



## **TIME TO RETHINK THE STRATEGY**

COVID-19 is forcing us to rethink our plastic problem. The World Economic Forum's website has published an article by Dmitry Konov, Chairman of SIBUR's Management Board, on this problem.



**DMITRY KONOV**

Chairman of SIBUR's Management Board

---

### **No comparable materials**

Skyrocketing numbers of COVID-19 cases and tremendous pressure on healthcare systems have underscored that plastic is still the most reliable and affordable solution for personal protection. Unless technological advances introduce better alternatives, we will need a systems-level approach from companies and governments on a global scale to address the issue of plastic and protect our environment. Today, plastic items are experiencing a sudden resurgence. In effect, already-implemented bans were suspended at many places, while the use of plastics in healthcare and related services has been hitting new highs.



*The pandemic changes the common view on plastics. Hardly anyone doubts today that polymers help a lot to combat the infection.*

---

BUSINESSES ALSO BET ON THE END OF THE PLASTIC ERA. THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK, HOWEVER, HAS CHANGED THE CALCULUS

---

As countries start lifting quarantine measures, we might discover that our reliance on plastic has actually increased – and that our environment is in greater danger than before the pandemic. Economic uncertainties and risks of a second wave of COVID-19 might impose significant limitations on waste management. With large volumes of waste being unfit for recycling, medical plastic waste could grow at an unprecedented scale. A similar situation might arise in the food industry and other services that had previously decided to temporarily limit reusables. The disrupted waste management and recycling sector would also take some time to recover and would not be able to effectively handle massive volumes of post-pandemic plastic.

## **Time to address the issue**

Experts believe that now is the time to revisit previous debates about plastic. Even if we banned plastic altogether it would take up to 20 years for a plastic grocery bag to decompose and 450 years for a plastic bottle. Any measures would also vary greatly across the globe due to political and economic differences. Banning plastic in some countries would not automatically push others to follow. We might end up with more divisions worldwide, while the environment would keep bearing the brunt.



*The Netherlands developed a project to build roads using plastic waste as early as in 2015 (Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/10/rotterdam-plastic-roads-trial-netherlands>)).*

We need more complex recycling practices and policies against plastic pollution that take into account extensive networks of transnational ties and interdependencies. In times when the risks posed by a global pandemic have become the new reality, environmental policies cannot be confined to a handful of countries, but must emerge as a universal action plan.

---

## NOW IS THE TIME TO REVISIT PREVIOUS DEBATES ABOUT PLASTICS

---

I believe that it is our collective mission to encourage the development of the circular economy, which aims to eliminate waste through the continual reuse of resources. Corporations should invest more in sustainability, while ensuring they deliver on their corporate social responsibility and environmental, social and governance (ESG) policies. Companies should also take more proactive steps and endorse responsible consumption, as well as boost investments into research and development that will help to create new long-term and sustainable solutions.

We need to put in place the infrastructure as well as greater regulatory incentives for people and companies to recycle and reuse worldwide. Studies indicate that less than 10% of all plastics have actually been recycled. The single largest volume of plastic found in the oceans – it accounts for around 49% – comes from single-use plastics, and this is the problem for which individuals and corporations should take collective responsibility.



*The Ocean Cleanup project founded by the 18-year-old Dutch inventor Boyan Slat has an objective to halve the Great Pacific Garbage Patch in the years immediately ahead.*

---

IN THE CURRENT CRISIS IT IS VITAL TO PROVIDE AID TO BOTH THE INDUSTRY AND SMALL AND MEDIUM PROCESSORS TO ENSURE FURTHER GROWTH

---

Corporations and governments around the world should allocate more funds to educate people on how the circular economy works and why they should reuse and recycle. We should encourage consumers to think of themselves as responsible for the proper disposal of any product they buy, and for reinserting it back into the economic cycle. Many societies also have to reconsider throwaway culture and become more aware of the associated environmental threats. Finally, we should encourage the production of polymers with improved recyclable qualities that would make it easier to reinsert used plastics back into our economy.

## **We need changes**

About three years ago, polymers were considered the main contributor to marine plastic pollution. Later, they began to be evaluated as products with a significantly reduced carbon footprint in comparison with other materials.

During the pandemic, polymers began to be perceived as a valuable material for the production of disposable plastic packaging and medical personal protective equipment. Such shifts underscore the abilities of corporations to embrace a proactive role in decreasing pollution, while also highlighting critical benefits that industries could deliver to social comfort and safety.



*Plastics can save, plastics can pollute, plastics can help. What plastics ultimately do depends on the people who use them.*

The best way to start is to acknowledge that there is no easy solution to the problem. The development of effective measures against plastic pollution is a complex and long-term process that will require a systems-level approach from companies and governments on a global scale. Sustainability will only be achieved by prioritising our actions and policies together for the greatest long-term environmental and economic good.

*Source: inoSMI (<https://inosmi.ru/social/20200508/247390206.html>)*