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“Public Participation: Shaping a sustainable future”

Public Participation and Effectiveness of the No Plastic Bag Day Program in Malaysia

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Abstract

In 2011, Malaysia introduced the No Plastic Bag Day program to discourage the use of plastic bags for carrying items purchased from shopping stores. In the country, most of them use plastic bags as carrier bags. However, their excessive use leads to a large amount of plastic waste. Plastic waste takes a long time to degrade and contributes to air, water and soil pollution. Aimed at reducing the environmental degradation from improper disposal of used plastic bags, the No Plastic Bag Day program applies a "market" instrument to discourage consumers from using plastic bags to carry items purchased. In the program, participating stores do not give out plastic bags. They charge a levy of MYR0.20 (USD0.06) for each new plastic bag requested by customers during the program. This paper reports the findings of an observatory study conducted during the middle of 2013. The study aims to identify the level of consumer participation in the program and analyze the effectiveness of the program.

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Keywords: Public participation; effectiveness; plastic bag; levy

1. Introduction

The plastic carrier bag, or simply known as plastic bags, is a popular means of carrying goods when making purchases in Malaysia. The retail business always use carrier bags or plastic bags as they are inexpensive, weightless but strong enough to carry bought items and clean when used the first time (Jalil,

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Mian, & Rahman, 2013). They used trillion plastic bags as carrier bags everywhere in the world annually (Miller, R.M., 2012).

Used plastic bag improper disposal, however, also known to cause long-term damage to the ecosystem and the natural environment. Plastic waste takes a long time to degrade in soil and contributes to air, water and soil pollution. Plastic bags that end up in landfills bring significant environmental burden that relates to resource use (Musa, Hayes, Bradley, Clayson, & Gillibrand, 2013) When thrown into landfills, plastic waste takes from 400 to 1000 years to degrade (Musa et al., 2013 ; Bashir, 2013)

Plastic waste can also become a nuisance to the human sight. If they do not send used plastic bags to landfills or properly recycled amass as litter in public areas (Ayalon, Goldrath, Rosenthal, & Grossman, 2009). With their aerodynamic shape and low rate of recycling (Godman, 2013), used plastic bags pose a problem beyond their simple use.

Plastic bags thrown in rivers and waterways even have the potential to cause harm to aquatic animals. This occurs when these animals perceive the bags as food and digest them, causing harm to the digestive system and the possibility of death (Ayalon, Goldrath, Rosenthal, & Grossman, 2009; Godman, 2013). Death to animals from swallowing plastic bags is higher than from diseases in most African countries (Bashir, 2013). Plastic waste, when broken down, can also affect hormone levels of animals when it pass through the food chain, which can eventually affect humans too (Musa et al., 2013).

In the attempt to reduce the problems on the environment from the nonchalant use of plastic bags, some countries such as Australia, Italy, United States of America, Tanzania and Ireland have resorted to the imposition of tax or to a ban on the production and use of plastic bags for shopping or other purposes (Jalil et al., 2013).

Malaysians on average produce an estimate of 19,000 tonnes of solid waste annually and plastic waste represents 24% of total solid waste. In 2011, Malaysia introduced the No Plastic Bag Day (NPBD) program to discourage the use of plastic bags for carrying items purchased from shopping stores. Aimed at reducing the environmental degradation from improper disposal of used plastic bags, the NPBD program applies a "market" instrument to discourage consumers from using plastic bags to carry items purchased. In the program, participating stores do not give out free plastic bags. They charge a levy of MYR0.20 (USD0.06) for each new plastic bag requested by customers during the program.

The combined approach of the levy and a restriction on plastic bag use applied in the program is an attempt to educate the public and increase their awareness on the environmental hazards of using plastic bags. The use of regulations such as the requirement for retailers to restrict the use of plastic bags for only those who are willing to pay a levy is a method implemented to discourage the use of plastic bags. They described regulations as playing a significant role in inducing ethical commitment for manufacturers (Zaman, 2012). This ethical commitment can also be applied to pro-environmental behavior of the general public.

It is also a method to change the behavior of consumers in depending on the use of plastic bags to carry purchased items and to reduce amounts of plastic waste in the country. As for shopping stores, their role is to carry out the implementation of the program. Both consumers and store operators constitute the public. The participation of the public in carrying out NPBD program is crucial in ensuring success of the program.

The several state governments and federal government have implemented the "No Plastic Bag Day". In other countries, they carried similar initiatives such as a ban in the use of plastic bags and the use of plastic bag tax or levy. The use of product tax or levy as a price signal can be an important instrument to change consumer behavior and the level of consumer acceptance to its implementation are crucial to its success (Convery, McDonnell, & Ferreira, 2007). However, while there have been many attempts and plans to reduce the use of plastic bags as carrier bags, not many of them have been assessed in terms of their success or effectiveness (Poortinga, Whitmarsh, & Suffolk, 2013).

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