



'Plastic Free' WFP food assistance outlets: Towards durable, sustainable solutions

As the humanitarian response continues into its third year, an environmentally sustainable approach is key to amplifying the long-term positive outcomes. Towards this end, WFP recently replaced the plastic bags with paper bags at the electronic voucher outlets that assists more than 70 percent of the entire population.

Initiatives by Bangladesh: In 2002, Bangladesh became the **first country in the region to ban the usage of plastic bags**. Bangladesh continues to explore durable alternatives, including jute, as the world's second biggest producer of jute.

Most effective alternative to single-use plastic bags: These jute bags (called as “**Sonali bags**”) bags are biodegradable and are also easily recycled. Depending on the commercial manufacturing timeline, WFP is planning to introduce “**Sonali bags**” at its e-voucher outlets.

IN NUMBERS ¹



In Bangladesh, every year **87,000 tonnes** of single-use plastics are thrown away according to a [study](#) by the Environment and Social Development Organization.



In Cox's Bazar Rohingya camps, each household within the e-voucher modality of assistance consumes on an average **4.5 single-use plastic bags** to carry the loose food items.



An average of **400,000 single-use plastic bags** are wasted monthly due to this reason. This equals more than **5 million** plastic bags wasted every year.



In addition, on an average 600,000 litres of oil is picked up by the refugee shoppers from the outlets, which is equal to **600,000 bottles of 1 litre oil**. This equals more than **7 million bottles** every year.

WFP RESPONSE

Since January, all **14 WFP e-voucher outlets** have replaced single-use plastic bags with recycled paper bags, i.e., currently more than **500,000 refugees** use these bags from the WFP e-voucher outlets.

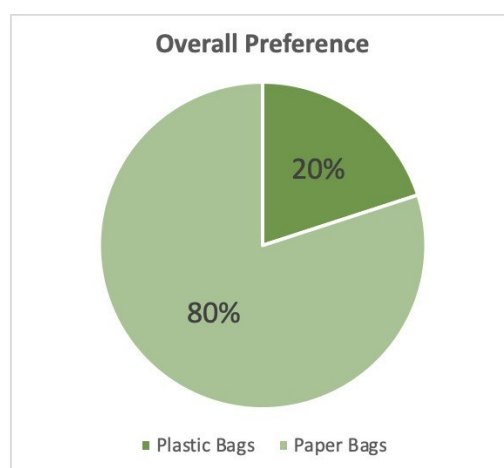
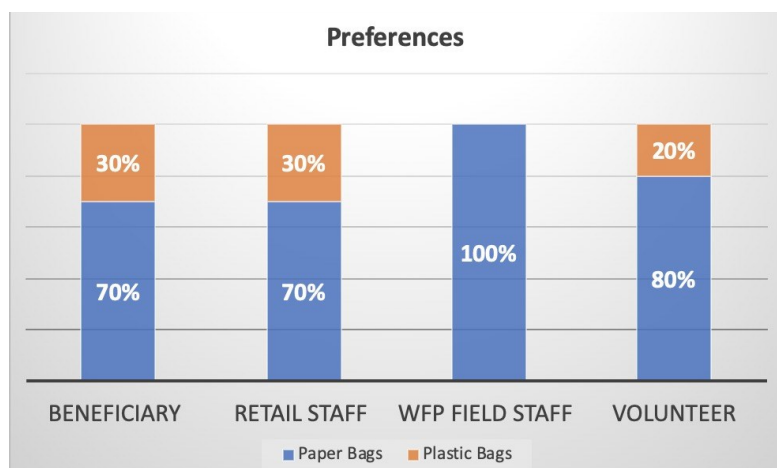
In addition, WFP has also introduced **2 litres oil bottles, instead of 1 litre bottles** (used earlier) to reduce **plastic wastage by half**. The estimated reduction would be over **400,000 single-use plastic bags** used for carrying loose food items, monthly and **500,000 plastic bottles**.

According to studies, a plastic bag would take 10-20 years to decompose, and, if burnt for fume, as expressed by 80 percent of interviewed refugees, “plastic bags release chemicals into the air, causing serious lung damage and other long-term health problems²”.

Perception Analysis*

To assess the on-ground perception of different groups towards the recycled paper bags a small-scale survey was conducted (semi-structured interviews)—which complemented the assessment conducted by the Monitoring and Evaluation unit on usage of/preference for plastic bottles for oil and big paper bags (which are supposedly meant to replace the plastic sacks used to carry smaller items).

The OIM and Reports Unit visited all the four e-voucher outlets (Camp 11, Camp 4, Camp 17, and Camp D5) in Ukhiya, one month post-introduction, and conducted focus group discussions and interviews cutting across beneficiaries, volunteers (Rohingya), retail and WFP staff. As reflected with their responses, the paper bags have high to moderate acceptability, amongst refugees and the retail staff and volunteers. However, some challenges were also identified which are being addressed effectively.



¹Numbers based on interviews conducted by the WFP OIM and Reports Unit.

²As suggested by the UN Environment Programme;

*Limitations: the sample size is representative of the different stakeholders/actors on the ground however it is limited in size.



Kobir Ahmed (22): "I will go back to my shelter and tell my neighbours about the benefits of reducing plastic consumption"



Volunteers in Camp 4: "Our suggestion is to give jute bags to the beneficiaries. It's less fragile and they will be able to use it for a long time"



Retail staff at Camp D5 outlet: "We are working round the clock to sensitize the beneficiaries on the positive impact of using paper bags. I think gradually they are understanding the benefits."



Naru Begum (22) has been volunteering in the outlet for 11 months. "I see less plastic bags waste around the outlet, but paper bags break easily. Especially when they get wet. I need to clean more, but I'm happy this is helping the environment."

Observations and Recommendations

- **Refugees' perception:** Beneficiaries were overall aware of the benefits of using a paper bag as oppose to the plastic bag. They expressed the need for using a bigger paper/ jute bag which could also be a preferred alternative for the big plastic sack that was used to carry the smaller paper bags.
- 80 percent of beneficiaries said they used the plastic bags for fume when needed, and they also collected them and gave them to other NGOs for recycling.
- **Retail staff:** The majority of the staff were in favour of the transition, while they also said that some refugees have the misconception that paper bags is meant to "trick them" into giving less food than what they normally get. They are engaged in sensitization around the use of plastic.
- **Volunteers** were mostly in favour of the transition, and much aware of the benefits. However, those responsible for keeping the stores clean, expressed discontent with the fragility of some of the paper bags, since they find them more susceptible to leakages.
- **WFP Field Staff:** All of them were in favour of the alternative and insisted upon the need to cut down on single-use plastic bags. They also indicated of the need for sensitization of refugees on the negative impact of using plastic bags which has thereby been initiated by the cooperating partners.

Opportunities and Way Forward

- The M&E early assessments* suggested most refugees prefer a single big bag (99.3 percent) to the small single-use plastic bag they use—this is considerably big and can accommodate the smaller packets. In addition, they also prefer big oil bottles (3 litres) rather than the smaller bottles or oil. Since February, WFP has introduced 2 litres oil bottles instead of 1 litre oil bottles to reduce in half the waste.
- As part of the Self Reliance programme, WFP is planning to introduce a recycling project whereby refugees/scrap dealers will be engaged in recycling of the plastic waste that is generated in the camps (little of which is coming from the humanitarian agencies' activities).
- As of the end of January 2020, WFP contributed to the overall reduction of plastic waste in the camps with the elimination of more than 500,000 plastic bags from its e-voucher outlets. WFP is exploring other solutions to reduce the environmental damage and benefit the local vendors/retailers which in turn could have a positive impact on the local economy.

Contributions for E-voucher Assistance

WFP is thankful to DFID, USAID, Canada, Germany, DFAT, ECHO, Japan and Netherlands for their contribution to the e-voucher assistance, currently assisting more than 500,000 refugees in Cox's Bazar refugee camps.

* M&E assessment conducted during the first month of transitioning to paper bags.