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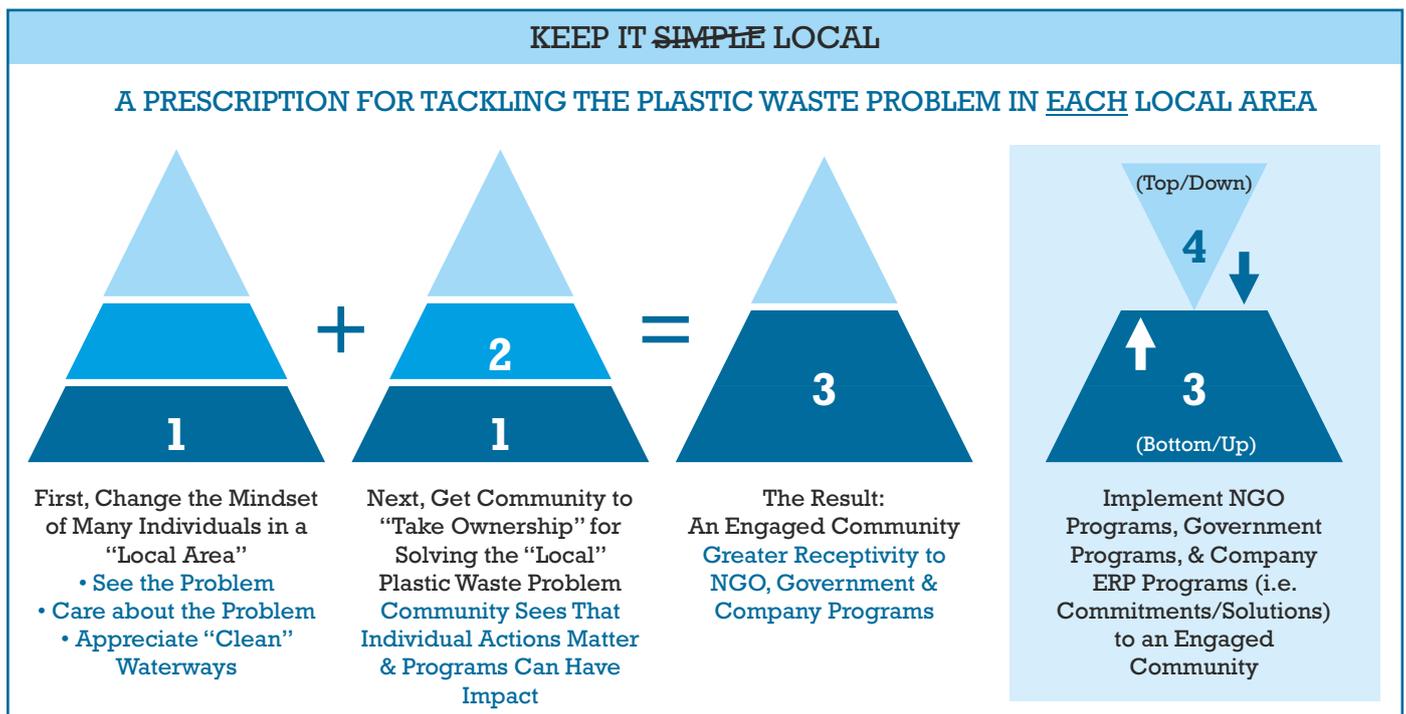
A NEW WAY TO LOOK AT SOLVING THE ASIA PLASTIC WASTE CRISIS: KEEP IT ~~SIMPLE~~ LOCAL

What if it were mandated to clean up every river, creek and waterway in each local area in Asia? The results might very well be spectacular and game changing.

By Rob Steir, April 18 2022

As the moderator of a very experienced panel on the subject matter of “Asia and plastic waste” for the student team competition “[Make the Case -East Asia to find scalable solutions to reduce plastic waste](#),” I had prepared a list of questions to ask the panel around the topic: “Is Asia doing enough to keep plastic waste from entering its waterways?”

The panel questions were meant to draw the discussion to the SOLUTIONS currently being implemented to solve Asia's plastic waste problem - which is the focus of the “Make the Case” competition; Solutions, in theory, that will truly make a difference in reducing Asia's significant plastic waste problem. What transpired in the discussion, however, was a bit different than expected, and the 75-minute panel Q&A discussion can be seen here. [WATCH HERE](#)



Two prerequisite themes emerged during the panel discussion, i.e., what needs to happen in order for Asia, and for most of the world, to tackle the plastic waste problem:

- 1) the need to first change the mindset of many individuals in a local area about plastic waste by instilling a feeling of “Trust” that improvements are being made, and messaged as such, accordingly; and
- 2) next, the need to get people in a local area to “take ownership” in order to continue to locally expand the way that plastic waste is being reduced.

First, Change the Mindset of Many Individuals in a Local Area About Plastic Waste by Instilling Trust

From the panel discussion, four steps emerged to build trust within a local community that are summarized below. They can be accomplished by a local government, itself, or for/with local government by NGOs and/or private sector and leaders in the community. Of course, if any of it were easy, we'd have no plastic waste problem.

Step 1) Clean Up Waterways in a Local Area – an Easy Way for Local Residents to See “Before & After” Intent and Results

Imagine a local area where every waterway (river, creek, or stream) was constantly cleaned. The first main goal here is to remove the surface pollution from the water, so that the community can see the beauty and value of clean waters. Pollution inspires more pollution, while clean waters create a disincentive for pollution, bringing pride to protecting the clean waters once cleaned. This can easily be done in waterways, where water only flows in one direction, by setting up a boom, net, or catchment device at regular intervals along that waterway to catch the waste. By monitoring these areas, and removing waste on a daily, weekly or regular basis, the surface water downstream from each intervention point is clean, as is the nearby land. The result: a continuous program that cleans local waterways due to the efforts of the local government, with the active involvement of the community.

Step 2) Seek Out and “Fix” the “Root Causes/Sources” of the Plastic Waste in the Local Area

For a local community (a city, town or village) which implements these clean-up commitments successfully, the next natural step is for the community to consider the source of pollution from upstream areas - identifying how and where the plastic waste is generated by the local community at its source. This can then bring considerations for prevention, avoidance, and further pollution abatement solutions.

Step 3) Get the Youth Involved, at the Same Time, as Waterways Are Being Cleaned Up

Involving young people in the local community in these efforts, not only for their own actions regarding using plastics, will have a real, ongoing, and measurable impact. Politicians should also take notice and realize their commitment to reducing plastic waste is a winning bet to being re-elected.

Step 4) Communicate Metrics to the Community -- Demonstrate to Local Residents the Positive “Connection/Correlation” of Cleaner Waterways and Less Plastic Waste in the Area

Trust is therefore built from seeing that waterway areas are cleaner - over a period of time - and that the commitment by the local community is real, especially as the community showcases its efforts to root out locally generated plastic waste at its source.

By using the boom/nets on rivers and creeks, for example, it is possible to provide real-time metrics (of waste collected each month), compiled over time, of how well the “upstream” local area is doing. By sharing these data results, and gains made, people within the community will have a better understanding that their individual actions matter, i.e. and make a difference - a real change of mindset!

Result: A New Local Community Mindset: Reducing Plastic Waste in a Local Community Becomes Important to the People in a Local Community

In fact, Ocean Recovery Alliance launched its Global Alert app, partly funded by the World Bank, over six years ago, in English and Spanish, allowing people to report trash hotspots anywhere in the world's waterways, as a tool to complement the thinking and methodology above. As an example, it implemented such [a program in Cambodia](#) and the results speak for themselves.

Next, Getting People in a Local Community to “Take Ownership” (Leveraging This New Mindset) in Order to Achieve a Meaningful Reduction of Plastic Waste

Let's assume the continuous waterways cleanup effort by the local government has made a noticeable difference in the local area, and people have noticed and appreciated the improvements in water quality and overall cleanliness. Many local residents have changed their own mindsets and built trust. Now what?

Even if an individual's mindset has changed to recognize that one's actions matter, if the reported overall results show no improvements in reducing pollution, beyond cleaner waterways, this same individual within the community may stop his or her own efforts. In other words, it will be easy to say “why bother.”

Therefore, for the local community to take “ownership” of the problem and to participate in the solutions offered, there needs to be projects and programs that produce “small wins” which can easily be monitored, with results being well communicated.

Set Achievable Goals, Based on Milestones/Metrics, to Reduce Plastic Waste, Then Implement “Small Wins” and Continually Share with Community the Results of These Programs

These “small wins” will not only add up in actual diverted plastic waste, but become great “stories” to share within the community. An example of a “small win,” as one of our panelists, Nikhilesh Paliath, shared, was how the organizers of an annual large event in one location in India, with thousands of attendees, exponentially reduced plastic waste for four consecutive years. By sharing their “story” with the local community (“trust”) and engaging event participants in zero-waste efforts while at the event, the organizers were able to achieve even better results.

In other words, when the public knows that their efforts are making a difference in reducing plastic waste in X and Y and Z activities, they will continue to see the value of their actions and efforts (taking ownership) to use less plastic and reduce plastic waste, where possible. These “small wins” enable local residents to receive the proverbial “pat on the back” that is sorely missing in today's local and global world.

RESULT: The Engaged Local Community (with Trust & Ownership) – As the New “Foundation” for Impactful Change

Please take a look at the diagram on Page 1 of this article - #3, the Engaged Community. Assume the following scenario: A local community sees cleaner waterways and less litter on surrounding land areas. Individual residents also see tangible results of creating less plastic waste through “small win” waste management programs. The youth are engaged. Waterways are clean. Politicians see the value.

Imagine, in this scenario, how much more successful a large corporation will be, as part of its ERP efforts? Imagine, how much more successful an NGO will be in implementing an awareness campaign for eliminating X or Y or Z actions. Imagine, how much less waste would be openly burned if the local government has a program to reduce open burning practices and continually shares how well the local community has done over time (i.e., a smaller number of tons burned, each and every year).

The Panel Genuinely Was Skeptical That Anything Will Change

When asked “is Asia doing enough to clean up plastic waste from entering its waterways,” the panelists said “no,” but they also didn't think the problem was an “Asia” problem only. They also did not think that multi-governmental organizations could regulate and enact enough effective laws, either “carrots or sticks,” that would change the predicted monumental gap in 2040 between new plastic used and the amount recycled/repurposed. They universally decried the sheer amount of waste they see around Asia, but believe, it is possible, by taking this “local approach” with the steps above, that some positive changes can be made.

Recommendation – Governments Should Act “Local” One Step at a Time

While the solution indeed needs to be tackled at the “local” level, funding must be provided at the “country” level. Earlier in this article, I stated “Imagine a local area where every waterway (river, creek, or stream) was constantly cleaned.” I’ll end this article with the following:

Imagine if the governments of Asia cumulatively committed, to start, as much as USD \$500 Million, to engage hundreds (potentially thousands) of local communities to clean up their waterways –as a clear first step - with the follow-up game plan mapped out as described above.

Just maybe, by 2040 and hopefully much sooner, the people of Asia will look at its rivers and waterways as a source of pride, and not, what is even more likely, a continued source of plastic waste.

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Rob Steir is the co-founder of the Commitments Accelerator for Plastic Pollution (CAPP.Global), a program from Ocean Recovery Alliance, and is a co-founder in a waste-to-energy company, FrontlineWaste.com. In 2020, I was the main author of a 100-page UN-funded report from Ocean Recovery Alliance (bit.ly/PlasticsCommitment2020) on a better way to construct the world's Voluntary Commitments to reduce or prevent plastic pollution. We had analyzed 580 commitments made between 2014 and 2018.” CAPP, in fact, was developed as a result of the report. Currently, CAPP offers student team “Make the Case” competitions as our first steps towards working with projects or programs to be replicated and scaled.

About the Panel: **Is Asia doing enough to clean up plastic waste from entering its waterways**

Panelists: **Doug Woodring**, Ocean Recovery Alliance Founder;
CAPP.Global Co-Founder

Sekhar DC, Alpha MERS - Executive Director

Youna Lyons, Advisory Committee on the Protection of the Seas – Chair of the Board

Coleen Salamat, EcoWaste Coalition – Plastic Solutions Campaigner

Nikhilesh Paliath, Breakthrough from Plastic Youth Ambassador

View Recorded Panel: <https://makethecase.capp.global/east-asia-panel>

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