

Ditching plastic straws isn't enough. Here's how to achieve zero waste.

It has become trendy to refuse single-use plastic straws. Paper straws now line the shelves of supermarkets, some cafes now use paper straws, and some convenience stores have swapped to lids. But the goal to eliminate all single-use plastic isn't helped when those paper straws sit in plastic cups and the lid replacements are also plastic.

In Japan, there's often a gap between idea and implementation for reducing plastic waste. In May, the government announced "Japan's Resource Circulation Policy for Plastics," to be presented at the G20 summit held in the country in June. The core concept is quite clear: that we follow the 3R (Reduce, Re-use, and Recycle) direction plus "Renewable," which includes implementing bio-based plastics and expanding the recycled plastic market. But it also has an unclear target to reduce single-use plastic by 25% by 2030 without explaining how specifically the country will do so.

The Japanese government also framed the regulation, to be in force from April 2020, to mandate charging customers for single-use plastic bags at stores, as an ambitious policy during the meeting of G20 energy and environment ministers held on June 15. While we can recognize that these moves represent advanced action of the Japanese government compared to past policies, they are unadvanced compared to the ambitious policies set by other countries, including Kenya, where it is [illegal to manufacture or use plastic bags](#), and the United Kingdom, which has a [specific plan to end all avoidable plastic waste by 2042](#).

Japan's regulation, unfortunately, does not directly control the number of plastic bags used. It does not include specific responsibilities for businesses, nor does it specify a roadmap to reduce the production of existing plastic products. And while the plastic bag might be a symbolic single-use plastic product, it consists of just 2% of the plastic production in Japan.

Too often in the creation of environmental policies in Japan, policymakers are influenced by demands to protect businesses. But are such policies really the way to protect businesses in a changing world?

Many European countries are already implementing policies that regulate plastic production and support the Circular Economy. If Japanese businesses are not ready for such production requirements, they won't succeed in the region. And that will probably not end with Europe, as European policy makers are aiming to make action on plastic pollution the global standard. Thus, if Japan sticks with the business-as-usual approach, Japanese industries will lose.

Therefore, if the Japanese government aims to lead the global society with its "Plastic Smart" policy, its campaign showcasing Japanese plastic-reduction practices, it also needs to commit to domestic policymaking. Many businesses are aware of the global trend and are willing to take the necessary steps forward. The government could provide good reason for them to act by initiating a policy mix of not only regulations like the plastic bag policy, but also incentives or subsidies for better solutions to reduce single-use plastics.

There are some mindful businesses that have already started to implement alternatives to single-use plastic products that are commonly provided for free at stores. My organization, Zero Waste Academy, organizes a system to support such businesses to shift in the direction of waste reduction, or "Zero Waste." The system is called the "Zero Waste Accreditation."

We provide support for businesses to reduce their waste by not only stopping providing single-use items or finding alternatives for them, but also by working together with their suppliers and customers. Businesses receive clear direction and training and benefit from branding themselves as sustainability conscious. By engaging stores, we aim to show policymakers, producers and society that there is a clear demand for sustainability-conscious products and supply-chain models.

The Zero Waste Academy has worked within a community for many years to achieve a zero-waste policy, and we have already proved that more than 80% of resource recovery is possible by a community effort. However, with the goal to achieve Zero Waste by 2020, we know that the remaining 20% cannot be achieved unless there is systemic change in policies and production.

To bring about such systemic change in Japan, we strongly believe multi-stakeholder partnership involving policymakers, businesses, NGOs, and

members of the community is the key. We must understand what can be done within each stakeholder's capacity and learn from each other to establish practical infrastructure for the circular economy.

The G20 summit is expected to conclude with a plan to address waste. Yet waiting for policymakers to direct us will take time. Each of us must take ownership in shaping a sustainable future, as urgently as possible. Our initiatives could create the basis to bring everyone to the table and shape better policy.