

## Life in plastic: on waste management framework

As a major producer of [plastic waste](#) that ends up in the oceans, India is arguably the best place to host World Environment Day. Union Environment Minister Harsh Vardhan has said the government means business, and the UN theme, “Beat Plastic Pollution”, will not remain an empty slogan. His claim would have inspired greater confidence had India taken its own rules on waste management seriously. Both the Solid Waste Management Rules and the [Plastic Waste Management Rules](#) of 2016, which built on previous regulations, mostly remain on paper. State governments have simply not given them the necessary momentum, and the producers of plastic articles that are invariably used just for a few minutes have shown little concern about their negative environmental impact. The Centre’s somewhat liberal estimate shows over 60% of about 25,000 tonnes of plastic waste generated daily is collected. That essentially means a staggering 10,000 tonnes of trash is being released into the environment, a lot of it going into the sea. Also, not every piece of plastic collected by the system is scientifically processed. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system is on the UN map of 10 rivers worldwide that collectively carry the bulk of the plastic waste into the oceans. The effects are evident: they threaten marine life and the well-being of people, as microplastics are now found even in drinking water.

In their response to the crisis, communities and environmentally minded individuals are ahead of governments and municipal authorities. They segregate waste, compost at home, conduct “[plastic free](#)” social events and help recover materials that would otherwise just be dumped in the suburbs and wetlands. But, valuable as they are, voluntary efforts cannot achieve what systemic reform can. It is the Centre’s responsibility to ensure that the Environment (Protection) Act, the overarching law that enables anti-pollution rules to be issued, is implemented in letter and spirit. Ideally, regulation should help stop the manufacture of single-use plastic articles such as carry bags and cutlery, and encourage the use of biodegradable materials. There is a challenge here, though. The provisions of the Plastic Waste Management Rules require manufacturers of compostable bags to get a certificate from the Central Pollution Control Board, but this has not stopped counterfeit products from entering the market. Local bodies mandated under rules to ensure segregation, collection and transfer of waste to registered recyclers have spectacularly failed to fulfil their responsibilities. The State Level Monitoring Committees provided for under the rules have not been made accountable. The waste management framework is dysfunctional, and Mr. Vardhan’s assertions on beating plastic pollution alone will not inspire confidence. India and the world face a plastics crisis. Solving it will take more than slogans.

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