



# PARTNERSHIP TO REDUCE PLASTIC USE IN THE TOURISM SECTOR IN GALLE, SRI LANKA

MAY 2023

## 1. Introduction

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that out of the approximate 100-150 million tonnes of plastics produced globally for single-use purposes as much as eight million tonnes are dumped into the oceans every year [1]. Marine plastic litter has been found to affect more than 800 marine and coastal species including by way of displacing biodiversity and disturbing sensitive habitat [2,3]. Some studies suggest that if production and consumption trends continue at the current rate, plastic pollution may ultimately make up 10%-13% of the total global carbon emissions by midcentury [4]. In addition to its climate and environmental health impacts, plastic pollution and associated marine litter also poses enormous social and economic risks. For instance, research estimates the economic damages from plastic waste on marine ecosystems at almost US\$13 billion annually, with a significant proportion of financial losses incurred by the international tourism industry—with knock-on effects for the

livelihoods of communities most dependent on it [5]. While tourism is adversely affected as noted in the previous section, tourism sector itself is also a driver of plastic pollution and marine litter across transnational value chains. For example, recent projections by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) indicate that international tourist arrivals are likely to grow from 1.1 billion in 2014 to 1.8 billion in 2030 [6]. 80% of all tourism activities take place in coastal areas, with marine-related tourism presently generating an estimated US\$ 134 billion per year [7]. Short of a different approach, it is clear that mis-managed plastic pollution from tourism will continue to accumulate in oceans and waterways [2].

Reducing the use and promoting the environmentally sound management of single-use plastics in the tourism sector therefore offers a great opportunity to tackle plastic pollution at the source. Similarly, addressing problematic plastics



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throughout tourism value chains can also drive a shift towards innovative and circular business models. In this context, the Global Tourism Plastics Initiative --jointly launched by UNEP and UNWTO in 2020—engages with key stakeholders in the international tourism industry with a view to achieve a number of concrete and actionable commitments on plastics reduction by 2025 [7]. These include (i) *eliminating problematic or unnecessary plastic packaging and items by 2025*, (ii) *taking actions to move away from single-use plastic products/ items towards reuse models/ reusable alternatives*, (iii) *engaging the value chain to move towards 100% of plastic packaging to be reusable, recyclable or compostable*, (iv) *taking actions to increase the amount of recycled content across all plastic packaging and items used*, (v) *committing to collaborating and investing to increase the recycling and composting rates for plastics and* (vi) *reporting publicly and annually on progress made towards these targets*.

Like many island nations, tourism represents one of the main pillars of national development in Sri Lanka, with implications both for employment generation as well as the country's longer-term economic prospects. Following the end of Sri Lanka's long running civil war, tourism-related services have emerged as an important economic driver that has attracted sizeable investment. Tourism presently ranks as the third-largest source of foreign exchange earnings in Sri Lanka, making up 12% of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) [8]. The sector also generates significant employment opportunities, adding thousands of direct and indirect jobs to the Sri Lankan economy every year. While Sri Lanka's hospitality industry contracted during COVID-19 pandemic, 2022 saw a slight increase in the number of international tourist arrivals, with 719,978 visitors recorded for the year [9].

Nevertheless, due in part to limited awareness, planning and management capacities as well as increase of the numbers, the country is facing challenges in managing growing volumes of plastic waste produced by hotels, especially from small and medium accommodation facilities. These constraints, together with the lack of readily available alternative products often result in a large percentage of Sri Lanka's plastic waste leaking into the marine environment. With this as a starting point, this paper summarizes critical observations and lessons learned from a pilot project on plastic waste management being implemented in Galle City by *the IGES Centre Collaborating with UNEP on Environmental Technologies (CCET), the Ministry of Environment, Sri Lanka, the Secretariat of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions (BRS Secretariat) and HELP-O, a local non-governmental organization (NGO)*. In cooperation with the Hotels Association of Galle, the project has sought to examine the current status of plastic consumption in selected hotels

across the city with a key focus on small and medium establishments located in the Galle Fort area.

Activities have also included awareness-raising with hotel staff and guests to avoid single-use plastic products, assisting selected hotels to develop plastic reduction action plans to better contribute to domestic solutions to plastic pollution, working with governments and suppliers to produce more sustainable alternatives to single-use plastic products, as well as outlining recommendations to link project interventions with national initiatives. This model project is being implemented as part of an umbrella project entitled "*Marine litter and microplastics: promoting the environmentally sound management of plastic waste and achieving the prevention and minimization of the generation of plastic waste*' (BRS-Norad-1), which is being implemented in Sri Lanka and Ghana, and also features global activities. The BRS-Norad-1 project is facilitated by the BRS Secretariat and financed by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) with additional funding provided by the Government of the Netherlands.

This paper consists of three sections. After this short introduction, Section 2 presents the status of plastic use in tourist hotels in Galle City based on the sample survey carried out in Galle Fort area during the period of May – December, 2022. Section 3 summarizes main lessons learned and outlines relevant policy recommendations for guiding the sound management of plastic waste in Sri Lanka's tourism sector.

## **2. A Status of Plastic Use in Tourist Hotels in Galle City**

### **2.1. A Rapid Growth of Tourist Sector in Southern Province**

According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), in 2022, the country hosted 3,829 registered accommodation facilities comprising a total of 48,120 rooms in 2022. As shown in Table 1, only 156 (4%) accommodations in Sri Lanka are classified as Tourist Hotels, comprising 37 Five-star, 37 Four-star, 26 Three-star, 28 two star and 28 one-star hotel. Comparatively, small and medium accommodations, such as guest houses, homestays and bungalows represent make up the highest number of registered tourist establishments in

Sri Lanka, accounting for 36%, 26.4% and 22.4% respectively.

Table 1: SLTDA registered tourist accommodations in 2022 [9]

Category	Number of establishments	Number of rooms
Boutique Hotel	40	845
Boutique Villa	49	346
Bungalow	857	3,513
Classified Tourist Hotels	156	15,080
Guest Houses	1,380	15,438
Heritage Bungalow	4	19
Heritage Home	3	9
Home Stay Unit	1,009	3,049
Hostels	11	133
Rented Apartment	85	323
Rented Homes	10	28
Themed Accommodation	1	11
Unclassified	224	9,326
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,829</b>	<b>48,120</b>

Similarly, when looking at the distribution of hotel rooms across the country (Figure 1), Sri Lanka's Southern Province has the second highest concentration (26%) following the Western Province (34.9%).

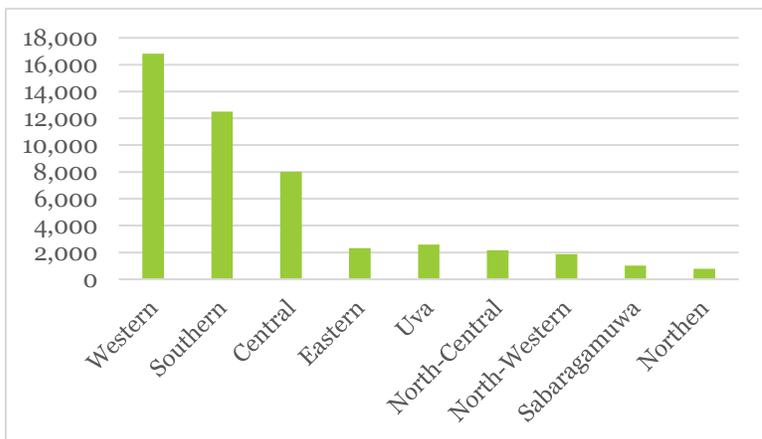


Figure 1: Distribution of hotel rooms by Administrative Province in Sri Lanka in 2022

Moreover, the compiled data also indicates a significant increase in the number of rooms compared to 2021, especially in the areas of Matara (33.4%) and Galle (27.7%) (Figure 2). This growth can largely be attributed to

growing numbers of visitors to these locations, as well as measures taken by authorities to meet market demands, such as providing provisional licenses to informal tourism business operations, expanded registration for obtaining soft liquor licenses, and progressive efforts to raise awareness about these legal reforms [10].

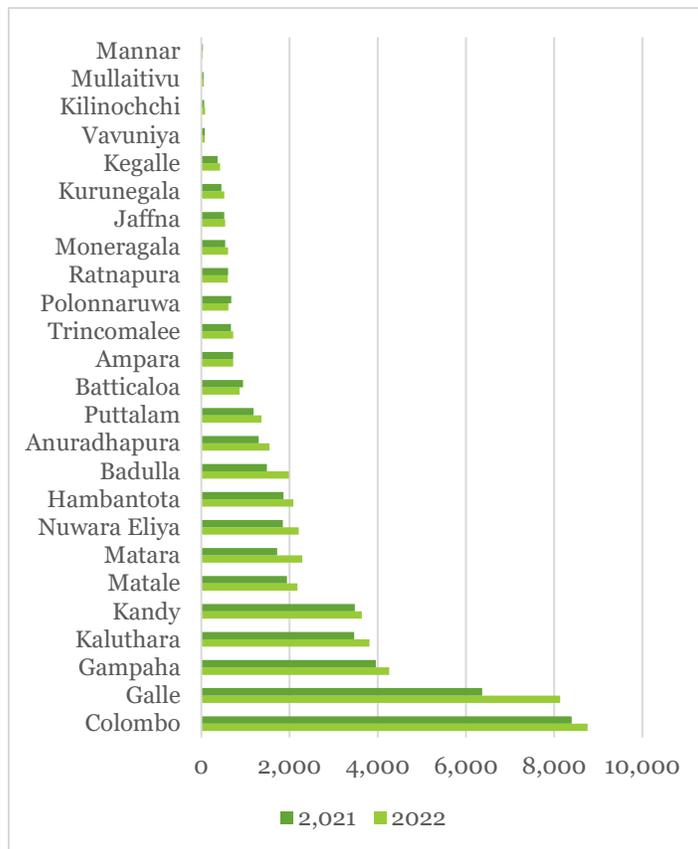


Figure 2: Distribution of hotel rooms by administrative districts in Sri Lanka in 2022

## 2.2. A review of tourist hotels in Galle Fort Area

Galle Fort is a historic World Heritage site in the city of Galle hosting impressive Dutch-style colonial buildings, ancient mosques and churches, as well as grand mansions and museums, among other heritage attractions (Figure 3). Built by former Dutch colonists, beginning in 1663, the Galle Fort represents a prime tourist hotspot for domestic and international travelers alike, who enjoy the city's many stylish cafes, boutiques and immaculately-restored hotels, many of which are owned by local and foreign luminaries such as artists, writers, photographers and designers.



Figure 3: A view of narrow streets within Galle Fort

For purposes of this study, sample data was collected from 24 selected tourist accommodations in the Galle Fort area, including through focused interviews with hoteliers and their staff, structured questionnaires as well as field observations. Analysis of this information reveals some interesting findings and observations about the status of hotels in Galle City, summarized as below.

(a) As shown in Figure 4, a large majority of tourist hotels in Galle Fort area are classified as Guest Houses (33%) and Homestays (25%). In addition, the data revealed that 17% of accommodations in Galle Fort are boutique hotels, followed by villas (8%) bungalows (4%) and other types (13%).

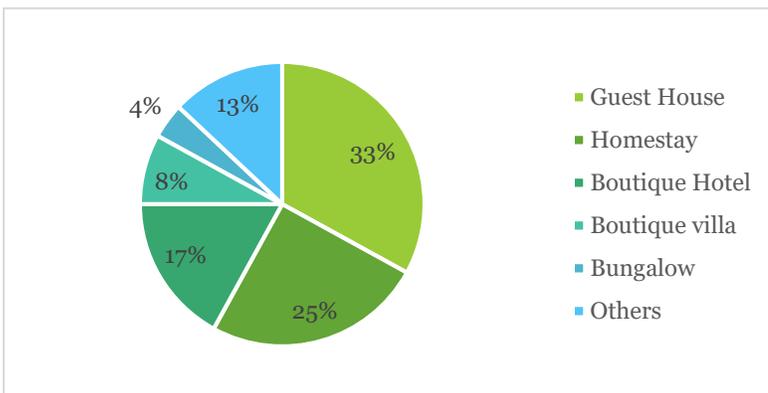


Figure 4: A type of hotels in Galle Fort Area

(b) When looking at the registration of accommodations, only 46% of hotels in Galle Fort area confirmed their registration under the SLTDA, with 12% pending approvals and 42% remain not registered (Figure 5).

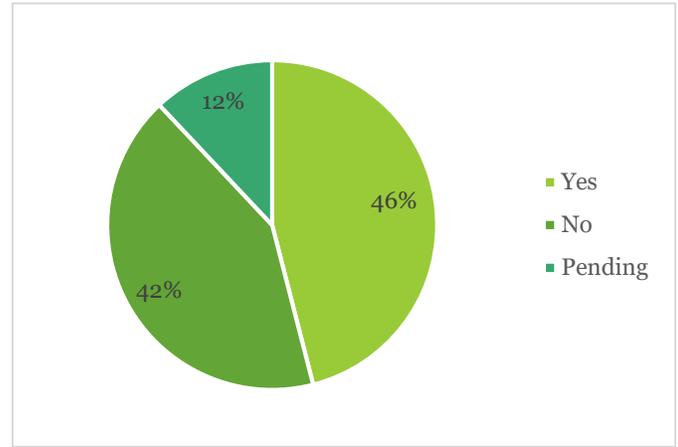


Figure 5: A number of registered hotels under the SLTDA in Galle Fort area

(c) The study suggested considerable variation in the size of lodging in Galle Fort area, ranging from the biggest (31 rooms) to the smallest (2 rooms), averaging a total of 8 rooms per accommodation. As shown in Figure 6, the highest number of rooms are belonged to the hotels with rooms less than 6 (50%) and between 6-15 (42%). Only 4% hotels have over 26 rooms.

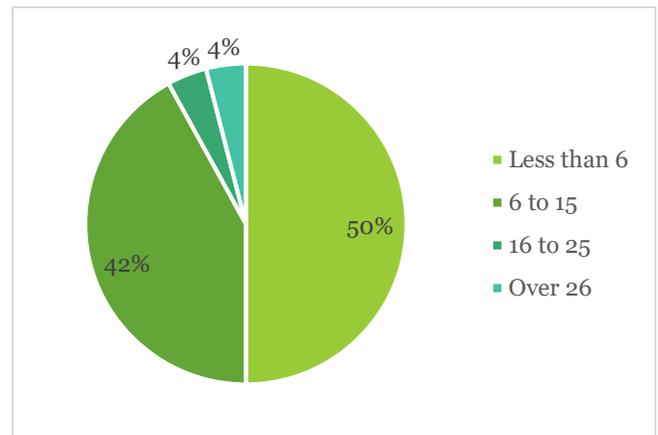


Figure 6: Number of rooms in selected hotels in Galle Fort

(d) Similar observations were found in terms of number of employees, with the largest hotel in the sample managing as many as 115 staff, compared to 24% of businesses that employed between 6 to 25 workers; almost half (47% of total) reported fewer than 11 employees (Figure 7).

(e) Moreover, approximately half of survey respondents indicated that they maintained on-site restaurant facilities (11 total). Notably, almost all survey respondents reported to make use of online reservation platforms, either

through third party service providers or through direct website bookings (22 total).

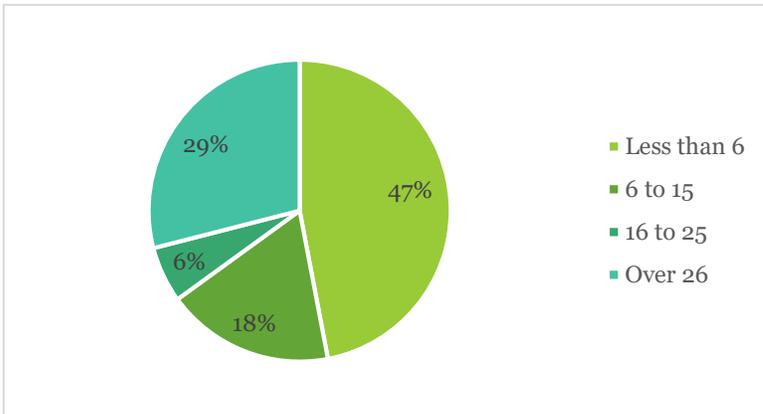


Figure 7: Total No of employees in the hotels

### 2.3. Review of Plastic Use by Hotel Operations in Galle Fort Area

The study also examined different types of plastic products that are consumed and disposed as waste within Galle Fort area hotels in order to assess which plastic items are most at risk of potential leakage.

Table 2: Plastic usage in different departments/ sections of hotels

Department	Popular types of plastic products
(1) Lobby/ Front Desk	Flower baskets/ Table mats/ Dust bins/ Ornaments/ Pens/ Writing pads
(2) Restaurants/ Cafeteria/ Kitchen	Ashtray/ Tissue holders/ Plate/ baskets/ Water bottles/ other drinking bottles/ Straws/ mixing sticks/ Dust bins/ Toothpick holders/ Table mats/ Cups/ Paper & Salt filters/ Trays/ Flower pots/ Table mats/ Tissue holders/ Pens/ Menu / Shopping bags/ Packaging
(3) Rooms	Dustbins/ Water bottles/ Hangers/ Tissue holders/ Table mats/ Spoons & Forks/ Pens/ Boxes/ Keys/ Key holders/ Sign boards/ Lamps/ Ornaments/ Cups/ Trays/ Laundry bags/ Slippers/
(4) Washrooms	Dustbins/ Sanitary box/ Shampoo kits/ Saving kits/ Tissue holders/ Soap boxes/ Tooth brush kit/ Cups/ Shower kits

As summarized in Table 2, the analysis of plastic usage by hotels in the Galle Fort area suggest a number of plastic products are used by each department or section. This indicates that all respective departments are important

when considering development of hotel action plans and strategies to manage plastic pollution. Further, the analysis also reveals that many single-use plastic products (SUPPs) used in Galle Fort area hotels are often responsible for environmental pollution, including PET bottles, followed by disposable shower kits and toiletries, plastic bags and liners, food packaging, as well plastic cups and straws. This finding was also supplemented with a review of existing literature. Compiled data from the 69 hotels' own operations note that, 32% of SUPPs by weight were associated with water bottles, 31% with toiletries, 15% with bags and liners, 9% with food packaging, 3% with cups, 4% with cling film, 3% with other miscellaneous packaging, 1% with cutlery, stirrers and straws and 1% with small food products [11].

Table 3: SUPP Hotspots for Travel and Tourism [11]

SUPPs	Risk of littering	Awareness among tourism businesses	Additional evidence
Water bottles (other drinking bottles, including caps)	High	High	One of the most common items found on the beaches (WWF 2019; Ocean Conservancy 2019), and amongst common items (cigarette butts, wrappers), also one of the heaviest.
Disposable toiletries	Low	High	High volume used in hotels.
Plastic bags and bin littering	Medium/ Low	Medium	Sixth most common item found on the beaches in Europe.
Food packaging	High	Low	Consistently one of the most common items found on the beaches (WWF 2019; Ocean Conservancy 2019); 30-40% of all plastic supply is used to produce food packaging.
Cups	High/ Medium	High	Eighth most common item found on the beaches in Europe.

Similar to the findings in Table 3, a majority of surveyed hotels have high awareness on SUPPs, particularly plastic bottles, disposable toiletries and cups. Comparatively, the awareness on packaging and bags are limited.

Some hotels have already introduced steps to reduce the generation of plastic waste. For instance, a number of surveyed businesses indicated that they have stopped providing disposable water bottles to the guests. In addition, a number of respondents highlighted the use of glass, wood, rattan, and metal as replacement materials for common plastic items, including but not limited to water containers, glass covers, tissue holders, waste receptacles, and room keys. Additionally, many businesses noted that the use of plastic alternatives also extended to en suite washrooms, often substituting glass or ceramic in place of plastic soap and shampoo dispensers. The survey also identified strong uptake of alternative materials (Table 4) used in lobby/front desk and onsite restaurant areas, where more than a few businesses reported making use of environmentally friendly, locally-sourced products including coconut coir, kithul, cane, and bulrush for common items such as floor and table mats, menu holders, and condiment trays, among others (Fig 8).

Table 4: Sustainable alternatives to SUPPs

SUPPS	Alternatives
Plastic water bottles	Glass bottles/ reusable bottles/ dispensers
Plastic cups	Glass cups/ reusable plastic cups/ single-use paper cups
Disposable toiletries	Soap bar/ refillable dispenser/ no amenities or replace with request-based
Food packaging	Compostable materials/ no straws/ reusable materials
Plastic bags and bin littering	No bin bags/ reusable materials

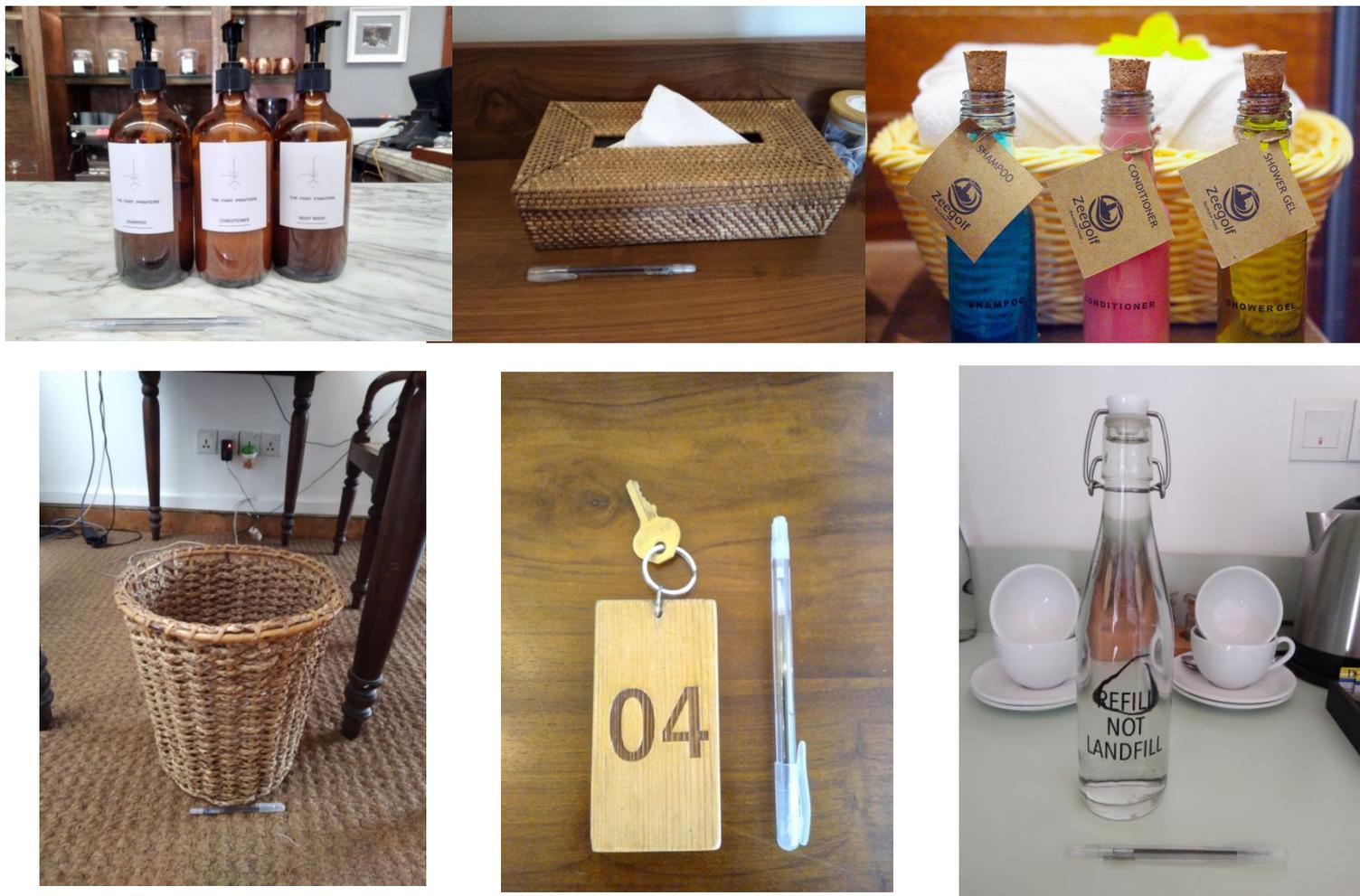


Figure 10: Use of reusable materials at the hotels

### 3. Lessons Learned

Several important insights gained from implementing the pilot project in Galle City are summarized below:

#### 3.1. Build capacity of individual hotels to manage plastic uses

Managing plastic use, particularly single-use plastic can be challenging for small and medium hotels due to their lack of capacity with regard to directing prevention planning, identifying sustainable alternatives, conducting monitoring and adopting communication strategies. In this regard, pilot project identified the need for introducing a number of key actions to effectively manage unnecessary and problematic plastics with a view towards progressively reducing pollution in Galle City's hospitality sector.

#### Develop a plastic use and waste inventory:

Hotels require a more comprehensive understanding of their current use of plastics across different departments in order to guide their reduction and prevention efforts. One demonstrated way of doing so involves conducting a self-assessment, starting with guiding questions, such as

- How much/ which kinds of plastics are used by different operational departments?
- What types of plastic packaging and single-use products can be tackled immediately?
- Which types of single-use plastic materials can be replaced with sustainable alternatives in respective operational departments?

With these questions as a starting point, a thorough waste inventory can be performed in all areas of the hotel with priority given to identified hotspots. This can be followed by a systematic analysis to determine whether specific plastic items are necessary and whether they can be reduced or eliminated.

#### Prepare a plastic management action plan:

Following the development of a plastic use and waste inventory, hotels can consider drawing up a plastic use and waste management action plan. These action plans are important to set clear targets, prompted by additional questions such as what is the hotel

seeking to achieve with regard to plastics reduction, and under what timeframe? Action plans need to consider guidance set out by 3R principles (Remove, Replace and Recycle). This entails first prioritizing plastic products and items that can be eliminated from purchasing and use. Secondly, hotels can seek to replace unnecessary or problematic plastic products. As a last resort, it is important to introduce recycle and/or responsibly dispose of plastic items that are unable to be eliminated and replace these with sustainable alternatives which benefits the image as being a green hotel.

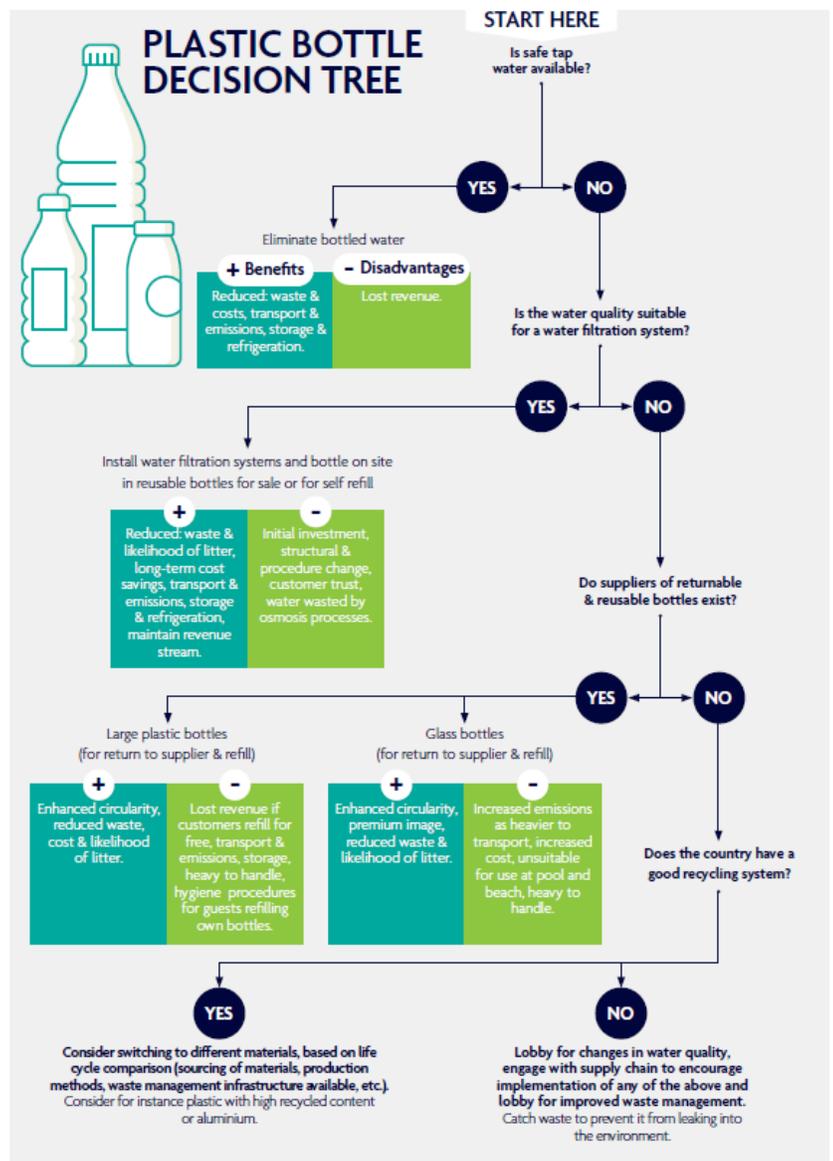


Figure 9: Plastic bottle decision tree [11]

In order to help facilitate more effective waste management assessments related to the 3Rs, a plastic decision tree [11, 12] can be used. A plastic decision tree serves as a simplified tool to estimate environmental and operational trade-offs, guiding hotels on ways to prioritize waste streams targeted for elimination. It also provides a logical method for navigating the waste hierarchy, highlighting the pros and cons of each step (Figure 9). In

situations where complete elimination or reduction of plastic waste is not deemed possible, preventing single-use items from becoming litter and managing it in an environmentally sound manner remains the minimum desired outcome. Information presented by plastic decision tree is used to inspire and stimulate continued discussions.

***Inform and train hotel staff:*** Successful implementation of plastic management action plans necessitates that all hotel staff understand their roles and responsibilities, are actively involved in the identification of strategies and interventions, and have the capacity and motivation to deliver intended results. Doing so requires training hotel personnel in the environmentally-sound management of different plastic items, such as packaging and single-use products. Moreover, hotel employees can play an active role in business campaigns, competitions and other associated events promoting waste avoidance and plastics reduction. A first step may involve convening regular staff meetings to discuss progress monitoring, problem solving and agreement on basic principles (no plastic bags, no single-use plastic bottles) that every employee is expected to follow. Lastly, all employees play a critical role in engaging and advising guests on effective implementation of the action plan. Providing information about hotel goals, principles and management efforts to reduce plastic waste in helps in inspiring guests to actively contribute. To this end, developing relevant information and communication materials (i.e., posters, announcements and videos, etc.) can increase exposure by making actions and impacts visible to visitors.

### **3.2. Build capacity of local/ regional hotel associations and networks**

Undoubtedly, the pursuit of plastic free hotel industry is a collaborative effort. Doing so requires close partnership, cooperation, networking and knowledge sharing among represented hotels, tour operators, local tourism associations, civil society groups and a range of other stakeholders in a given city or region. Effectively managed, the promotion of networking and cooperation among local hotels (particularly small and medium enterprises) has the potential to initiate a virtuous circle, helping cities or regions establish themselves as sustainable tourism destinations. To this end, building strategic partnerships with local associations can support the wider adoption and scaling of an innovative practice among hotels, strengthening their capacity for continued implementation of sustainability initiatives. This, in turn, can provide additional motivation for municipal and regional decision-makers to enhance environmental rules and regulations including upgrading necessary infrastructure for plastic waste collection and recycling. Lastly, such cooperation and collaboration can lead other regional

organizations to champion plastic reduction efforts across their value chains, requesting suppliers to provide greener products and services as well as undertaking sustainability monitoring (i.e., single-use plastic statistics, progress and achievements, areas for improvement, etc.), for instance. Sharing this information with wider groups of businesses, tourists and individuals, can inspire other actors to take the lead.

### **3.3. Strengthen national actions to bring about systemic change in the sustainable tourism industry**

***Sustainable tourism certificate:*** Interest in sustainability certifications for travel and tourism has increased considerably in recent years. For instance, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) operates as an international body responsible for setting globally uniform standards and criteria, including guiding principles and minimum requirements for the assessment of sustainable tourism companies and destinations. Companies that qualify for GST Certifications are highly regarded for their commitment to sustainable corporate governance in the tourism industry, with initiatives that contribute to the achievement of all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [13].

Commercial law in Sri Lanka sets out rules for hotel registration, with those designated as Stars hotels licensed under the Tourism (Registration and Licensing of Tourist Hotels) Regulation No. 01 of 2016. This bylaw ensures that hotels meet minimum requirements specified in both Schedule II (Star 1 and 2 hotels) and III ordinances (Star 3, 4 and 5 hotels). According to Schedule III guidelines, hotels must abide by environmental, community and sustainability guidelines, especially those underlined in Section 17, which includes recycling of waste and associated instructions on the sound management of plastic litter [14]. Nevertheless, this requirement only applies to registered Star hotels (3-5) which make up a mere 1-2% of the country's registered hotels.

In this regard, it is important to highlight a recent initiative led by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) in partnership with UNDP Sri Lanka, which aims to provide support to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) working in the country's tourism sector. One intended outcome of this campaign is to help SMEs obtain National Sustainable Tourism Certificate (NSTC), which also

comprises environmental and community sustainability indicators. Despite this laudable goal, many hotels in Sri Lanka have yet to engage with the program, highlighting the need for more awareness raising and technical support to guide SMEs on ways to become more sustainable. To this end, local/ regional tourism associations and networks can serve as an effective bridge for building partnerships and encouraging member hotels to adopt measures for sustainability, particularly as they relate to plastics reduction.

***Sustainable alternative products for SUPPs:*** In addition to sustainable management of plastic uses and waste at hotels, sustainable procurement of plastic products is also critical in managing resources and improving efficiency throughout the tourism value chain. Hotels can replace SUPPs by introducing more sustainable alternative products and services that are designed in favour of reusing and decreasing environmental impacts across the life cycle. However, hotel operators who are part of the survey under this study identified that the lack of information, awareness and availability of sustainable alternative products and services is one of the challenges faced by the sector. Hotel operators also commented that even though there are some alternative products available in the market, they are usually not available locally and are therefore not easily accessible. They also quoted high costs compared to their plastic products competitors.

At the same time, Sri Lanka has a long history of making traditional craft products for the daily lives of the people. It was an essential part of the national economy too. However, these traditional-craft products are not favoured amongst the general public these days. Aiming to strengthen access to entrepreneurship and markets for traditional craft products, the National Crafts Council was established by the Parliamentary Act No. 35 of 1982. It aids introduce new designs, thinking, and ideas to the craft products, training craft persons to think differently and produce alternative products to compete in the market, promoting and preservation of handicrafts and upliftment of the social and economic status of crafts persons.

In addition, policymakers have a vital role in establishing incentives and supporting mechanisms for entrepreneurship around the design of alternative products and services that can replace SUPPs used by hotel operators. Relevant policies, regulations and end-of-life infrastructures are also required to collect and process alternative products after their product life.

The local and regional hotel networks and hotel associations can work with their member hotels to negotiate with producers and policymakers to make new products and services. They can also carry out the information campaigns to reduce SUPPs, introduction of alternatives and sound management of plastic wastes at hotels. National industry products associations and research institutes have a role in leading by example, conducting research, compiling and disseminating information and providing guidance and best practice examples on alternatives and sound management of plastic wastes.

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