyclable
- plastic bags are made from a by-product of oil refining and use resources that would otherwise be thrown away
- action taken to reduce plastic bag use can have negative environmental consequences, in particular when it comes to litter
- plastic bags have a high calorific value which can be captured in energy recovery plants
- shoplifting may be easier when many people carry their own reusable bags.

In many industrialised countries the real impact of plastic bags is limited to litter nuisances due to their visibility and easy dispersal. However, just as many people happily report that their own pro-environmental behaviours include reducing their use of plastic bags, so there is a widespread public enthusiasm for policy actions against these tokens of consumerism.

It is often argued that the environmental gains achieved through a reduction in the consumption of plastic bags could be reduced or offset by the environmental impacts of increased use of plastic bag alternatives (such as bin liners).

The choices facing policy-makers are therefore diverse, not particularly clear-cut and depend on a web of inter-connected factors. As with most policy decisions, national, regional and local administrations can act at different pressure points. In democratic systems, decisions are usually reached after assimilating views of relevant stakeholders. For plastic bags, policy decisions range between doing nothing beyond token gestures (for example a supermarket offering eco-points to customers who bring their own bags) to the extreme and

comprehensive measure of legislated prohibition. Between these extremes, one finds an array of more or less persuasive measures which can yield the varying results described within this report.

Bans are often applied to non-biodegradable lightweight, thin-walled plastic carrier bags, with some administrations being more fussy about the nature of the biodegradability (for example extending bans to bags which are less than fully compliant with authorised national compostability standards). Bans usually specify a minimum gauge or thickness, ensuring that heavier, more durable (and therefore more likely to be reused) bags are permitted. Prohibitive legislation is more likely to be applied in poorer countries (typically with an annual per capita GDP of US\$10,000 or less), where plastic bags and other waste items can clog drains and sewers, with consequential risks for public health and the environment.

Taxes and charges are sometimes accompanied by a threat of a ban in the event that particular targets for bag use reduction are not met. These charges may be applied in tandem with voluntary agreements by industry to reduce bag consumption. Sometimes, effective voluntary action by retailers can forestall the need for mandatory legislative interventions.

Of course, systems of charging can serve both to elicit a behavioural change in consumers, but can also generate funds with the option (although this ought to be systematic) to allocate these to environmental causes.

At the lower end in terms of complexity and reduction potential, policymakers and industry can focus their attention on increasing recycling rates for plastic bags; this is a simple application of existing producer responsibility systems which acknowledges that a plastic bag can be viewed as a sub-set of packaging.

The easiest initiative (in terms of reducing the use of plastic bags) would be to rely on retailers' own in-house efforts to offer incentives to those customers who decline to use available free bags. Bonus points awarded to stores' loyalty card schemes would be one example, another would be the free replacement of thin-walled bags with heavier reusable carrier bags.

There are many local campaigns against plastic bags, organised by local authorities or campaigning groups. These campaigns are too numerous to document within this report. However, these local initiatives are interesting in their own right. They can exert upward pressure for change through retailers, local and national authorities. In these cases, although global issues are often referenced by campaigners soliciting local participation, prime local drivers relate more to litter problems.

Regardless of whether measures to limit dependency on lightweight thin-walled plastic carrier bags are implemented by 'top-down' policies, or by 'bottom-up' grassroots initiatives, there is a connection between these symbolic behavioural changes and other more important issues connected with resource use, environmental impacts and sustainable consumption and production.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A PLASTIC BAG?

Before analysing the various issues related to plastic bags in more depth, one needs to address the question of whether there is a common understanding of what is meant by a plastic bag. Bags, plastic or other, are often described as 'service packaging', i.e. packaging not connected to a specific product and/or not sold with the product. However, under this category it is important to make a further distinction for better definition and understanding:

1. Carrier bags, the primary function of which is to transport goods from one place to another and which are often provided at the counter of a shop or supermarket
2. Bags in which to put loose fruit and vegetables etc. sold in the supermarket and which would then typically be placed within a carrier bag once at the counter (used in open-air markets as well).