



Youth Inspired by Knowledge

POP-UNAM ON ELIMINATING SINGLE-USE PLASTICS & STIRRING ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

By Philo Magdalene



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Every single piece of plastic that all of humanity has ever used remains undecomposed to this day, blocking the processes of natural environment in every way possible. While anthropocentric development has ensured that man's immediate reality doesn't get threatened by this, it is inhumane to turn a blind eye to the fact that the accumulation of plastic has largely affected almost all forms of environmental ecosystems. With the realization that these dreadful consequences ultimately doom the future of human survival, one becomes sensitized to making conscious efforts in restricting the habitual use of plastic commodities.

While several state and national governments have been forthcoming in promoting plastic-free regions by banning the manufacture and utilization of single-use plastic, there have also been collective attempts by corporates and educational institutions in promoting eco-friendly and sustainable lifestyles. The National Autonomous University in Mexico (UNAM) is one such institution of higher learning whose Chemistry Faculty, through POP - UNAM is conducting extensive campaigns on the elimination of single-use-plastic in that faculty, and after that, to spread the POP Movement outside that faculty and mobilize more students. UNAM is the largest university in Mexico with around 356,530 students (according to the period 2018 – 2019). With the Chemistry faculty alone having a population of almost 8000 including students, professors and workers, the POP Movement with its team of 14 members and 5 advisors has been sensitizing the students in and around the Chemistry Faculty to adopt an eco-friendly lifestyle by suspending the use of single-use plastic.

With the help of *Braskem Idesa*, a petrochemical company, POP – UNAM has recently participated in a project wherein 70 kilograms of plastic materials including propylene, PET and Styrofoam¹ were collected from the students in the faculty's cafeterias in a mere span of three weeks. Aside from the fact that the plastic was taken for recycling by the petrochemical company, there were other enriching aspects which inspired almost all the population of the Chemistry Faculty to participate. For every kilogram of plastic waste that was collected by the students, they were given 'plastic coins' in the form of tickets which could be later exchanged for stationery and laboratory materials. The community decided to exchange the 'plastic money' received for books and donated them to the faculty's library.

The POP team in UNAM believes in sensitizing individuals through informed one-on-one interactions. By using a personal carbon footprint calculator which they had earlier come up with, the team talks to students about their non-environmental friendly habits. Questions like "How many single-use plastic glasses/ cutlery do you use in a week?" are posed and the answer

¹ It is important to note that this amount is quite significant given that most single-use plastic is quite light in weight. For example, the weight of one thousand single-use plastic bags is a mere 6.8 kilograms. Read more facts on plastic bags [here](#).

is used by the calculator to give an approximation of the person's carbon footprint in a year. The data is also translated in terms of the number of trees being cut by the person so as to nudge the individual's conscience and instill a sense of obligation to pay attention to their utilization. Data collected from earlier projects implemented in the faculty are also effectively disseminated through this method. The team distributes 'POP cylinders' which are reusable bottles, as presents to students who have participated in their campaigns and showed interest. This gesture is intended to encourage students to bring their own containers or glasses from their homes and make use of the free water system that is available in the campus, instead of splurging on use-and-throw plastic bottles. On the other hand, they have adapted some table games with environmental education information.

Along with a wide range of environmental friendly activities, students are also encouraged to adopt consumer behavior that discourages and dismisses the utilization of single-use plastic and prefers the local market over the purchase of items that travel thousands of kilometers overseas. To drive home these messages, the POP members themselves set personal examples by engaging in eco-friendly activities like bringing utilities from home and avoiding the use of plastic plates, cups and cutlery in the faculty.

From campaigns on social media to dialogues and interactive sessions, POP- UNAM has been working extensively to bring environmental education to the forefront. Their activism, along with those of others around the world will be the propellers of change in the society.

To visit the Chemistry Faculty's POP Facebook page, please scan the QR Code below or [click here](#).

