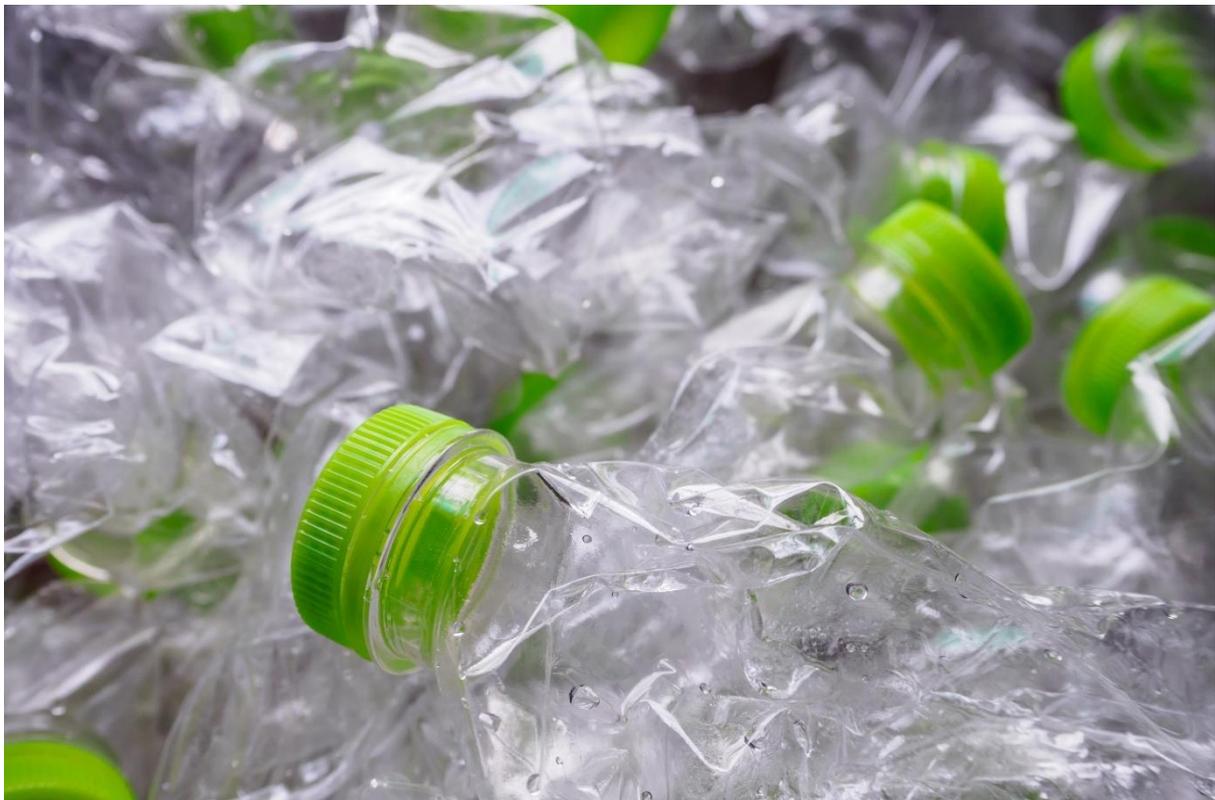


BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

PLASTIC POLLUTION REDUCTION FOR THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

April 2021



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1.0 Introduction

The Pacific Islands rely heavily on imported goods and tourism, both of which introduce a disproportionate amount of plastic pollution and damage their environment and delicate marine ecosystems. Without a comprehensive plastic pollution reduction plan, Pacific-islanders will suffer the true cost of this pollution in the years to come. This report examines the limitations of current Pacific Island legislation, policies, strategies and bans in order to identify opportunities to develop a circular plastics economy, keeping plastics circulating in the economy and out of the environment.

Numerous in-country partners and subject matter experts were consulted during this project and the content of this report is a synthesis of both desk-based research and meetings held via Zoom. The output is divided between barriers identified and opportunities for action with recommended next steps.

Summary

- The Pacific Islands are uniquely positioned but extremely vulnerable to the tourism trade, extreme weather events and rely on imports, all of which increase plastic pollution
- There is a disproportionate amount of plastic pollution burden for the Pacific Islands to process when compared to their levels of production and consumption
- Individually, each Island nation's purchasing and influencing powers are limited, but if they were united their ability to enforce strict laws and penalties would increase
- Plastic import and waste data flows are not generally being mapped, this makes it challenging to measure improvements and requires a consistent mandatory approach
- In order to have a successful circular economy for plastics, internal and external material markets must be developed, this will require funding and financial incentives
- Commercial shipping remains one of the biggest barriers and opportunities to remove plastic pollution from the Pacific Islands, trade routes and programmes supported by international development funds would help to ensure plastic pollution is recycled
- In-country expertise and opportunities must be developed to create a generation of waste management specialists and circular economy pioneers, rather than continuing to bring in external consultants on short-term projects.

2.0 Barriers

There are many proactive and passionate actors within each of the Pacific Islands who are keen to reduce plastic pollution and create a circular economy for plastics. However, there are also a number of barriers preventing these companies, governments and citizens from contributing to a more circular system and making better use of precious resources.

The same qualities that make plastics a highly effective material choice for plastic packaging also make them challenging to recover and recycle: they are cheap, lightweight and vary in base chemistry and have protective and preserving additives. With so much variety it can be difficult for citizens to identify what is and is not recyclable and segregate. Without well informed citizens and effective collection and recycling programmes, nations face an uphill struggle to curb plastic pollution.

The following section is a summary of the key barriers identified during the project which will need to be overcome for Pacific Island nations to transition to an effective circular economy for plastics.

Lack of data collection

Without a consistent and mandatory monitoring and reporting framework linked to policy enforcement, plastic waste flows will remain unknown and a baseline cannot be created. There is little data collection occurring on the Pacific Islands beyond beach clean exercises and some data being collected on what plastic is being imported and exported. There is some project-based analysis of waste collection and overall waste management costs but little long-term support from nation-specific policy to ensure continued enforcement and activity.

Lack of enforcement with few prosecutions for offenders

Efforts to reduce and regulate plastic pollution through the introduction of national material and product bans with levies have had a positive impact in several Pacific Island nations. Most notably, Vanuatu's strict bans on the manufacture, use and import of single-use plastic bags, straws and polystyrene takeaway food containers. However, without a joined-up national, regional and international approach, the Pacific Islands are vulnerable to system-wide abuse resulting in the uncontrolled inflow of plastic pollution. Measures need to be supported with strict penalties or prosecutions for offenders with fines or other punitive measures.

Poor domestic material markets

There is poor demand on Vanuatu and Samoa for recyclable materials due to a lack of infrastructure and recycling programmes, even highly recyclable materials such as PET bottles, paper and cardboard have little incentives attached to recycling them. This may be due to poor collection activities or low volumes available resulting in insufficient throughput quantities to achieve economies of scale, rendering it economically unviable. This, coupled with low demand for these and other waste materials from the Pacific Islands, makes it an unattractive venture for neighbouring countries to implement waste management programmes.

Commercial shipping channels

Irregular international shipping traffic makes reverse logistics and take-back/end-of life logistics challenging. The relative low value of waste, even if correctly segregated, is proving to be a difficult business proposition for the Pacific Islands to make with commercial freight companies. There are high marine transportation costs and storage facilities to host the materials prior to shipping require land, buildings and management.

Landfill and recycling limitations

Available and suitable sites to build sanitary landfills and recycling plants are limited, there are currently very few sanitary landfills across the Pacific Islands and with high costs associated with improving them, funding will be required to have a impact. The currently available sites have poor segregation systems and lack feedstock collection network, especially in more remote areas and outer islands. Private enterprises who are undertaking recycling activities on the Pacific Islands operate without much support from national Governments and do not receive strong incentives beyond their own initiatives and business operations.

Focus on waste management

Circular economy and plastic pollution initiatives on the Pacific Islands are largely focused on the end of life, rather than upstream innovation or the upper echelons of the waste hierarchy. Costly reactive measure such as beach cleans and post-disaster clean up operations are prioritised over preventative measures. Upstream control measures and legally-binding material capture, separation and recycling requires an holistic approach to be taken by multiple stakeholders across the supply chain by both public and private actors.

Lacking dedicated in-country resource

The Pacific Islands require funded jobs which also provide local people with training, mentoring and further development to create a generation of waste management specialists and circular economy pioneers. Without increasing the in-country and technical capacity, short term programmes implemented by foreign experts and environmentalists strips the Pacific Islands of an opportunity to empower locals and create jobs on the Islands.

3.0 Opportunities

The Pacific Islands have numerous opportunities to stem the flow of plastic pollution entering their precious ecosystems through legislative instruments, financial mechanisms and citizen behaviour change. Packaging waste is a highly visible problem and as the Pacific Islands are vulnerable to extreme weather events, storm surges often cause plastic litter to enter the marine environment. The devastating impacts of plastic pollution, especially marine litter, are acutely felt on the Pacific Islands which is why it is critical to enact change to ensure long-term benefits are realised.

The opportunities identified and detailed below cover the four key areas required to have a positive impact to reduce plastic pollution on Pacific Island nations. Several recommendations for next steps and requisite actions have also been scoped out:

Monitoring and reporting

Without robust material flow and waste composition data, the Pacific Islands lack a baseline to understand where the critical problems arise and identify which actions would be the most impactful. National, regional, and international data reporting provides a snapshot of how countries are making progress towards national action plans and global initiatives and helps to identify where the key areas of impact will be. By implementing a mandatory waste data and plastic production reporting framework, the Pacific Islands have the opportunity to determine a baseline and create realistic but ambitious targets as well as gather a clear understanding of the scale of the problem.

Recommendation:

- Create a baseline for plastic material and waste flows in-country and regionally. Material imports and exports as well as manufacturing figures, plastic items sold, waste generated, and recycling rates are all essential pieces of information necessary to form a complete picture and highlight the hotspots and system weaknesses

Financial instruments

Policy levers to introduce a polluter-pays-principle can either be voluntary or mandatory, either measure would place a financial uplift on plastic items sold onto the Pacific Island markets. The money generated from this can be ringfenced and directly used to fund collection systems, education campaigns or recycling programmes. There have been early proposals for Container Deposit Programmes, pre-paid waste collection bags and the introduction of waste tipping fees among Pacific Islander organisations, which would be a positive step in the right direction.

Recommendations:

- Explore the introduction of Extended Producer Responsibility Legislation, fees and how to ringfence money gained into recycling initiatives and recycling facilities
- Undertake a financial analysis to determine price points for Container Deposit Programmes in order to price the money received correctly. Machinery and equipment will need to be procured, placed in trusted public spaces and have trained staff who are able to unload the machines and store the collected bottles, ready to be collected for recycling
- Explore option to fund infrastructure investment through international development banks. There are several opportunities to apply for international funding through development banks and trusts or foundations
- Links to external markets need to be supported, international foreign material markets are not established due to unique island nation constraints. Research into the most valuable materials, potential export revenue and supporting policies is required.

Collaboration

Due to the Pacific Islands being disparate, small and resource-limited, their individual influencing powers in terms of plastic waste reduction are reduced. Working together as a region and setting similar or complementary laws, the Pacific Islands as a whole have the opportunity to bolster their purchasing and influencing power. Similarly, aligning to and transposing internationally recognised and operational agreements such as the Basel convention would help to ensure actors breaking the rules are held accountable.

Recommendation:

- Transpose international agreements such as The Basel Convention (plastic additions) into national legislation
- Group together and work as a united group to increase enforcement and policy adoption

Systems Thinking

Due to system-wide inefficiencies, valuable post-consumer plastics are being lost. The islands businesses and governments lack a co-ordinated and coherent approach to tackling plastic waste. Well-designed circular economy strategies take a system wide and holistic approach by internalising the full costs of materials thereby offsetting the need for ever increasing material demands.

Recommendation:

- Undertake a system-wide mapping exercise in order to identify hotspots and areas where plastic pollution occurs and determine what interventions to introduce.

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