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Single-use plastics are deeply embedded in daily life in Bangladesh, but reducing our dependence on them is possible. The challenge is to make reusable and sustainable alternatives affordable, accessible and practical

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Single-use plastics are cheap, convenient and readily available, but their journey after disposal — and their impact on rivers, soil and oceans — is a growing concern. Photo: TBS

Can we really say "no" to single-use plastics in our daily lives? The question sounds simple, but the reality is not. Plastic is embedded in our everyday lives — shopping bags, food packaging, water bottles, cups, plates, spoons, wrappers — often used without us even noticing. But difficult does not mean impossible.

In Dhaka, single-use plastics remain widespread in hospitals, educational institutions, offices, event venues and food outlets, particularly for serving hot food — even as concerns grow worldwide over the health and environmental impacts of plastics and plastic-related chemicals.

Research into microplastics has expanded significantly. Tiny plastic particles are now detected in water, soil, air and the food chain, and the World Health Organization has called for further research into human exposure through food, water and air.

Many questions remain unanswered — but that is no reason for inaction. If anything, it should push us to act responsibly and apply the precautionary principle wherever possible.

One of the biggest challenges is that single-use plastics are cheap, convenient and readily available, from small neighbourhood shops to large public events. Yet we rarely ask what happens to them afterwards — where they go, how they are managed, and how much ends up in our rivers, soil and oceans. These are questions we can no longer afford to ignore.

A growing concern for Bangladesh

The rise in plastic consumption in Bangladesh's urban areas is stark. According to World Bank data, per capita consumption tripled from around 3 kilograms in 2005 to 9 kilograms in 2020. That year, Bangladesh used nearly 977,000 tonnes of plastic, of which only about 31% was recycled.

Dhaka fares worse still, with annual per capita consumption of approximately 22.5 kilograms. Nor is this unique to Bangladesh: the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that more than 400 million tonnes of plastic are produced globally each year, much of it used briefly before becoming waste.

We are producing enormous quantities of material that serves a purpose for minutes but persists in the environment for years. It was not always this way — previous generations carried cloth or jute bags to market, and household items were built to be reused rather than discarded. Convenience has gradually reshaped that habit.

Plastic has gone beyond our streets

Plastic pollution is no longer just a matter of overflowing bins or littered streets. It has made its way into rivers, canals, wetlands, agricultural land and the sea, with plastic particles found in marine and terrestrial animals alike. Fortunately, there are reasons for optimism.

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Encouraging signs of change

Across Bangladesh, young people, educational institutions and civil society organisations are increasingly taking action. Initiatives such as UNEP's Tide Turners Plastic Challenge are training young people to take practical steps against plastic pollution.

Some encourage students to carry reusable bottles; others organise clean-up campaigns and plogging drives, promote separate waste collection, or push communities towards local alternatives. These efforts are valuable — but are they enough to match the scale of the problem? Probably not.

We need to think beyond cleaning up plastic waste, and reduce how much we use in the first place — making safer, reusable alternatives more accessible, affordable and convenient.

Alternatives can also create economic opportunities

Moving away from single-use plastics is not only an environmental responsibility — it is also an economic opportunity. Bangladesh has a rich supply of natural materials for sustainable products: jute, cloth, bamboo, cane, palm leaves, water hyacinth and agricultural residues.

With the right research, product design, quality standards and market support, these materials could become the foundation for new businesses. The aim should be to make choosing an alternative to plastic not just a moral decision, but an easy and economically sensible one.

At the same time, we should not overlook those whose livelihoods depend on producing or selling single-use plastic. Through training, new materials and access to markets, they can become part of the solution rather than being left behind.

There is no reason why environmental protection and employment should be viewed as opposing goals. With thoughtful planning, they can support each other.

Is calling something 'biodegradable' enough?

We hear a great deal today about biodegradable and eco-friendly alternatives, from jute fibres to plant-based materials. These efforts are promising — but they call for caution.

A product is not automatically environmentally safe just because it is labelled "biodegradable" or "eco-friendly". We need to look at its entire life cycle — from raw material to production, use, disposal and ultimate impact.

Most importantly, we need to move away from the culture of "use once and throw away" — prioritising reduction, then reuse, then repair and recycling. The solution cannot simply be swapping one disposable product for another; it requires rethinking our habits.

Plastic pollution and climate change

Plastic pollution is not only a waste-management issue — it is a climate one too. Greenhouse gases are emitted at every stage of the plastic life cycle, and UNEP warns that related emissions could rise significantly by 2050 if current trends continue.

Reducing our dependence on unnecessary plastic can therefore support cleaner communities and healthier ecosystems, as well as broader climate goals.

Change can begin with one bag

The good news is that each of us can begin with small changes: carrying a cloth or jute bag to the market, or keeping a folded reusable bag on hand at the office or school.

We can carry a reusable water bottle, decline a plastic bag when it is not needed, or choose reusable cups and plates when organising an event. Small choices, repeated widely, add up to meaningful change.

It may not be realistic to expect everyone to stop using single-use plastics overnight, but reducing our dependence on them can start today. One person's change can inspire others; a family's change has greater reach; a school's or university's change can shape an entire generation.

A business that chooses responsible alternatives can influence both consumers and the wider market. Being environmentally responsible should not be extraordinary — it should simply be part of how we live.

We have done it before — we can do it again

Bangladesh has done this before: in 2002, it became the first country in the world to ban polythene shopping bags — a historic decision.

That experience offers a lesson: legislation alone cannot solve the problem. Implementation must go hand in hand with affordable alternatives, supportive markets and consumer awareness. What we need today is stronger coordination among law, policy, business, education and citizen action.

The goal should not simply be to ban plastic, but to build an environment where sustainable alternatives are readily available, entrepreneurs can find new opportunities, and the throwaway culture gradually fades.

So, can we say "no" to single-use plastics? Perhaps not all at once — but we can start: with one bag, one bottle, one business, one decision. The journey will be challenging, but difficult does not mean impossible. Change begins when we take the first step.

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