

## Individuals push ahead with zero-waste initiatives

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**PETALING JAYA:** In the affluent gated community in Seri Hartamas in Kuala Lumpur, a greyish blue van, beat-up and dusty, stands out like a sore thumb. The side and back doors are open and a makeshift canopy juts out from one side, shielding an eclectic mix of goods on the tables, including reusable menstrual cups and cloth purses, from the blistering sun.

A sign with the name "Refiller Mobile" hangs off the side of the van with lists of items and prices next to them.

Oh Sok Peng sits in the van, plastic-like and clad in an old t-shirt and black cut-off jeans, surrounded by mini tanks full of various liquids. She wipes the sweat off her brow before continuing to pump green liquid into a used laundry detergent bottle.

She treats her business as "working to reduce plastic." And yet, here she is, filling up plastic bottles with liquids from large plastic containers.

"For us, our business is not anti-plastic. We're not trying to say plastic is bad and we need to ban it. In our lives, we still need plastic containers to keep liquid items or for storage as well," she told Bernama.

She wipes down the bottle, sets it aside and starts refilling another one, this time with dishwashing liquid.

Even though she said she is not anti-plastic, what she is doing is very much part of managing plastic waste.

Why she is doing it is two-pronged: she is trying to prevent new plastics from entering the market and stop sending plastic waste into landfills after one use by keeping present plastics in circulation. To do so, she is willing to drive to various communities - ranging from Rawang to Bangsar - almost every day, revisiting them once every two months.

It is all part of the zero-waste or low-waste lifestyle of reusing, repurposing as well as reducing plastic.

The movement has been gaining popularity worldwide including in Malaysia. And considering the country's placement in the global plastic trash rankings, it is not a moment too soon.

Malaysia has a plastic trash problem. Depending on which survey you read and who you talk to Malaysia is either the second, fifth or eighth worst plastic polluter in the world. Studies have shown microplastics, which are tiny pieces of plastic measuring five millimetres or less, are present in the clouds and the deepest oceans as well as in animals and the human body.

According to Solid Waste and Public Cleansing Management Corporation (SWCorp), 101,949 metric tonnes of plastic, or 13% of the total 772,349 metric tonnes of trash generated by Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya residents in 2021, ended up in landfills. Only 132.87 metric tonnes of plastic were recycled, at a plastic recycling rate of 19%.

In 2022, the plastic recycling rate improved but the amount of plastic and general waste produced increased even more. Overall trash generated in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya last year stood at 796,795 metric tonnes of which plastic comprised 210,966 metric tonnes or 26.5%. The recycling rate for plastic was 18% while the recycling rate for all waste was 33.16%, which was below the 2023 target of 40%.

Reducing, repurposing and reusing are part of the country's circular economy plan for managing plastic

Difficult to sustain because it involves behavioural change but we can start by introducing regulations, Don



Oh sits in the van, surrounded by mini tanks full of various liquids. - MOBILE REFILLERY



Oh says we still need plastic containers to keep liquid items or for storage.

waste, along with recycling. However, since the Malaysian recycling rate is sub-par, it stands to reason that reducing the amount of plastic waste going into landfills by any means is a good thing.

The low-waste movement has attracted more devotees intent on doing their part for the environment, and several small companies are not only providing refills of food items and household products but also producing and selling plastic-free or sustainable products.

One of them is Minimise, a zero-waste store located in Subang Jaya and run by Jayne Lee and her business partner Tan Pei Yen.

Lee told Bernama she conceived the idea in 2019 when she became curious about plastic waste after reading about single-use plastics like straws.

"I discovered that actually there is an impact and how we use things in daily life. I was wondering how I could reduce my impact," she said.

The answer is the store that sells personal products that are plastic-free in plastic-free or sustainable packaging. The products range from toothbrushes made from bamboo and chewable toothpaste to reusable cloth napkins and menstrual cups and lip balms. Other items include metal lunch boxes and silicone lids for food containers.

Lee and Tan also provide refilling services for household items and Malaysian snacks like love letters and crackers.

They also accept recyclable items like bottles and cooking oil, although "recycling should be the last step," Lee said.

One of the products the store carries

is Lips Carpenter lip balms. What is rather unusual about the lip balms is that the tubes are made of paper and are plastic-free.

Unlike other lip balms in plastic tubes, which one has to twist to push up the balm, her product requires one to push up the stick from underneath. To bring the balm back down, just knock the paper container down on a hard surface and it will drop in place.

Lips Carpenter founder Law Yifon tells Bernama she decided to go the low-waste and sustainable route after seeing all the cosmetic waste her products generated a year after starting her business in 2018.

"Think about it. A lip balm, you can finish it, if you use it daily, in three months or six months and maximum a year. So why do you need plastic packaging that can last 500 years for a product that should be finished in one year?" she asked.

Other than lip balms, Law's company also makes lipsticks. Although the containers are not plastic-free, the lipsticks are sustainable as they come with a refill option and the containers are recyclable.

These zero-waste options should be able to cut into waste generation in Malaysia but there is no evidence that they have had any effect so far. Officials dealing with solid waste have reported that the amount of waste is increasing in tandem with population growth.

Does this mean the zero-waste movement has no effect on trash creation? Or not enough people are participating in trying to reduce plastic waste?

One of the criticisms of the movement is that it puts the onus on

the public rather than corporations or the government. According to a 2017 Carbon Majors Report, 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global climate emissions, most of them oil and gas companies. But the public's unchecked use and disposal of plastics also play a part.

Bernama asked a few Malaysians what they thought of the zero-waste lifestyle and whether this was something they might be interested in.

Most were not aware of the movement but they were supportive once they found out. However, many thought adopting the lifestyle would be too difficult.

Despite this, zero-waste entrepreneurs and experts say it is important to at least try to reduce one's waste.

UCSI University professor of environmental engineering Prof Datin Dr Ahmed Ibrahim is not surprised that some members of the public think it is too difficult to go zero-waste.

"(Zero-waste lifestyle is) difficult to sustain because it involves behavioural change but we can start by introducing regulations, etc," he said.

He added that a circular economy, which includes the reuse of products and wastes, is crucial to achieving the nation's goal to go low carbon.

WOWO Ecoview owner Chai Pei Chee, 42, said despite its growing popularity, not enough people know about zero waste or understand it. She recently closed her store in Ampang, Selangor, where she provided refilling services and took in bottles to be reused or recycled. Now, she is taking her business online and going mobile, servicing the Ampang area.

"In my area, nobody knows what I'm doing. They ask me, 'What are you doing?' Filling the green colour dishwash (liquid) in the mineral bottle, what ah?"

"And then from the outside, they think I'm selling very, very expensive organic things so that's why some of them dare not step into my shop. (To them) organic means expensive," she said, adding the products are, in fact, cheaper than those sold in supermarkets.

Oh agreed. A big part of the price tags on products in grocery stores is for the packaging which tends to be high-quality sturdy plastic. By refilling and reusing the bottles, consumers will just be paying for the content and not the packaging.

"When they come to my van, they find out 'Oh, the price is so affordable.' 'Oh, you can help me save my plastic bottles.' They (become) even more open to this idea," she said.

Zero-waste services are not without their limitations. In the mobile refill service case, there is only a certain distance Oh and others like her can cover without leaving a huge carbon footprint. In Oh's case, she says she also needs a guaranteed number of clients for every venue she visits to make the trip worthwhile.

As for brick-and-mortar stores, they are extremely local, servicing mostly the communities in which the stores are located. And online stores will have to grapple with using some plastic packaging such as bubble wrap when delivering their products.

All this effort can feel Sisyphean, that is, working so hard to achieve a goal that yields no discernible results unless a huge swath of the world's population joins in. And in some cases, elimination is not possible.

Nevertheless, Lee thinks adopting zero waste is easier than it seems, saying recycling is a more difficult habit to instil.

After all, reusing and repurposing items have been in Malaysians' psyche for a long time, such as repurposing the shortbread biscuit tin as a sewing kit or ice cream containers as food containers.

What anyone needs is to take that step and have patience.

"It takes a lot of practice before you can do it. Like us, we've been here two years, we are now starting to see people that came very early on and now starting to get into the lifestyle habits," Lee said.