

2.2.10. Unilever

Unilever is the fifth biggest FMCG company (by revenue), with sales in over 190 countries reaching 2.5 billion consumers each day.¹ The company produces 700,000 metric tonnes of plastic per year, as reported to the New Plastics Economy Global Commitment.² It has over 400 brands in its portfolio; key brands include Dove, Ben & Jerry's, Lipton, Cif and Omo. Unilever was the fifth-worst offender in the Break Free From Plastic 2019 Audit.³ In Tearfund's report, Unilever was responsible for 70,000 tonnes of plastic waste per year across just six countries - more than 11 football pitches every day.

Littered items including Unilever brands |

Credit: Shutterstock |



Unilever has identified plastic packaging as a 'principle risk for [its] business',⁴ and has committed to 'help collect and process more plastic packaging than [it] sell[s]' by 2025. The company states this commitment will require it to collect and process around 600,000 tonnes of plastic annually by 2025, and that this will be delivered through 'investment and partnerships which improve waste management infrastructure' in many of the countries in which it operates.⁵ Although it doesn't openly call for mandatory-collection legislation and DRS, Unilever offers qualified support, saying DRS should be 'well thought through' and avoid 'putting consumers off' with high deposit fees.⁶ Interestingly, Unilever has highlighted the Lipton 'festival bottle', which is made from 100% recycled plastic and collected using a deposit system in the Benelux region.⁷ If Unilever believes this is a good idea, the company should actively support it as a solution - by backing mandatory collection globally and helping implement DRS on a larger scale.

Unilever is exploring several types of reuse models, although current pilot projects appear to be on a small scale and cover only a small proportion of products and packaging; for example, a small-scale pilot with three retailers in São Paulo, Brazil, to trial refillable Omo liquid detergent; and through Algramo in Chile, which is piloting a reuse-and-refill system using electric tricycles to deliver to people's

homes.⁸ Cif refill stations for shampoo and laundry detergent are being rolled out in shops, universities and mobile vending stations in South East Asia, and - like other companies - Unilever has signed up to TerraCycle's Loop platform.⁹

As part of the New Plastics Economy, Unilever has pledged to use at least 25% recycled content in its plastic packaging by 2025. Similarly to other FMCG companies, Unilever says *'the biggest challenge is the limited availability of high-quality recycled waste materials, particularly in developing and emerging markets'*¹⁰ - without supporting legislation for mandatory collection, which would help to achieve a clean stream of recycled plastic. Despite the commitment, Unilever is lagging in its progress towards achieving the target. In 2018, recycled plastic represented less than 1% of the total amount of plastic resin it bought.¹¹ The amount of post-consumer recycled content incorporated into Unilever's rigid plastic packaging actually decreased by 1%, in absolute terms, between 2015 and 2018 - from 4,900 tonnes to 4,845 tonnes.¹² In 2019, recycled-content inclusion was reported at 5% of rigid plastic packaging: 35,000 tonnes. This appears to represent a laudable increase; however, it is unclear from the company's reporting whether the figure is for all plastic packaging or just rigid plastic.¹³

Unilever has set a pioneering target to reduce its use of virgin plastic by 50% by 2025. The company has explicitly highlighted that it plans to do this by reducing its overall use of plastic packaging, with around a third coming from absolute reductions - more than 100,000 tonnes by 2025, through reuse, refill and packaging-free solutions. The remaining reduction will be achieved through increasing the use of recycled content.

Unilever does not appear to be indiscriminately replacing single-use plastic with single-use alternatives, and, where the company is exploring alternative materials (such as aluminium, glass and paper), it appears to be aware of potential unintended consequences and environmental impacts. The company seems to be looking at different packaging formats and models of consumption first.¹⁴ Unilever has also produced a position statement on bio-based plastics, stating it will switch to bio-based alternatives if they show an equivalent or better life-cycle impact compared to fossil-based plastics, do not lead to competition for land that could be used for food crops and do not have a negative impact on traditional recycling infrastructure.¹⁵ However, its Simple brand of face wipes do not appear to have biodegradability certifications, and the advice on the product is to send them to industrial composting - but acceptance of these types of products by composting plants is not widespread, and not all markets where the products are sold have access to such facilities. Unilever's commitments relating to bio-based, biodegradable and compostable plastics are relatively vague, but its approach is stronger and more sensible than other companies.



Unilever products in a supermarket |

Credit: Les Stone |

A persistent problem for Unilever is its multi-laminate plastic sachets, which represent 19% of its products.¹⁶ These are practically impossible to recycle conventionally, and have created a massive pollution problem in South East Asia. The company seems to be relying on its newly developed Creasolv[®] technology at a plant in Indonesia - which appears to be a type of chemical recycling - but is experiencing obstacles due to the high volumes of sachets needing to be collected, as well as remaining technical issues. Finally, Unilever is not transparent about questions of toxicity relating to chemical recycling.¹⁷

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