

## Fact Sheet

# Designing Products and Systems for SAFE and SUSTAINABLE REUSE

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## INTRODUCTION

Reuse is a key component of the 3Rs + return (reduce, reuse and recycle) approach to reducing pollution but it has not yet been fully embraced in policy despite its reference in the Sustainable Development Goals. While it may appear as a new concept, before the advent of single-use plastics (SUP) traditional practices of reuse and refill were commonplace and are still a part of everyday life around the world. More recently, governments have recognised the impact of SUP products and imposed bans on specific items. However, this often leads to problematic alternatives and substitutes and perpetuates the take, make, dispose mentality. In reality, reuse comes higher up the waste hierarchy and deserves greater consideration by policymakers.

Comparing SUP and reusable packaging, reusable packaging is the more environmentally friendly option. The underlying logic is as simple as it is compelling: by using and reusing an item many times before it ends up as waste, the environmental costs, the amount of waste generated and the resources needed to produce and dispose of it can be divided by the number of uses. There are also significant opportunities for job creation. Deposit systems (not just specific to reuse) can create 11-38 times more job opportunities than other waste management alternatives. In this context the negotiations towards an International Legally Binding Instrument to End Plastic Pollution (ILBI) have included discussions on reuse as a pathway to reduce pollution. Reuse, if designed and defined correctly in the ILBI, has the potential to increase safe circularity and support the overall objective of ending plastic pollution.

## Relevance to the Pacific Context

- Pacific Island Countries and Territories rely heavily on imported goods and many of these either contain or are packaged in SUP, often creating a one-way flow of materials.
- Importing countries in the Pacific have little control over product import and design and may lack domestic infrastructure for environmentally sound management at end of life.
- In the Pacific Islands over 300,000 tonnes of plastic waste is generated each year. The Cleaner Pacific 2025 Strategy includes overarching goals to prevent and minimise the generation of wastes and associated impacts, guided by the 3Rs + return model.
- Pacific island nations are extremely vulnerable to severe weather events and the impacts of climate change, which can generate large volumes of waste, in addition to the plastic pollution which arrives on oceanic currents throughout the year. This places extra burden on already pressured waste management infrastructure.
- Traditional and local knowledge, values and alternatives to plastics are underutilised in developing place-specific policy solutions to tackling plastic pollution in the Pacific.
- As solid waste volumes continue to grow, Pacific Island nations are struggling to manage it. Limited capacity to dispose of plastic waste is linked to geographical isolation, limited land capacity, high costs of providing collection and disposal services to small and dispersed populations, and small economies of scale. Reuse presents an opportunity to reduce reliance on imports and waste management in the Pacific, but certain enabling conditions are required.



## Key Considerations

Policy options for reuse within the ILBI were identified in Core Obligation 7 in UNEP/PP/INC.2/4, 'encouraging reduce, reuse and repair of plastic products and packaging,' including options for targets, general and sectoral guidelines, the promotion of service delivery systems (e.g. such as take back schemes, refill dispensers, reverse vending machines, etc.), harmonised product design standards and the role of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) in facilitating reuse. While reuse discussions tend to focus on packaging and beverage containers as a high-impact category of waste, negotiators may also consider whether other sectors should be covered and how reuse 'on the go' or refill can or should be included in the scope of discussions.

Other key considerations for discussions on reuse include:

- Defining key terms such as 'reusable packaging', 'packaging waste prevention', 'reuse system'. These concepts are not all covered in the glossary of terms provided by the Secretariat, but the common language is essential.
- Approaches for implementing binding quantitative reuse targets, both general and sector-specific, especially for packaging and packaging types, e.g. beverage, food, take-away, transport, e-commerce packaging.
- Harmonised material and product design and labelling, including criteria for safety and sustainability, durability, recyclability, and essential use.
- Creating suitable incentives to return the packaging (usually a deposit set at a sufficient level to encourage return, but could be a fine on failure to return)
- Ensuring the existence of infrastructure and reverse logistics for take-back, sanitation, refill, and redistribution of the products - operated by an independent third party.
- Just transition for workers currently involved in the linear plastics economy and consideration of re-training and job opportunities in the local reuse sector.
- Identifying capacity-building and infrastructure needs for the scaling of reuse systems and local refill models to inform discussions on financial assistance, including EPR.
- Coupling national targets for plastic reduction with targets to increase reuse, with regular national monitoring and reporting.

## Summary

Reuse principles and measures are likely to be an integral requirement to achieve a non-toxic and just circular economy for plastics when coupled with measures to reduce production and use of plastics in general.

Reuse targets send a strong signal against the use of problematic alternatives and substitutes, while voluntary initiatives may not fulfil this function nor provide the security for investors, businesses and governments needed to transition to reuse systems on the necessary scale.

It is recommended that negotiations on reuse focus on ensuring harmonisation, cooperation, and clear monitoring and reporting; to be effectively implemented and scaled and be coupled with the promotion of local and traditional reuse and refill practices.



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