

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)

What is Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)?

In the field of waste management, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) aims to ensure that the private sector takes responsibility for the environmental costs associated with the life cycle of their products.

By 'life cycle', we mean:

- Producing the material
- Turning it into a product/package
- Distributing it
- Selling it
- Using it
- Disposal

Activists have been pressing for the incorporation of EPR into laws and rules governing the handling of waste in order to reduce the burden of products and packages on local and other governmental entities who manage solid waste. It is a long-term strategy, which works to leverage costs, logistical and physical responsibility for the end of life of products and packages squarely onto the designers, producers, manufacturers, importers, and distributors of those products and packages.

How did EPR begin?

The concept was first formally introduced in Sweden in 1990 in a report to the Swedish Ministry of Environment.

Subsequently, the following definition emerged: "EPR is an environmental protection strategy to reach an environmental objective of a decreased total environmental impact of a product, by making the manufacturer of the product responsible for the entire life-cycle of the product and especially for the take-back, recycling and final disposal."

What is Product Stewardship (PS)?

Product Stewardship (PS) initiatives come about when producers decide that they need to take responsibility, and as producers, they know best how to manage the end of life or recycling of products. The companies may choose to set up their own system for capturing the products and recycling them.

Product Stewardship is the name for individual or group initiatives financed by brand owners (or other companies), to improve the performance or decrease the problems from specific products in the solid waste stream.

PS systems are different from EPR in that they are not created by laws. That is, the government may be consulted, but it is the producers who decide what to do, how long to keep doing it, and how they measure its success.

Activists want EPR to force designers/manufacturers to make products that are:

- Re-useable after their original purpose
- Easier to separate at the source and give directly to a recycler
- Less toxic
- Less resource-intensive
- Refillable, re-usable, and recyclable
- Less likely to produce pollution
- Easier and more feasible to repair
- More efficient for transport
- Of simpler structure
- Easier to dismantle at end of life
- Traceable back to the specific brand or manufacturer to assure responsibility

EPR and Informal Waste Recyclers in Pune

Most products end up in the waste stream after use and the informal sector sorts through this waste to pick out what can be sold. In Pune, 2300 erstwhile waste pickers are now authorized to collect Municipal Solid Waste from residents/waste generators. This means they have to handle a variety of post-consumer waste products that can be harmful (light bulbs/tubes, containers of chemical agents...) and degrading (soiled diapers, sanitary napkins) and some products that are simply very difficult to sell.

Consultation with Informal Recyclers in Pune

In India, Extended Producer Responsibility has been mentioned in the Plastics (Manufacture, Usage and Waste Management) Rules, 2009. The rules clearly mention that the producers of plastic bags, pouches, packets etc. must be involved in the collection (after use) of these products. EPR is also referred to in connection with E-Waste.

In order to orient those involved in the waste recycling sector to nuanced issues related to Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and Product Stewardship (PS), SWaCH organised a Consultation with Informal Recyclers on 25th and 30th October, 2012. Participants included waste pickers (both SWaCH and KKP members), staff members and scrap dealers.

SWaCH has been engaging with scrap dealers after conducting an extensive survey of 566 scrap dealers in Pune between the months of April and July, 2012. Subsequently, between the months of August and September 2012, in collaboration with the PMC, meetings with scrap dealers of Pune were held where issues related to EPR and recyclability of scrap material were raised.

A few scrap dealers are engaged in formal partnerships with SWaCH and KKP in running 'fair scrap trade stores'. These entail a written commitment to various environmental, social and municipal Solid Waste Management (SWM) goals. Three such scrap dealers were also separately interviewed for the purpose of this consultation.

At the Consultation, the relationship between the manufacturers of products/packages (propacks) and waste pickers was discussed and debated at length -- waste pickers are largely responsible for ensuring the recycling of propacks. Participants examined this relationship both from the point of view of how it exists now, as well as how they would like it to be. All their suggestions on ensuring/enhancing the recyclability of propacks were recorded.

Participants then discussed the relatively modernised Solid Waste Management systems in Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad. They analysed the impact of these systems on waste pickers as well as on waste materials and the appropriate handling of these.

The roles and responsibilities of Urban Local Bodies, scrap traders, waste pickers/waste collectors and manufacturers of propacks in an ideal scenario, were also discussed. Specific suggestions to ensure higher levels of recycling were made for each sector.

More specifically relevant to this consultation, the ideas of all three groups about what they require to ensure increased recycling in their cities, and their concrete suggestions to global brand owners, were recorded both on video and in a report.

Video link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5g4rKQrLGo>