

Young Voices

An Analysis of the Plastic Policy in the Global South

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Abstract

The exacerbating problem of Plastic Policies in the Global South calls for our attention. This paper, with the help of the Multiple Streams Framework, comparative case study and fieldwork, seeks to analyze the Plastic Policies in the Global South, specifically in the Indian context. It provides a comparative analysis of the plastic regulation policies in India and South Africa. Both countries are grappling with the pervasive problem of plastic pollution and consequent emissions through recycling initiatives, but they have adopted distinct approaches to address this environmental challenge. India has implemented a multifaceted strategy while South Africa relies primarily on economic incentives such as levies and taxes on plastic bags and single-use items. This article aims to shed light on the diverse strategies employed by nations facing similar challenges and the lessons that can be learned from their experiences in regulating plastic use. We conclude that supportive and synergetic policies like stress on alternatives, awareness campaigns, research and development are required to effectively eliminate the plastic problem.

Keywords: Plastic Policies, Multiple Streams Framework, Global South

Introduction and Review of Literature

The Plastic Problem remains unaddressed due to the prevailing habitual linearity in consumption coupled with policy lethargy. Moreover, Inefficient production, management and recycling systems have resulted in missed opportunity benefits and additional costs. The problem is further worsened in developing countries due to infrastructural, technological, and institutional inadequacies. Despite the lack of coherent solutions in force (Chen, H. L, 2021) many countries have tried to incorporate solutions to the plastic problem.

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Plastic policies can tackle Production/Product Design, Consumption/Use, Disposal/end-of-life and Circular approaches. A majority of the policies focus on the Consumption and Disposal.

The production of plastic involves significant consumption of oil. The petrochemicals used to produce virgin polymers and other products account for eight per cent and 14 per cent of total primary demand for gas and oil, respectively, and will soon become the world's biggest driver of oil demand after aviation, trucks and shipping. (International Energy Agency (IEA)). Production schemes are rarely enunciated as part of discourse or mitigative strategies. Plastic is a resource-intensive material throughout the entire production process.

Disposal mechanisms are limited with a preference for incineration, reliance on waste pickers and abandoning plastic waste (Velis, C. A., & Cook, E. 2021). While limited policies target actual production or incorporate circular practices. Barriers to the circular use of plastic face numerous technological and institutional hindrances.

The consumption approach aims to control plastic consumption through measures such as bans, taxes and incentives. However, one must skillfully incorporate economically incentivizing policies bearing factors of intrinsic motivation in mind. (J. Rode, et al, 2014). Stringent policies tend to be more effective in such cases (Wang, B., Zhao, Y., & Li, Y. 2021). Hence consumption regulations are the most feasible Global South countries.

Two major types of consumption regulating policy measures generally adopted by developing countries are Plastic Levies and Plastic Bans. In some jurisdictions, Plastic Bag Tax is framed as a levy, fee or charge (Muralidharan & Sheehan 2016)

Methodology

To assess the veracity of plastic ban and plastic levies pertinent to the global south, while also assessing the policy agenda setting and adoption process, we use the Multiple Streams Framework, a Case Study of India and South Africa's Plastic Policies along with our field analysis and observations. Policy approaches like the Rational Actor Approach, do not focus on how policymakers select their approach and assess its practicality in a given context. To overcome this barrier, Multiple Streams Framework was developed. MSF is a valuable tool for understanding the dynamics of policymaking and agenda-setting. When applied to the regulation of plastic pollution in India, it provides insights into environmental problems, potential policy solutions, and the influence of political factors on the policy process. The following section examines the effectiveness of policy solutions i.e. Plastic ban and levies implemented by developing countries in the global south, we use South Africa's Plastic Bag levy as a reference for comparison. By incorporating multiple methods of MSF, Comparative Case Studies and Field Interactions, we can visualise the process of policy adoption, implementation, effectiveness and supportive initiatives.

Results and Discussions

Multiple Streams Framework:

Problem Stream: In the context of plastic pollution, the problem stream represents the recognition of the environmental challenges posed by plastic waste. The problem of plastic pollution in India is increasingly recognized due to its negative impact on the environment, water bodies and public health. Cases of plastic-filled rivers, ocean pollution and damage to wildlife have drawn attention to this issue. An example of the consequences of plastic pollution is the devastating flood in Mumbai in 2005, which was partly caused by sewers being blocked by plastic bags. Many countries designated as waste absorbers are struggling to manage their own waste while addressing the global waste crisis. According to a report by Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyay Smriti Manch, around 121,000 tonnes of plastic were imported in 2019. Additionally, global concerns about the environmental impact of plastics have contributed to the problem's salience.

Policy Stream: The policy stream focuses on the development of potential solutions and policy proposals. In India, various options have been proposed, including stricter regulations on single-use plastics, extended producer responsibility, incentivizing recycling and promoting alternative materials. These ideas have been discussed by government agencies, environmental groups and industry stakeholders. Some state and local governments have already implemented plastic bans, the first being announced in 1999. Other policies such as Swach Bharat Abhiyan and Namami Gange also support efforts to combat plastic waste.

Politics Stream: The political stream involves the political context and the role of key actors and institutions. The politics surrounding regulating plastic pollution in India are complicated. On the one hand, there is growing environmental awareness and support for stricter regulations. However, the plastics industry is important to the economy, which creates tension for policymakers. The effectiveness of plastic regulation may also vary between states. International agreements like the Basel Convention and events can influence decisions and draw attention to the issue. The India Plastics Pact aimed to bring together various stakeholders to address plastic waste in supply chains

Comparative Analysis of India's and South Africa's Plastic Policy

To tackle the plastic problem, India adopted regulatory policy instruments (Ban) while South Africa used financial policy instruments (Levy). India, under its Plastic ban, charges a fine of Rs 1 lakh or imprisonment for 5 years under the Environment Protection Act 1986. Plastic Bans have an equivocal narrative of successes and failures. In South Africa, the levy initially charged was raised from 0.46 to 3 rands

and then to 4 rands. Plastic levy in Ireland gained laudable success. However, the effects of a similar policy in developing settings are unknown. Hence, we take up South Africa as a subject of our study to conduct a comparative analysis of policies.

Revenue-generating policy regulations are beneficial as they potentially support hinged initiatives like research, recycling, awareness campaigns, etc. The plastic bag tax in South Africa initially proved effective in generating revenue but failed in revenue mobilization to attain coherent goals. Only 13% of the revenue was received by the recycling partners (Nahman 2010) reported 'Buyisa e-Bag' (Plastic Bag recycling Partner). India has also been engaging in raids to generate significant amounts differing from state to state. (Implementation of Plastic Waste Management Rules Report, 2020-21).

Supportive policies like alternatives to discourage the habitual use of plastic bags are an aiding mechanism. No alternatives to plastic bags were discussed in South Africa. (Bezerra, J. C., et al., 2021). In the Indian context, they are comparatively widely discussed. Non-profits and Self-help Groups have started intervening to provide alternatives to ban single-use plastic commodities. Our interaction with Keshav Srushti had valuable insights. In Palghar district, KSGVY has initiated a bamboo handicraft industry for producing plastic alternatives for Diwali lanterns, rakhis, etc. A part of the women's workforce is also involved in stitching cloth bags as an alternative to plastic bags. The bamboo and cloth bags were specifically started after the plastic ban. Additionally, NGOs started work along with the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC), and its volunteers got cloth bags made out of upcycled cloth. However, on a utilitarian basis, using cloth bags has many discouraging lethargies on the part of the consumers.

Due to the hindered alternatives to plastic bags in South Africa, the consumption level soared after 3 months of implementation. (Dikgang et al. 2012). India, the ban policy has been severely inconsistent in reaping any fruitful results. The repeated bans imposed by the Indian Government with subsequent relaxations have been in a constant cycle since 1999 (Science. wire). But during our field visit to supermarkets (D-Mart, Reliance Supermarket), we discovered that paper bags or cloth bags have very well replaced plastic ones.

The majority of violations and leniencies prevail among local vendors and businesses, making the policy tedious to micro-manage. While interacting with a local cloth vendor, we encountered that his plastic bag stock was majorly due to consumer demand and he was helpless. But alternatives have now penetrated among retail giants suggesting positive developments. A similar problem was evident in South Africa as well.

Conclusion

The MSF suggests that the convergence of these three streams—problem, policy, and politics—can lead to policy change. Policy entrepreneurs, individuals, or organizations, can play a crucial role in coupling the stream and push for policy

change. At the same time addressing consumer behaviour in relation to plastic policies is also a determining factor.

When comparing the two countries, limited synergies in supportive policies can be observed. The Indian government is banning plastic, but approving plastic parks is concerning. These supportive policies like community engagement, strengthening the plastic waste system, raising awareness and introducing stricter fines or levies need to be introduced.

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