

Reports by FATIMAH ZAINAL, GERARD GIMINO, IMRAN HILMY and YEE XIANG YUN

It's tough to meet ambitious goal

Eliminating single-use plastics by 2030 seen as an uphill battle

PETALING JAYA: With seven years to the deadline to ban single-use plastics, environmental and consumer groups say it will be an uphill battle for the country to meet the target.

Malaysia set an ambitious roadmap in 2018 to eliminate single-use plastics by 2030.

One weakness of the Roadmap Towards Zero Single-Use Plastics 2018-2030 is that it does not outline a uniform approach to address single-use plastics, other than just providing a policy direction to all stakeholders, including state governments, in taking a unified and collective approach to the issue.

Malaysia is ranked eighth among the top 10 countries with the most mismanaged plastic waste in the world.

Another startling stat is that of 0.94 million tonnes or 940 million kg of mismanaged plastic waste in the country, 0.14-0.37 million tonnes may have flowed into the sea.

For visualisation, 0.94 million tonnes are equivalent to 1,634 Airbus A380 planes.

The concerned groups said the government had much to do in

order to meet the target of single-use plastics.

They cited public apathy, a lack of a uniform policy and lax enforcement as the biggest impediments to phasing out the use of the item.

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) honorary secretary S. Mageswari predicts that the target might not be reached.

"Despite there being behavioural changes with consumers bringing their own grocery bags, containers and even reusable straws, it is not widespread enough.

"Plastic bags are freely and rampantly distributed in wet markets, sundry shops and pasar malam. If any ban or restriction is not thorough and all encompassing, we will still see them being used," she said.

Despite the "no straw by default" policy introduced in 2019, Mageswari said many food outlets were still providing straws together with drinks.

She said the irony was that restaurants still provided plastic straws even without customers asking for them.

"So, the government and local authorities must get serious with

the implementation," she added.

Mageswari said there was also a need to promote reusable alternatives to single-use plastics.

"A list of unnecessary single-use plastics should be drawn up, beginning with those containing hazardous substances or additives.

"Measures can then be taken to phase out and eventually ban the items, replacing them with alternatives. Policies should be set in place to ensure corporations take responsibility for their products and packaging.

"A holistic approach covering all bases and sectors is also necessary to help Malaysia achieve the zero single-use plastics target.

"We need to identify the sectors using single-use plastics. Action plans must be drawn up to address these issues in tandem with stringent implementation," she said, adding that SAM was awaiting the mid-term review report of the Roadmap due this year.

Ecotourism and Conservation Society Malaysia (Ecomy) president and chief executive officer Andrew Sebastian said political will was crucial to achieve the target of doing

away with single-use plastics.

"It is feasible by 2030, or even sooner. But efforts must be done properly in phases with solutions readily available for us to go without single-use plastics.

"The government and respective agencies at the federal and state levels have to be committed and driven towards meeting the target. Incentives must also be put in place, as with penalties," he said.

Sebastian said industries affected by the ban of single-use plastics would have to find a way to adapt and provide eco-friendly alternatives once a solid timeline emerges.

He said the Covid-19 pandemic also led to an increase in the use of single-use plastics worldwide.

"There are many advancements in this field where packaging can be relooked and have end-to-end usage," he said.

Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) president Mohideen Abdul Kadeer urged the government to ensure that more businesses were included in the list that must comply with restrictions on single-use plastics.

"Hypermarkets, supermarkets,

departmental stores, convenient stores, fast-food restaurants, petrol station convenient stores, chain stores and pharmacies are businesses that have been listed to comply with the restrictions on single-use plastics and we find that they are in compliance.

"As for other businesses, they do not seem to bother and keep giving plastic bags to customers. We have observed that markets, hawker stalls and food outlets are still distributing free plastic bags. The use of straws is also rampant, even if one refuses!" he said.

Mohideen also lamented about the low recycling rate in Malaysia, adding that it had yet to become a norm.

"Educating the people on the importance of recycling, how one should separate waste and where to drop off recyclables will provide a boost to recycling efforts.

"Schools and resident associations can play an active part in increasing awareness and taking initiatives," he said, adding that CAP had conducted several projects with schools and communities and found it to be effective.