

## Feature

**T**HE evils of polythene have become a global concern with new findings about its dangers to the environment and health coming out everyday. In Bangladesh, many of us have a vague idea of the demerits of polythene, yet they are not deep-seated enough for us to do without it.

Polythene is used for wrapping mainly food items such as meat, vegetables, bread, biscuits etc. Not surprising therefore, that everyday, on an average, a single family throws four polythene bags in Dhaka. With half a million families living in the capital, this means the number of polythene bags thrown out every day is four and a half million. Only ten per cent of this obscene number is thrown at a fixed place. The remaining ninety per cent are thrown randomly in drains, manholes, canals or just in open garbage dumps.

It does not take much imagination to know what kind of consequences follow after such large scale dumping. Polythene is not recyclable, it clogs the drains making them overflow and spread more germs, it gives off harmful gases which damage the environment and plays havoc with people's health.

Yet this is just the tip of the iceberg. Recent studies in the US have found that continued consumption of food wrapped in polythene may cause a form of blood cancer in later years. An American health magazine reports that patients with artificial plastic hearts run a very high risk of developing cancer. Yet plastic hearts continue to be used in transplants because alternatives have not been invented. Soil too, is adversely affected by polythene that is dumped in it. Polythene destroys the bacteria in the soil that helps in its fertility thus causing agricultural problems.

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causing agricultural problems. It also disrupts the concentration of soil, making it weak and so unsuitable as foundation for buildings. Moreover in Dhaka, some amount of polythene is recycled to make plastic moulds used as container bottoms or soles of shoes. The hydrogen cyanide gas given off when the polythene is burnt for this purpose causes all kinds of respiratory diseases, some of them as fatal as lung cancer.

All these facts point out to one nagging question: why are we still using polythene? The answer is: a variety of reasons. Apart from the convenience that polythene offers in terms of wrapping and packaging, the factories making this harmful substance have been

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allowed to thrive and proliferate indiscriminately. In 1983 there were only two polythene bag factories in Dhaka city. At present this number has increased to over two hundred. Alternatives have not been promoted and the ban on polythene manufacture has not been enforced. Public awareness has still not reached a level where a majority of people refrain from using polythene bags.

In this respect Hossain Sharier, a journalist, through his organisation Environment and Social Development Organisation (ESDO), has

started a crusade against polythene. ESDO's prime strategy has been to reach out to local people. In 1992 apart from circulating leaflets and posters with information on the ill-effects of polythene, ESDO organized group meetings in 14 thana areas participated by local people with the help of local clubs. Operating centrally from Dhaka, ESDO got a few policy makers and the general public together to disseminate information on polythene and discuss ways to stop its use. In mid '92, Sharier and his colleagues arranged a successful rally that was participated by

ESDO made some recommendations: i) the government would use the electronic media that is TV for one whole year to create awareness among the people; ii) no new polythene factory would be allowed to operate and the existing industries would gradually phase out production from 10 per cent to 30 per cent reduction and a complete stop of production within the two years. iii) The Ministers of Jute and Textiles would take initiatives to replace polythene with alternative materials such as

January '94. Needless to say, this has not worked. With city elections at the same time, the government was probably reluctant to lose the 2600 votes from workers at the polythene factories. The result was a decision on January 14 to suspend the ban for the time being.

In '93 a Parliamentary Committee on Polythene Banning was formed chaired by the Jute Minister. But instead of adopting any of the ESDO recommendations that provided practical, sustainable solutions, the committee decided on a complete ban on polythene production from

joint programmes with the workers and field officers of these organisations to give information to local people," says Sharier. "We are also taking the help of the Press Clubs around the country to create greater awareness and let people decide whether they will accept polythene or not," he adds.

The government, says Sharier, has recently shown support for the programmes and people have had positive responses. "We ask them says ESDO's Executive Director, what did we use 10 years ago when we didn't have polythene bags? Why can't we go back to jute, cloth or paper bags?" Sharier explains that using a cloth or jute bag is much more economical since it will cost about Taka 450 and can be used for at least six months whereas if a single family even uses just one bag a day and 20 bags for a month each for one taka, it will be spending Taka 20 per month.

To practice what he preaches Sharier has stopped using polythene in his own household and has persuaded many of his friends and relatives to do the same. "We use cloth bags for keeping food in the deep freeze with different coloured cloth for different food items and it works just as good as polythene without its bad effects."

ESDO is also trying other ways to get the message across. From January, it has started a Family Development Programme targeting mainly women and children of middle class and poor. A health service programme operating in Tejgaon, Gulshan and Mirpur gives free treatment to poor residents each week. On the first visit each patient has to buy a 5 taka card paying only 2 taka for subsequent visits. In exchange, the patients have to

listen to ESDO workers speak on hygiene, environment and so on.

ESDO's saving programme allows members of groups to save money for a certain period which allows one member, at the end of the period, to take a loan which he or she may use to do business with.

In order to make children more aware of the dangers of polythene use and other man-made environmental hazards, ESDO plans an Environmental Camp in October for school children between 8-12 years. Each camp will consist of 20 to 25 children accompanied by their parents. "We will take them to the Botanical garden, zoo, agricultural fields etc to give them a first hand lesson on nature conservation", says Sharier.

ESDO has certainly made a difference in the way many people think about polythene use. Yet we are still buying polythene bags everyday, to carry vegetables or meat and still eat bread wrapped in a substance that may cause us to have blood cancer; every day we throw polythene bags in open garbage dumps, bags that eventually find their way into drains, sewers or inside the soil; and everyday we allow people to burn tons of polythene bags to emit noxious gases into the environment, into our bodies. The government has a vital role to play in terms of creating awareness and promoting environment friendly substitutes. But ultimately it is really upto us to stop using polythene. Where there is no demand, there will be no supply.

**Note: All information regarding the harmful effects of polythene have been taken from ESDO's report on the subject.**

## Environment

## The Fight against Polythene

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

cloth or jute which have natural fibres and so have no adverse effect on the environment. The idea was that at the end of two years these substitutes would be available for the public.

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This, however, has not stopped ESDO from continuing its work. With a fellowship from Ashoka Foundation, Sharier and his colleagues have developed linkages with other organizations engaged in social development in other parts of the country. "We have

been working with the Jute, Cloth and Paper Bag Association.

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