

Key Messages on
***Preventing single-use plastic waste:
implications of different policy approaches***

March 2020

Business at OECD and its members share the objective of addressing environmental challenges, including ending plastic waste in the environment. In this context, we caution that “Preventing single-use plastic waste” should not be viewed as an objective in itself, but be carefully discussed as a potential means to address environmental challenges, in particular plastics pollution. In the broader debate, it is also important to adequately consider the crucial role that certain single-use plastics play for the achievement of other policy goals - such as in health and sanitation - to further strengthen coherent policy-making.

In principle, market interventions (including bans of specific products or applications, as well as other policy measures) without a complete and evidence-based understanding of the impact of alternatives, often have unintended adverse consequences resulting from a shift to substitute materials. Such impacts may include higher greenhouse gas emissions, increased energy, and/or increased water use. For example, replacing “single-use plastics” with disposable alternatives has been shown to increase environmental impacts¹. There is a high risk that policy interventions banning specific products or applications negatively affect market outcomes, have collateral effects on business competitiveness and sustainability, and fail to achieve desired policy objectives, such as addressing environmental challenges overall.

When prioritizing the most effective policy solutions to end plastic waste in the environment, it is important to take a systems approach. Focusing on the waste hierarchy (source reduction and reuse, recycling and composting, energy recovery, and treatment and disposal), the private sector are able to reduce waste generation by investing in packaging and product design, eliminating unnecessary packaging, and developing more efficient delivery systems. Such an approach provides greater opportunity to capture value from used materials, helping to offset the costs associated with collection and processing infrastructure. Governments should adopt policies that address plastic waste in a more holistic way, including all end-of-life materials, not just single use plastics and incentivize waste management and recycling infrastructure.

¹ [TruCost \(2018\)](#) showed that the environmental cost of replacing disposable plastic packaging with alternatives resulted in nearly 4 times the environmental impact.