

Dear Congresswoman Han Jeoung-ae, (한정애-민주당 환경노동위원회)

We are writing on behalf of PLAYGROUND, a group of Korean high school student activists who are deeply concerned with South Korea's increasing plastic use and mismanagement of plastic waste.

PLAYGROUND is a student-led nonprofit organization committed to bringing social change. When we were kids, the playground was a space for unbound creativity and meaningful collaboration. Now as we develop as global leaders, the world has become our playground. By tapping into the infinite potential of imagination, we seek to discover new approaches to the world's most pressing issues. Gaining insight and exploring new opportunities, we aim to apply our ingenuity and creativity to develop innovative yet tangible solutions to improve our world.

It is evident that plastic use has significantly increased in South Korea since 1950 with approximately 335 million tons of plastic produced in 2016, causing both primary microplastic pollution—the disposal of tiny plastic parts from electronic devices and industrial products—and secondary microplastic pollution—the degradation and wearing off of larger plastic materials over time. Such pollution has a detrimental impact on marine wildlife, ecosystems and fisheries, inevitably also causing issues with public health. As a response, South Korea has taken several measures to mitigate this global environmental catastrophe, such as banning disposable plastic bags from large supermarkets. Moreover, South Korean president Moon Jae In has recently announced that he will invest 160 trillion won by 2025 in initiating a “K-New Deal,” with goals to transform the economy from petroleum-based to eco-friendly.

However, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea's efforts now seem to have backtracked. With the public perception that disposable plastic will prevent the virus from spreading, the city of Seoul experienced a 15% increase of daily plastic use in 2020 compared to last year. Cafes are no longer required to use reusable mugs and cups within the store, and the number of food deliveries have increased by 40%, causing concerns of excessive plastic repackaging. Yet, according to the United States National Institutes of Health, the virus could still stay on disposable plastic for three days, and that within a restaurant, tables, chairs, and handles could serve as greater causes of infection, rather than reusable materials.

Excessive repackaging has also contributed heavily to the plastic crisis in South Korea, aggravated by the increase in delivery services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the government has enacted a ban on repackaging to reduce unnecessary waste, controversies arose due to a lack of detailed guidelines for implementation. With South Korea's problem with handling plastic, trash waste has either been piling within the country or exported to other countries, sometimes illegally. While South Korea suffers from these issues, other nations have been initiating environmental measures. The city of Kameoka in Japan has issued “zero plastic coupons,” where acts of environmental conservation, such as bringing reusable mugs or shopping bags, could be transferred into money. The European Union has already banned plastics that only degrade from oxidation, and will ban disposable plastics entirely by 2021.

South Korea is one of the world's worst offenders when it comes to plastic waste. The nation ranks second worldwide as the largest waste producer, wherein South Koreans annually use an average of 420 plastic bags. As a highly developed country, the government should thus take responsibility on human activity and its impact on the environment. In order to mitigate the effects of plastic pollution, we propose the following measures:

Point 1: Outline a roadmap for South Korea's plan to ban disposable plastic within the coming years, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. So far, South Korea only has plans of possibly banning disposable plastic cups by 2021 and straws by 2022; thus, a proper plan ahead to ensure all disposable plastics will be eliminated is necessary.

Point 2: Commit to research and financial support for companies that produce or use plastics from renewable biomass sources, also known as bioplastics. Alternatives are varied, such as polylactic acid (made from sugars in corn starch, sugarcane or cassava) that could be dissolved in 80 days. Funds could come from the Finance Ministry's recent investment in the K-New Deal.

Point 3: Limit plastic waste imports from and exports to abroad. A myriad of companies in South Korea continue to prefer imported plastic waste; moreover, due to China's recent ban on import waste, several firms began illegally exporting waste to Southeast Asian nations. Limitations on both waste imports and exports could incentivize recycling companies to utilize recycled domestic waste, minimize trash piles, and curtail illegal waste exports.

Point 4: **PLASTIC STANDARDIZATION**

As a member of the National Assembly's Environmental Labor Committee, we sincerely hope that you could bring light to these disregarded issues.

Sincerely,

The members of PLAYGROUND