

Ending Waste Colonialism, Governing Plastic Pollution

Japan's Opportunity to Lead Asia out of the Plastic Crisis

THE GLOBAL PLASTIC WASTE TRADE

Since the late 1980s, over a quarter of a billion tonnes of plastic waste has been traded globally, often to regions with little capacity to manage the waste properly.¹ While marketed as an economic opportunity for importing countries, this global exchange merely enables developed countries to continue the high consumption of plastics while developing countries bear the burden of increased plastic waste imports - exacerbating waste management problems domestically. This form of “waste colonialism” has caused irreversible damage to the environmental and human health of importing countries.

JAPAN-MALAYSIA PLASTIC WASTE GOVERNANCE

- Since China began prohibiting solid waste imports in 2018, Malaysia has emerged as a global hub for plastic waste exports, with Japan a major exporter of plastic waste to Malaysia.
- In 2022, Malaysia received the largest volume of plastic waste/scrap under HS Code 3915, with approximately 179 million kilograms from Japan.² The following year, Japan exported 21.7 million kg per month to Malaysia.³
- Malaysia has limited capacity and ability to recycle domestic waste. In 2019, Malaysia only recycled 24% of key plastic resins with 1.07 million tonnes of plastics disposed annually, resulting in 81% of the material value of plastics being lost.⁴ This weakness has led to overflowing landfills and the possibility of more waste incinerators being built.
- While Japan has pledged to help emerging economies with waste management infrastructure, the sheer scale of Japanese waste exports calls into question the sincerity of Japanese efforts in supporting programmes to tackle waste management in Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia.⁵

KEY REPORT FINDINGS

- 1. Plastic is the problem.** The harm caused by plastic pollution across its lifespan is indisputable. Downcycling plastics only delays its final disposal and produces hazardous byproducts.
- 2. Lack of transparency and access to information** concerning globally traded plastic waste means that local communities are unable to address illegal waste recycling in their neighbourhoods.
- 3. Plastic recycling in Malaysia may not be carried out in an environmentally sound manner** as there is a lack of monitoring and reporting from the notably secretive recycling industry.
- 4. Focusing on downstream measures such as waste management to end plastic pollution is inadequate** especially when plastic production, consumption, and waste generation continues to increase.
- 5. Governing the plastic waste trade is not just a matter of economics and the environment.** When exporting plastic waste, governments must consider the politics, culture, and governance of destination countries, as well as their capacity to tackle domestic waste management issues.
- 6. Existing loopholes in Malaysian plastic waste governance increases the risk of corruption and waste trafficking crimes.** Corruption risks may involve collusion to avoid inspection, abuse of power, money laundering, and bribery.

STEPS FORWARD

MALAYSIA:

- Prioritise reducing plastic production, use, and waste generation, and overall plastic dependency.
- Adopt Basel Convention Plastic Waste Amendments into local laws with strict penalties for violations.
- Ensure transparency and public access to data to support local community efforts which address plastic waste trade issues.
- Incorporate measurable, inclusive and sustainable targets into the National Blueprint on Solid Waste Management and Circularity.
- Strengthen enforcement in monitoring waste shipments at ports and waste treatment at plastic recycling facilities to prevent illegal waste trafficking and illicit activities.
- Phase out plastic waste imports and focus on expanding the capacity and infrastructure in domestic waste collection and sorting.

JAPAN:

- Phase out plastic waste exports to Malaysia and other non-OECD countries.
- Reduce dependency on exporting plastic waste as a method of managing domestic waste.
- Continue cooperation with destination countries even after plastic waste is exported to assist their management in an environmentally sound manner.

References

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- 2 Ministry of Finance, Japan. (n.d.) *Trade Statistics of Japan*. Available at <https://www.customs.go.jp/toukei/srch/indexe.htm?M=01&P=1,1,,,,,3,0,2022,0,1,12,2,8549,,,,,1,,,,,100>
- 3 Basel Action Network (n.d.) *Japan Export Data - Monthly Data*. Available at <https://www.ban.org/plastic-waste-project-hub/trade-data/japan-export-data>
- 4 World Bank (2021). *Market Study for Malaysia: Plastics Circularity Opportunities and Barriers*. Available at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/272471616512761862/pdf/Market-Study-for-Malaysia-Plastics-Circularity-Opportunities-and-Barriers.pdf>
- 5 Japan International Cooperation Agency (2020, March 17). *Tackling the issues of marine plastic waste: Collaborating with developing countries to implement various initiatives*. Available at https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/english/news/field/2019/20200317_01.html