Background Information

In Korea, the per capita consumption of plastic, including plastic bags, lies currently at around 420 and 100 kilograms per year respectively. In terms of the population ratio, it ranks first in the world. Despite active plastic recycling campaigns in Korea, the rate of plastic that is recycled amounts to less than 9 percent. Plastic waste pollutes our oceans, land, and the air, revealing an urgent necessity to initiate a model on reducing plastic waste in Korea.

Plastic pollution is a threat to the marine environment. Of the more than 278 million tons of plastic produced per year worldwide, up to 12 million tons flow into the ocean and break down into small pieces called micro-plastic. The amount of plastic in the ocean today is enough to circle the Earth around 400 times, and if current trends continue, our oceans could contain more plastic than fish by 2050.

Over 70 percent of Korea’s border is surrounded by the ocean, located along the Pacific Ocean. Thus, if Korea takes more active action in raising awareness of marine plastic pollution, establishes multinational partnerships with corporations across all sectors, and initiates activities to improve the marine environment, it can contribute to alleviate marine pollution in some critical regions including Southeast Asia.

Plastic pollution is just one of many threats to the marine environment. Pollutants that contaminate the marine environment include—among others—plastic, packaging materials, industrial wastewater, and wastewater from the livestock and fashion industries. The environmental issues of marine pollution are linked to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14, embodying “Life Below Water.” SDG14 asks to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development. As an environmental issue as such, marine pollution cannot solely be dealt with by national or local governments. All levels of stakeholders must take collaborative action. In this respect, a change in the initial stages of the production processes of corporations is important to tackle the environmental issue of waste that threatens the marine environment.

The Association for Supporting the Sustainable Development Goals for the United Nations (ASD) has addressed this issue by launching eco-friendly initiatives and innovative partnerships with global corporations, working together with businesses and government leaders to promote increasing consideration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their decision-making processes. To encourage awareness of the marine environment, together with SDG14 among diverse enterprises, and to initiate action as a response to environmental issues related to plastic waste, the Guidelines for Reducing Plastic Waste & Sustainable Ocean and Climate Action Acceleration (GRP) were launched.
The GRP explain the background of environmental issues caused by factors such as plastic, fashion, livestock and logistics and establish global standards to encourage enterprises to reduce environmental pollution through concrete eco-friendly action. In addition, the GRP has developed into an environmental certification system. In their role as “eco-friendly guidelines” and as a global environmental certification system, the GRP estimate and approve practices of corporations from diverse industries and help showcase the efforts of global enterprises in tackling diverse environmental issues, such as plastic pollution.

**Approach, Delivery, & Challenges**

For seven years now, ASD has implemented various eco-friendly projects with different enterprises and the GRP were promoted with the 2017 **UN Ocean Conference**, using its momentum. The GRP are updated annually and ASD publishes and announces them each year to encourage enterprises to pay more attention to the SDGs, the marine environment, and global warming. In addition, ASD’s activities include awareness-raising of environmental issues and advisory services to the National Assembly and enterprises for environmental strategies, environmental and sustainable management, and the implementation of the SDGs.

Throughout the project’s life, ASD has strived to warn the government and global corporations of the environmental expenses which they have to cover for current environmental pollution, especially marine pollution, which is persisting. In the Asia-Pacific region alone, where extensive ocean pollution occurs, the tourism, fishing, and shipping industries bear expenses of around $1.3 billion a year from plastic litter.

As part of its campaigns, ASD recommends global corporations to take concrete action to cut the usage of plastic as the main cause of marine pollution. ASD analyzes various company groups to discover potential for concrete measures on reducing plastic waste at the initial stage of the company’s production process. Ultimately, ASD urges eco-friendly production lines for all plastic manufacturing enterprises. In order to establish an institutional framework, continuous discussions with the National Assembly are held.

For example, in the fashion industry, ASD has suggested that fast fashion companies transition away from the use of polyester for clothing, a synthetic fibre which requires decades to naturally breakdown, threatening the marine environment and emitting three times more CO2 in production than cotton. In this context, ASD consistently brings to light the heavy environmental costs and aftermath caused by the fashion industry, and assists corporations in recognizing the problem and start initiating change in their way of doing business.

In the context of the GRP and the diverse campaigns conducted to resolve environmental issues, ASD has built partnerships with enterprises in different sectors; for example: groceries (food), fashion, finance, semiconductors, and information and communications technology (ICT). Key partners are CJ CheilJedang (one of Asia’s largest bio-food corporations); UNIQLO Co. Ltd. and The Handsome (fashion corporations); SK Hynix (the world’s largest semiconductor corporation); HSBC (a global financial enterprise); KT (a global telecommunication corporation); Hyundai Department Store and Hyundai Home Shopping; Hyundai Green Food Co. Ltd.; Hyundai Livart (a major furniture company in South Korea); CJ Olive Young Corporation (health and beauty); CJ Logistics; Everdigm (construction company), BukangTech Co. Ltd.; and Hansot (a takeout lunch company). Some of the partnership results are elaborated on in the next section.

These corporations are approached by ASD with the full consideration and understanding of the given circumstances in their designated field. Thereby, ASD consults the companies with reasonable and necessary measures. Depending on the field and the company’s situation, ASD suggests both short- and long-term activities that are vital for environmental protection. Activities are prioritized based on their feasibility and initiated on a case-by-case basis with each corporation.

The introduced certification system through the GRP reviews how companies handle waste according to 3 aspects (3R): Reduce, Replace, and Recycle. Each of the 3R Indices is divided into detailed indicators. Thereby, its fundamental objective is to reduce waste generation and create a resource-circulating society by restraining the origin of waste, using and converting substitutes into products of various
materials, and reusing them. Targeted fields include petrochemicals, fashion, retail, food and beverages, cosmetics, and accommodations and restaurants. Each field is composed with customized criterions for a thorough review. Calculated on the basis of a computation model, corporations are categorized into 4 groups: AAA (highly sustainable corporations, surpassing the Guidelines, Top 10%), AA+ (sustainable corporations abiding to the Guidelines, Top 20%), AA (corporations close to fully abiding to the Guidelines, Top 30%), and AA- (corporations which have a high understanding of the Guidelines, top 40%).

**Challenges**

The main partners of ASD have continuously been highlighting concern about environmental issues and the importance to tackle them. Yet, the rise of costs accompanied by the substitution of plastic packaging to plastic alternatives has been an obstacle for innovative change. The cost effectiveness of environmental strategies has been a major challenge for businesses and one of the main explanations to their passive behavior.

In consideration of this challenge, from the corporative perspective, ASD advises corporations in making impact through small changes. For instance, in partnership with corporations in the groceries and packed lunch fields, ASD advised to initiate a change by replacing or reducing the use of disposable paper cups and plastic forks.

**Benefits, Lessons Learned, and Outcomes**

Below are a few examples of outcomes from ASD's campaigns conducted in partnership with corporations:

Hyundai Department Store has drastically cut down plastic wrapping and packaging, providing biodegradable bags as delivery alternatives. Hyundai Home Shopping, meanwhile, replaced delivery boxes with ‘finger boxes’ composed of paper which can be assembled by hands.

In partnership with the two fashion corporations UNIQLO and Handsome, ASD initiated small eco-friendly changes concerning the type of fabric material and the amount of water used in the production process. For instance, Handsome has presented sneakers made out of apple peels, and UNIQLO is in the process of removing plastic materials from all their clothing and reducing the amount of water used in their washing process. Both have paid more attention to using smaller proportions of cotton in their clothes production, and, include eco-friendly materials such as EcoVero (a more sustainably produced viscose) or TENCEL-lyocell (a natural fiber).

KT (Korea Telecom), as one of the most active partners of ASD’s campaigns, initiated a “tree planting” marathon. As a result of which, one tree per kilometer ran by a participating employee was donated. As such, the campaign successfully planted 30 thousand trees in an abandoned wasteland for environmental purification.

With CJ Logistics (a global logistic corporation), ASD initiated a public campaign printing an eco-friendly message on 1.22 billion parcel box invoices, which is the average number of invoices used annually. The dissemination of this message raised awareness on the dire impacts of climate change.

ASD’s approach and initiatives, in the context of the GRP, are linked to SDG14 and acknowledge that the engagement of all stakeholders is necessary to accelerate its achievement. They target the observed hesitancy in the private sector, which has inter alia been explained through the clash of ideals between the ethical public interest of the SDGs and the profit-based motivation of private corporations.

However, these initiatives demonstrate that profit-based companies can pursue action for addressing plastic pollution and climate change and transition towards increasing environmental protection while continuing to achieve profit. ASD’s initiatives strengthen the understanding of the SDGs and provide assistance to scale-up projects which contribute towards achieving the SDGs through private sector activities in environmental protection and sustainable growth.
Opportunities and Next Steps

The reduction of plastic and tackling of its involved environmental issues are critical challenges which must be resolved in a timely manner. In doing so, global corporations are confronted with major obstacles as they must assume responsibility for additional costs of material and personnel expenses to approach and handle the environmental issues and the associated introduction of alternatives to plastic. Therefore, ASD’s initiatives with the GRP intend to bring about a substantial impact in targeted industries through small changes.

Through participation from the private sector, media, and the National Assembly, ASD aims to create a sustainable chain. In other words, ASD identifies sustainable best practices among corporations, certifies them, and works together with the media to highlight such activities/campaigns. When the public becomes aware of the practices and the underlying issue, ASD brings it to the National Assembly for review. As an organization with consultative status within ECOSOC, ASD has been cordially raising these issues through written statements. The GRP is a model in which diverse actors including the private sector, media, and the National Assembly participate in.

Over the past 7 years, ASD has brought small and big changes to its 20 partner corporations. SK Hynix, for instance, emphasizes environmental efforts as its first priority in the production of semiconductors.

One of ASD’s biggest opportunities ahead is its role in providing professional advice to revitalize Sustainability Bonds, Green Bonds, and Social Bonds for global financial enterprises. Sustainable Bonds, Green Bonds, and Social Bonds can raise a large scale of funding and this capital can contribute to accelerating the SDGs. For example, by providing expertise to HSBC’s bond issuing, ASD hopes to take part in stimulating the financial pipeline for the SDGs.

Information

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References


