



# Strengthening Waste Management Policies to Mitigate the COVID-19 Pandemic

The coronavirus (COVID-19) has had a negative impact on waste management in some Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries that are dealing with growing amounts of medical waste due to an increase in the number of patients. This condition is exacerbated by a lack of proper medical waste facilities, e.g. hospital incinerators, which can effectively kill the virus with high temperature. In line with this, the amount of plastic waste is rising because people rely more on food delivery services that frequently come with layers of plastic packaging.

In this critical situation, recycling becomes problematic. First, recycling workers now must use protective equipment. Second, in some landfills, recycling facilities cease, reducing the price of recyclable waste, which eventually reduces the income of the waste pickers. Although there is no clear evidence, the informal sector might be more vulnerable to these changes.

As a response to the current challenges, we need to adopt better policies quickly. Some policy recommendations from ASEAN countries and the city of Wuhan, the first epicentre of the virus, consist of, first, strengthening waste management policies, especially those related to infectious waste (e.g. rigid source separation and higher collection frequency as well as monitoring floating river waste) to address the rapid virus transmission. The second recommendation is adopting an inclusive approach towards all parties, particularly the vulnerable waste collection workers, the scavengers, and the workers in recycling centres. For example, the use of transparent plastic bags for detecting any potentially infectious waste, as well as the use of masks, gloves, and other protective equipment based on specific guidelines, will make waste collection and management safer. Apart from such physical protection, waste management workers also require protection from stigmatisation, by people collectively showing respect and appreciation for their significant contribution during the pandemic. Lastly, in addition to prioritising the safety of all parties, a market mechanism is also needed to financially support the scavengers who have lost their source of income because of the drop in recyclable waste prices.

Furthermore, it is reported that disposable face masks, which are made from plastics such as polypropylene and polyester, are usually littered in open space. Without proper collection of waste, the huge number of masks and other plastic waste generated during the COVID-19 pandemic will leak into the ocean. To tackle marine plastic debris as an ASEAN Plus Three region-wide effort, ERIA established the Regional Knowledge Centre for Marine Plastic Debris (RKC-MPD) in October 2019 with support from the Government of Japan. This was welcomed at the 16th ASEAN Plus Three Environmental Ministers Meeting and the 22nd ASEAN Plus Three Summit. The RKC-MPD will share good practices in the region, including on waste management during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Waste management is not a new issue in the region; therefore, we need to turn this severe situation into a better waste management structure for the longer term. ERIA, through the RKC-MPD, is willing to share the good practices, facilitate networking and cooperation amongst stakeholders, enhance scientific knowledge, and develop waste management abilities through raising awareness and conducting capacity-building activities in the region.

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