



# MANAGING PACKAGING WASTE SUSTAINABLY – LESSONS FROM HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

## ACTED LEBANON: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO REDUCING AND MANAGING WASTE

### INTRODUCTION

ACTED has been committed to reducing its environmental and carbon footprint for some years. As early as 2017, ACTED carried out an organization-wide carbon accounting exercise, which identified that approximately 60 to 70% of its total footprint resulted from its supply chain. In line with the organization's [3 Zero World vision](#) (Zero Exclusion, Zero Carbon, Zero Poverty), ACTED started to explore ways to introduce sustainability measures into procurement both for office supplies and for programs.

In Lebanon, these measures were aimed not only at lowering the organization's carbon footprint, but also reducing local pollution caused by low in-country waste management capacity. ACTED had ongoing projects responding to the waste crisis<sup>1</sup> in Lebanon such as supporting the collection, sorting and management of household solid waste<sup>2</sup> in Beirut and in the surrounding areas.

These efforts helped build greater awareness on waste management within ACTED Lebanon, and motivated staff to translate these efforts to reducing and **improving the organization's own waste management practices** (both office and program-related waste).



LUNCH BOXES FOR BENEFICIARIES OF ACTED'S TRAINING SESSION

<sup>1</sup>In 2015, the largest landfill in the country was closed and waste collection in the streets was stopped, creating accumulation of waste in the streets. Waste continues to cause a serious sanitary and environmental threat in Lebanon

<sup>2</sup>More information here: <https://www.acted.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/acted-lebanon-circular-economy-final.pdf>



## STARTING WITH THE QUICK WINS AT THE OFFICE

### OFFICE

A logical start was to implement no-cost, “quick win” actions. The team began by implementing a **single-use plastics ban in the kitchen, at events, and training sessions**. Now, the office uses **reusable utensils, cups, and plates**. They also use exclusively non-packaged office cleaning supplies. **Double-sided printing** was made mandatory to reduce paper consumption, and office notebooks are made of recycled paper. “Eco fonts”<sup>3</sup> which use less ink and **electronic signatures** are increasingly popular. Furthermore, ACTED’s 70 staff were each given reusable tote bags for grocery shopping.

### VISIBILITY AND COMMUNICATIONS

For an organization like ACTED, measures to reduce waste must be compatible with donor visibility requirements. To achieve this, ACTED worked on “greening” its **roll up banners** (where the names of the project/organization and donor appears, along with logo). Roll ups have a short life span - they can only be used during the lifetime of the project and cannot be **passed on** from one project to another for reuse. ACTED and their supplier reached an agreement enabling them to purchase only the banner itself and reuse the metal banner mount. In addition to prolonging the lifespan of materials in circulation, this change also generated cost savings for ACTED.

### RECYCLING, REUSING AND REPURPOSING

Following these waste reduction measures, ACTED Lebanon developed a **sustainable waste management** system for the office (separating recyclables, batteries, and household waste), and developed a partnership with a local waste recovery association<sup>4</sup>. Recyclables are collected from the office once every 2 weeks for free, and repurposed. The waste recovery association promotes a circular economy approach and employs people living with disabilities.

### MOBILIZING SUPPLIERS

In addition to reducing its own environmental footprint, ACTED has managed to positively influence its suppliers, encouraging them to develop approaches and plans to promote environmental sustainability. When assessing and scoring suppliers, **5-10 bonus points** are given to those who can demonstrate that they take environmental considerations into account. Although this was challenging for some suppliers, it gave a clear message that **sustainability was a priority for ACTED** and that there will be **growing expectations of its suppliers** in this regard in the coming years.

**Environmental sustainability** is also included in the **annual framework agreements** which ACTED signs with key suppliers and service providers. In response, some suppliers have **moderately increased their fees** to be able to comply with the environmental sustainability requirements and to anticipate price changes. However, ACTED has viewed this **as a necessary investment**.

<sup>3</sup> “Eco” fonts include: Century Gothic, Garamond, Times New Roman, and Courier,

<sup>4</sup> L’écoute <https://www.lecoute-lb.org>



## PROJECT LEVEL SHIFTS TO PACKAGING WASTE REDUCTION

Today, plastic packaged post-training beneficiary distributions, such as baby or family hygiene kits, or lunch boxes, have been replaced with cardboard or jute bags. Where possible, single use plastic secondary packaging was removed and replaced with more sustainable materials. Although plastic primary packaging is still present inside in some kits (ex: for individual food or NFI items), overall, this has helped significantly reduce plastic pollution in the distribution areas. Over the course of a year, ACTED estimates that approximately 2,000 pieces of plastic packaging were avoided.

Carton/jute bags were estimated to be 30 to 40% more expensive than their plastic counterpart, however, ACTED decided that the reduction in environmental degradation outweighed the increased cost. To overcome financial constraints for food distributions, a new call for tenders for catering services was launched in 2021, wherein suppliers were encouraged to offer fair prices and to propose plastic free packaging. The company that won the bid was able to meet ACTED's programmatic need for individually wrapped food by using craft paper instead of plastic. ACTED has also been successful working with its donors to finance the costs of environmentally friendly packaging.

In recent months, ACTED Lebanon has continued to work towards banning all plastic bottles at events and during distributions, by investing in portable and refillable water dispensers and reusable cups.

## CHALLENGES

**IDENTIFYING SUPPLIERS:** In general, identifying suppliers which can provide sustainable packaging in Lebanon can be challenging. In addition, environmental awareness is generally low in the country, meaning it was more difficult to convince suppliers of the utility and potential impact of using more sustainable packaging. Finally, as environmentally sustainable approaches are more costly in the short-term, ACTED has had to strive for a balanced approach in order not to hamper its ability to work with smaller suppliers.

**THE ADDED COST OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY:** Similarly, meeting the additional costs of “greening” has been difficult. In light of growing humanitarian needs exacerbated by climate change and the impact of Covid-19, donors are looking for ways to reduce administrative costs of programs. **While securing grants for projects focused on environmental protection is more straightforward, due to the possibility to clearly demonstrate direct results for the environment, obtaining funds for the “greening” of supply chains and ongoing projects (ex: water supply, income generation) is more of a challenge.** This requires continuous dialogue and negotiation with donors. Engagement with donor staff at local level is particularly important, as sometimes global approaches and policies adopted by humanitarian donors at head office level have not yet “trickled down” to field level.



ACTED'S TOTE BAGS USED AS PLASTIC BAGS



## LESSONS LEARNED

### 1. ANTICIPATING ADDITIONAL COSTS AND FOSTERING SUPPLIERS' BUY-IN ALLOWS FOR MORE SYSTEMATIC CONSIDERATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN SUPPLY CHAINS.

The organization has now entered a “virtuous cycle” where all budgets consider the need for reduced waste from the initial stages of the project development. ACTED systematically includes additional costs for sustainable packaging and/or waste collection in its budgets and adds sustainable requirements in its framework agreements with suppliers. Thanks to the logistics team’s forward-thinking, sustainability is gradually being mainstreamed throughout all administrative and logistics processes. By taking a flexible approach – working with suppliers to explain the benefits of using more environmentally sustainable materials (including packaging) and rather than “penalizing” smaller suppliers who might find it more challenging to take this on board, ACTED has successfully fostered supplier buy-in.

### 2. A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE QUALITY OF ACTED’S WORK

ACTED’s gradual approach to “green” its practices has undoubtedly enhanced the quality of its work in Lebanon. The team is motivated, and keen to suggest further ways to reduce its environmental footprint at all levels (from small actions to bigger changes). By “walking the talk”, members of the ACTED team in Lebanon have become “ambassadors” for more environmentally sustainable practices. Furthermore, beneficiaries are happy to adapt to these changes: for example, the transition from plastic to jute bags was very well received by beneficiaries and has also allowed the organization to **strengthen its awareness-raising messages for beneficiaries**.

### 3. A TWO-FOLD APPROACH: QUICK WINS AND LONG-TERM CHANGES

While some actions are easy to implement, others take longer. Positive results from short-term changes (“low-hanging fruit”) have helped the team to stay motivated and to continue exploring improvements and changes. In the case of packaging, while ACTED was able to change secondary packaging for distributions relatively easily, primary packaging - particularly for food items - is still a challenge and generates considerable amounts of waste. The team is currently working with suppliers, academics, and local organizations to identify innovative and sustainable solutions for individually packed items. ACTED’s experience has shown that a lot can be achieved easily **to reduce an organization or a project’s environmental footprint before addressing the longer term and more complicated challenges**.

### 4. GLOBAL AMBITION AND WHOLE-OF-ORGANIZATION APPROACHES

ACTED’s experience shows that individual actions can go a long way, but they can only have a real impact if there are supported and encouraged by the organization as a whole. ACTED’s head office has been a strong driver of more environmentally sustainable practices for several years: it launched **a carbon footprint exercise in 2017, set up a monthly reporting system<sup>5</sup> on environmental sustainability issues, encourages country teams to set up inter-disciplinary (e.g., logistics, administrative, programs) working groups to design and monitor sustainable actions, and is**

<sup>5</sup> Ex: how much waste/what type of waste is generated, collected by recyclers

<sup>6</sup> *Red Goes Green Report- Barriers and enablers for effectively greening practices and strengthening environmental sustainability across the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement*





also developing a greening reduction and adaptation support plan. Above all, ACTED's strategy promotes innovation, increased collaboration with actors outside the humanitarian sphere, and collective learning amongst country offices.

“Mainstreaming environmental considerations across an organization takes time. Incremental changes and piloting new solutions allow for more feasible and evolving ambitions.”<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSION

ACTED's experience shows that sustainability can be achieved with limited extra costs (or no cost in many cases) and relies more on each organization's ambition and ability to encourage a green mindset across its staff. Thanks to a strong and continuous dialogue with its donors, and a general strive for exemplarity, the organization has worked simultaneously on greening projects, and offices building staff expertise and motivation on waste management and environmental issues.



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