

Plastic in Hospitality and Tourism: A Global Problem with Local Solutions

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Introduction

The polluting effects of plastic materials and Single Use Plastics (SUPs) are a worldwide challenge to be solved with urgency. The Hospitality & Tourism (H&T) sector is a large-scale user of plastic material and SUPs. SUPs are widely present in the kitchen, dining room, breakfast area, housekeeping department, guests' rooms, the front office, as well as being often parts of the welcome package kits - or toiletries - provided by H&T facilities to their guests. With COVID-19, the use of SUPs for hygiene and safety purposes increased dramatically with an estimation of 8 million tons of pandemic-associated plastic waste generated. While big hotels and chains have more robust economic means and human resources to reduce plastics use, small H&T firms face further constraints due to limited knowledge, economic and human resources.

Hence a consortium made of different local and national stakeholders articulates clear questions and is interested in building knowledge and finding solutions to reduce SUPs in H&T developed the project "Plastic in Hospitality & Tourism: a Global Problem with Local Solutions". Implementing a Design-Based Research (DBR) methodology, this project will generate new knowledge and innovative solutions to reduce plastics use within the H&T sector. The project is a powerful cross-over of the Professorships of Sustainability in Hospitality and Tourism, Circular Product Design, and Green Economics at NHL Stenden UAS of Leeuwarden together with HZ UAS of Middelburg, with the participation of 12 small H&T firms of Friesland and Zeeland. Circular Friesland, Center of Expertise in Leisure, Tourism, and Hospitality (CELT), University of Groningen, Bidfood NL, Omrin, ACCOR Amsterdam, Westerlaken Foundation (Bali), and Roompot NL (Headquarter in Zeeland) are involved.

The Plastic Challenge

The Hospitality and Tourism (H&T) sector is among the largest users of Single Use Plastics (SUPs). The international hotel industry uses 150 million tons of SUPs every year (UNESCO Sustainable Travel Pledge), hence it is a major contributor to the problem. This is partly due to the heavy focus on comfort and convenience and because plastics are generally considered unexpensive, durable, flexible, and hygienic (Green Hospitality, 2020). Although plastics are an essential material in our industrialized society, they are also iconic pollutants as in the so-called plastic soup (www.plasticsoupfoundation.org). Plastic elimination, reduction and recycling is therefore expected to contribute to the transition to a Circular Economy as well as being in accordance with the EU agenda.

The Context

The use of SUPs takes place both in front of the counter (terraces, restaurants, rooms) and behind the counter (kitchens, services, and transport). Friesland and Zeeland small H&T firms are conscious and aware of the problem and are willing and committed to reducing the use of plastics. This commitment is partly based on their intrinsic motivation, and – with regards to Friesland – on their desire to contribute to Friesland Province Agenda of becoming the most Circular Province of Europe in 2025. These firms aim to reduce plastics by exploring how to refuse, re-use and recycle plastics as well as replacing the unavoidable plastics with alternatives. Within the H&T sector, the situation is quite complex since some small firms have already started implementing plastic reduction measures while others are just starting or willing to do it. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is hampering plastic reduction ambitions and efforts of small H&T firms, and even increasing the use of plastics.

Project Rational & Objectives

Friesland and Zeeland H&T firms expressed the worry that, after COVID-19, the use of plastics will not decrease due to consumer hygienic concerns. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis stresses the urgency to explore and understand the implications on the refuse, re-use and recycle of plastics in these firms. The involved H&T firms recognize that they lack knowledge on the current best practices of refuse, reuse, and recycle of plastics, on possible alternatives, and on effective nudging practices to stimulate the required behaviour in reducing plastic use. Therefore, the consortium wants to:

1. Inventory the current knowledge and practices implemented by the involved SMEs for SUPs refuse, reuse, and recycle as well as the nudging strategies applied to reduce plastics use.
2. Close the gap between entrepreneurs' current knowledge and practices in these H&T businesses and the established knowledge on plastics refuse, reuse, and recycle; alternatives to plastics; and nudging strategies for behavioral change.
3. Design and strengthen the entrepreneurs' practices for plastics by introducing innovative refuse, reuse, recycle and nudging products, systems and strategies in Friesland and Zeeland H&T businesses.
4. Design an iconic nudge / iconic nudges in the form of a Plastic-Free Welcome Package for Friesland and Zeeland H&T, to convey a learning experience to both guests and staff.
5. Secure and disseminate the acquired knowledge about refuse, reuse, and recycle innovations in plastics, alternatives to SUPs, and best nudging strategies within the Dutch H&T sector and Universities of Applied Sciences.

The project is conceived as a step towards Circular Economy implying a focus on local solutions. The Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) of H&T sector have a huge potential to contribute to SUPs reduction. The question we want to address in this project is how to use less SUPs within the SMEs of the Friesland and Zeeland H&T sector.