



CASE STUDIES SERIES
ZERO WASTE
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN
PLASTIC REDUCTION

Reducing the use of disposable plastic: San Pedro La Laguna, Sololá, Guatemala

The GAIA Alliance brings together 130 organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean and more than 800 worldwide, which have in common to promote the zero waste strategy, with the aim of building a society in which the use of resources respects the ecological limits and everything that is produced returns to the productive system or to nature in a safe, environmentally and socially safe. And when this is not possible, those materials are redesigned, or stop being produced.



Alianza de Derecho Ambiental y Agua

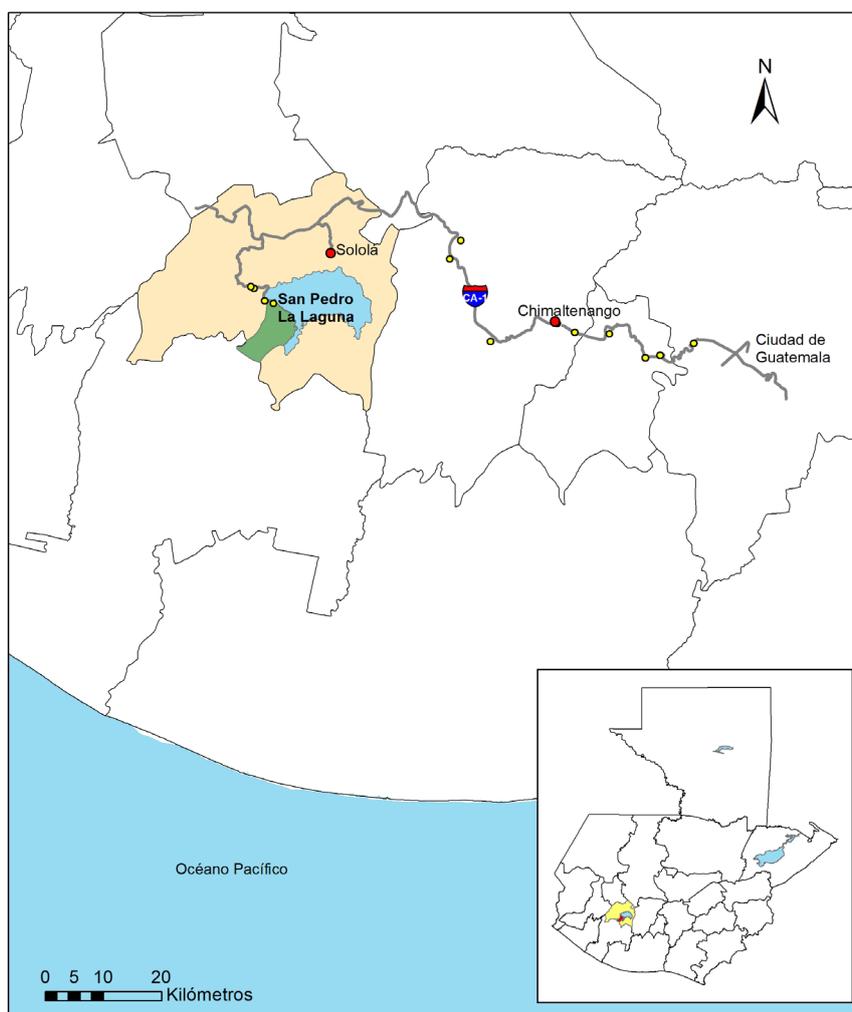


Abogando por el Derecho Humano al Agua

January, 2020

San Pedro La Laguna

Population: 18.500 . Surface: 25 km². MSW per capita: 0,5 kg/día.



The San Pedro La Laguna municipality can be found in the Department of Sololá in Guatemala. Made up of an indigenous population, *Tzutuhil*, it is one of the 14 municipalities that integrate Lake Atitlán's basin, one of the most beautiful bodies of water in the country. In September 2016, the municipal mayor took on a citizen's proposal and ordered through a Municipal Agreement the prohibition and commercialization of single-use straws and plastic bags, including polystyrene products (locally known as *duroport*). This prohibition immediately caused reactions throughout the country. Three years later, after having won a lawsuit put on by the plastic industry, the rule has kept going strong and has been accepted by a large part of the population. The people of the town believe they have changed and that the change is forever. As a corollary, the initiative of San Pedro La Laguna and of at least 17 other municipalities in the country has grown. In

September of 2019, the Guatemalan government banned the use and distribution of disposable plastic bags, straws, cups, plates, stirrers, and bowls starting in 2021.

PREVIOUS EFFORTS OF THE INITIATIVE

Prior to the single-use plastics ban, efforts to reduce the contamination of the zone had been focused mainly on environmental education, promoted by the Municipal Commonwealth of La Laguna (Manclalaguna), that brings together the municipalities of San Pedro, San Juan, San Marcos and San Pablo, all “La Laguna”, to establish processes based on the common interests of different areas of work, particularly of water and sanitation. Manclalaguna has been working for over a decade to form and incentivize a change in attitudes of neighbors, students, youth, women and local groups who share the same vision of promoting a new path towards sustainable natural resource use, the preservation of original cultures of founding towns, and a holistic vision of the environment with an emphasis on Lake Atitlán. The campaigns to protect the hydrographic basins include waste management programs, reforestation campaigns, control of erosion, forest plagues and fires, the installation and management of water treatment systems, biodiversity protection, tourist development, and more.

Manclalaguna put aside resources to improve the quality of water that drains into Lake Atitlán. In that framework a solid waste treatment plant was built, funds were allocated for the establishment of a wastewater treatment plant and the Commonwealth worked with community members and encouraged them to separate their waste at home. In addition, it worked with the San Pedro La Laguna Municipality to enforce the Rules for Solid Waste. The Municipality has made investments to improve the processes, with a focus on recruiting personnel and building the infrastructure necessary to recover waste.

ORDER TO REDUCE DISPOSABLE PLASTICS

The prohibition of single-use plastics was also a result of a citizen initiative that was channeled effectively by the Municipality. At the end of 2015, Liseth Martinez, a student majoring in Communication Sciences at the State University of San Carlos went to the offices of the Authority on Sustainable Management of Lake Atitlán and its Environment (AMSCLAE) to propose a senior project through a Supervised Professional Exercise. This project would revolve around designing and launching an awareness campaign for the communities that surround the lake and inform them about the need to assume an obligation as citizens and do their part in rescuing and preserving this important and symbolic body of water.

AMSCLAE constitutes the Lake Authority and is integrated by representatives of local and environmental public entities, it establishes work policies and accompanies the municipalities’ authority over the Lake. This entity allowed for the campaign to be communicated through an exceptional work of resource mobilization, coordination with different municipalities and interactions with communities along

the Lake achieved by the student, whose representatives proposed as a strategy banning the sale and use of straws and plastic materials in the shops and within the community.

In a public event in August 2016, the AMSCLAE authorities presented the recently elected mayors with a regulation model for solid waste management at the basin of Lake Atitlán. The proposal was meant to boost the campaign's effort to support the prohibition of straw use and its commercialization. In this same act, the recently elected Mayor of San Pedro La Laguna, architect Edwin Mauricio Méndez, promised in front of the Lake Authority and his colleagues that he would be the first to implement these rules in an integral way to clean up his municipality, San Pedro La Laguna.

He not only boosted but expanded the rule, and prohibited straws, single-use plastic bags, and polystyrene products (*duroport*) through Agreement 111-2016 of the Honorable Municipal Council of San Pedro La Laguna, voted on September 2016 and published in the Official News on October 7th of 2016, the moment it went into effect.

The agreement states: "The use, sale, and distribution of plastic bags, duroport, straws and by-products in the San Pedro La Laguna municipality, Sololá, are prohibited, in order to minimize the grave consequences that the excessive use of these products generates in the environment and Lake Atitlán."

The agreement also says: "From its publication date, the San Pedro La Laguna Municipality will provide a grace period of 60 calendar days for individual people and legal bodies to initiate the rule, get rid of the bags, duroport, straws and residual by-products, which the Municipality will create a center for the collection of and removal from the municipality. At the same time the Municipality, the Municipal Council for Development and the Board for Communication of Development that are recognized in the municipality will join the campaign of awareness and action for the disuse of bags, duroport, straws and by-products in the municipality."

Parallel to this, a policy was instituted to fine those who did not comply, with sanctions of 15,000 quetzales (1,950 USD) on companies that commercialize and distribute plastic bags, duroport, straws and by-products inside of the municipality and 300 quetzales (39 USD) to physical people or legal bodies that use these.

REDUCTION AND SUBSTITUTION OF PLASTIC IN FAVOR OF TRADITIONAL MATERIALS

The content of the agreement spread throughout the population and gained strength through the public actions taken by the mayor of the municipality and civil servants of the Lake Authority. One such action was they gave the businesses of the city market paper bags and confiscated plastic bags.

In addition, information on alternatives to plastic bags was given. These included baskets made of sugar cane, as is traditional in the region, reusable plates and utensils, cloth bags, and maxan leaves, which is the ancestral wrapping material of choice among indigenous communities.

In addition, the municipality provided cloth bags to 3,000 homes as an incentive to stop the use of plastic bags.

In the case of polystyrene, those who used it such as street food vendors, now use carton cups and wrap food in maxan leaves. In their part, plastic straws were used by restaurants and by street vendors who sold drinks in plastic bags with plastic straws. Both no longer offer them, but in the most expensive restaurants they are given upon request.

Also, a budgetary line was assigned representing 14% of the annual budget of the municipality to strengthen solid waste collection, separation, management, administration, and disposal in the municipality.

The case got national attention when a lawsuit was brought by the plastic industry. The case made it all the way to the highest court of the country, the Constitutional Court, who gave broad support to the mayor, and against the demand of the producers.

To give a consistency to the objectives of the prohibition, the strategy counted on the participation of the population and has held much ancestral and cultural weight within the *Tzutujil* community, who are only recent users of consumer items such as plastic bags in their everyday lives.

Other important actors in the achievement for this strategy, particularly in the prohibition of straw use, are the hotels and restaurants in San Pedro La Laguna now that most of them are willing to meet the regulations.

The municipality depends on a great number of volunteers, among students on track to university, who have to do community service to complete their educational program's requirements and who are sent to monitor if commercial places are abiding by Agreement 111-2016. These same students also lead workshops to raise awareness within the population.

Up to this point, there have been fines issued but only symbolically, as a way to bring attention to the issue and only on stores that sell plastic products.

Inspired by the project of not using synthetic materials, many independent citizen initiatives have been born. One of these is by the Xicay siblings, who coordinate an art gallery which displays photographs promoting a culture of environmental responsibility and brings to light the municipality and have even gone onto display in Canada

and Switzerland. The siblings lead another project that they have called “For a green world free of plastic,” through which they recruit groups of young people to organize activities for citizen responsibility and for the clean-up of public spaces.

CHALLENGES

Among the challenges identified by the shopkeepers, they mention that the newer generations are more willing to use things that are easy to use and they also prefer to use plastic straws and bags because they are cheap. Thus, the arguments against their use should be strong enough to convince their neighbors to change their habits. In addition to this, the rivalries between political groups have created a systematic opposition to everything that comes from the municipality. Nevertheless, the municipality estimates that 80% of the people are in favor of the plastics ban.

Lastly, in the beginning the agreement’s language was very general, prohibiting “plastic products,” which was modified to be more specific in Agreement 111-2016 and now refers to straws, plastic bags, and polystyrene products. This situation became the base that the maximum legal body of the country used to give the mayor’s office of San Pedro La Laguna provisional protection at the beginning and definitive protection at end of the process, on the basis of promoting the right to a healthy environment and to benefit the population.

Reflections on the initiative to reduce plastics

In relation to the initiative, and after having interviewed different sectors of the community, including the mayor and public and private bodies, a few reflections can be made:

- This measure represented a return to traditional forms of wrapping that used natural materials and that the *Tzutujil* community of San Pedro La Laguna has used for centuries.
- The introduction of straws in the municipality is a relatively recent event (in the ‘90s) and happened when the restaurant and hotel industries developed there and wanted to meet the growing demand of tourists with low-budgets in the region.
- Plastic bags were also a daily consumer product that was introduced in the ‘70s in the municipality and were important due to its low cost and practicality.
- Polystyrene utensils are just as recent and were introduced to meet an important demand for people who work and do not give up the practice of taking homemade food to their workplace, as the material keeps the food warm.

- The municipal mayor is an authority figure of traditional power and is very respected in indigenous communities. Also, they were definitively protected by the Constitutional Court, which rejected the demands made by the plastic industry.
- The extent of the effort to reduce and eliminate the use of plastic products is supported by the popularity of the global movement to clean the planet of hazardous elements to safeguard the health of people and ecosystems.
- The community has become aware and has started its own movements to protect the natural resources of the municipality.
- The presence of plastic bags and polystyrene utensils in the lake has diminished drastically and the reduction trend continues.
- The presence of bags, straws, and polystyrene utensils in the solid waste plant had reduced at first, but has increased in the past year, meaning that people have begun to disobey the measure.
- In the end, the process was positive because the proliferation of the waste in the lake has decreased a good amount and it continues to diminish.
- The ban gained validity and is being emulated by other municipalities at a national level, with 18 municipalities having similar prohibitions. Among these are San Pedro La Laguna, San Andrés Semetabaj and Santa Lucía Utatlán (Sololá Department); Cantel (Quetzaltenango); Acatenango (Chimaltenango); San Miguel Petapa, San Juan Sacatepéquez and Villa Canales (Guatemala); Antigua Guatemala, Santa Catarina Barahona, San Antonio Aguas Calientes and Santa Lucía Milpas Altas (Sacatepequez); San Miguel Chicaj (Baja Verapaz); San Pedro Sacatepéquez (San Marcos); San Juan Ixcoy (Huehuetenango); San Juan Chamelco and San Cristóbal Verapaz (Alta Verapaz) and Esquipulas (Chiquimula). In addition, there have been voluntary initiatives identified in Panajachel and San Lucas Tolimán, just like the head of the Department of Sololá where the municipalities that make up the Manctzolojya community have promoted ancestral alternatives for the reduction of solid waste.
- To consolidate this trend, in September of 2019, the government of Guatemala prohibited the use and distribution of bags, straws, plates, cups, and stirrers or mixers made of plastic and for single-use, including the containers for the storage and transportation of food that are made of plastic and with polystyrene. The rule allows for the distribution and use of these elements only in the case that they are produced with compostable plastics, according to the European standards for compostable plastics. The prohibition was sanctioned through the Gubernatorial Agreement 189-2019 and will be enforced in 2021.

October 2019





Sources:

1. Arch. Edwin Méndez, Municipal Mayor of San Pedro La Laguna
2. Eng. Agapito Cortez, Manager of the Commonwealth of Municipalities, Manclalaguna
3. Eng. Luisa Consuelo Cifuentes de Aguilar, Director of the Authority on Sustainable Management of Lake Atitlán and its Environment (AMSCLAE)
4. Eng. Onelia Xicay, Technical Director AMSCLAE
5. Eng. Maria Chavajay Méndez, Waste Treatment Plant Manager
6. Mr. Pablo González, Manager of the [Tren de Aseo] Municipality of San Pedro La Laguna
7. Mr. Gaspar Ixcaja and Mr. Juan Quiacain, Representatives of the Academy for Mayan Languages
8. Mr. Pedro Yancor, Student of Pedagogy and a merchant

Also, vendors of the market, high school students and citizens were interviewed as well.

Minister of the Environment of Guatemala

Investigation conducted by Alianza de Derecho Ambiental y Agua
(Alliance for the Right to the Environment and Water)