

# NO MORE PLASTIC WASTE



## **Lillygol Sedaghat**

(pronounced “said-uh-gat”) loves milk tea. When she was a teenager, she spent hours drinking milk tea in a California teahouse. She sipped from a plastic straw stuck in a plastic cup. When she finished, she tossed the cup and straw in the garbage just like everyone else. Then one day, Ms. Sedaghat wondered where all the plastic cups and straws went.



Milk tea with tapioca balls is called bubble or boba milk tea.

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It may seem like trash disappears after we throw it away. But of course, it does not. It's not magic. Some trash is recycled. But most plastic cups and straws cannot be recycled. Ms. Sedaghat made a decision to never use plastic cups or straws again. She used the phases of the Geo-Inquiry process to investigate the problem.

## Ask Questions

Ms. Sedaghat had many questions. She wanted to know about the whole journey of her plastic cup and straw.

- Where do they come from?
- How are they made?
- Who makes them?
- Where do they go after we throw them away?
- What happens if they are recycled?
- What can they be made into?

Finding the answers to these questions would help Ms. Sedaghat answer her Geo-Inquiry Question: How can we solve the problem of plastic waste in the United States?

## Collect Data

Ms. Sedaghat decided to learn from experts. So she went to Taiwan. Taiwan is one of the best recycling countries in the world. They have almost zero waste. That means almost no trash ends up in the land or water. Ms. Sedaghat wanted to find out how they do this.

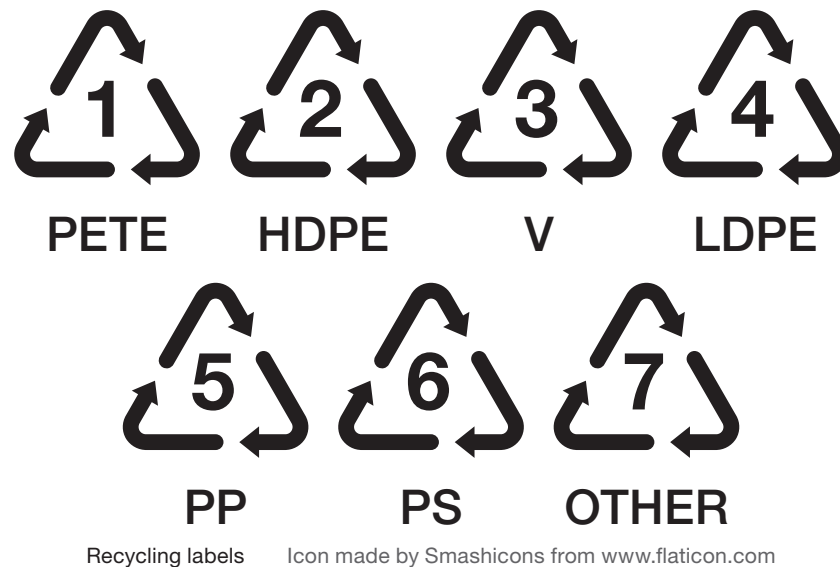
In Taiwan, Ms. Sedaghat visited places where plastic products like cups and straws are made. She found out that one product might be made from several different kinds of material. For example, a coffee cup might be made of plastic, wax, and aluminum. To recycle the cup, someone would have to separate the materials. This is difficult and would take a long time. Instead, the cup gets thrown away. But the milk tea cup that Ms. Sedaghat used in California is made from one material—plastic. So why couldn't it be recycled?



Taiwanese woman sorting plastics

©Lillygol Sedaghat

Ms. Sedaghat asked experts about plastic. They said there are seven kinds of plastic. Recycling labels on packages tell you the category of plastic with numbers: 1–7. Some of those categories cannot be recycled. Some products like straws don't have any recycling category numbers at all. Those also cannot be recycled.



To collect more data, Ms. Sedaghat followed garbage trucks. In Taiwan, the garbage trucks are musical like American ice cream trucks. People run out with their garbage when they hear the music. They have to pay to throw away garbage, but recycling and composting are free.

Ms. Sedaghat talked to many women about recycling. In Taiwan, women have been leaders in changing ideas about recycling. It was a group of women who came up with the musical garbage truck idea. These women also got restaurants to stop using Styrofoam because it cannot be recycled.



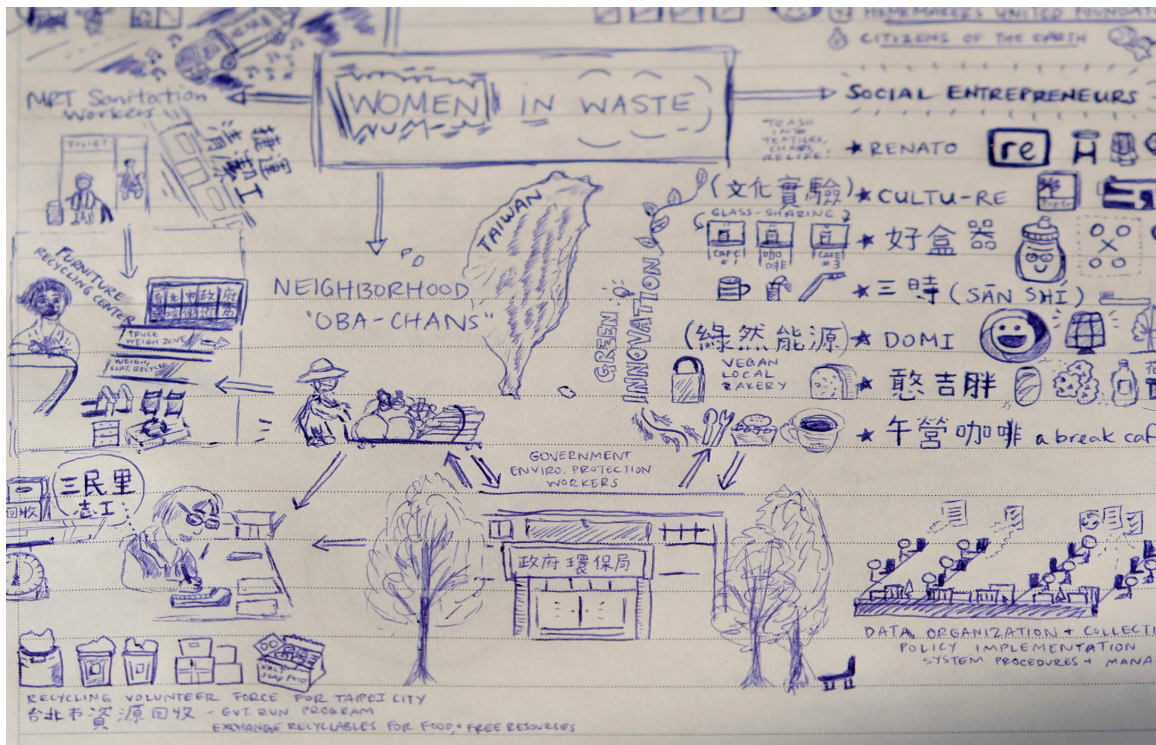
Taiwanese woman with sorted recyclables ©Lillygol Sedaghat

Because of these women, people in Taiwan know what happens when they throw something away. Food waste feeds farm animals. Things that can be recycled are cleaned, sorted, and made it into new things, such as blankets, hats, bricks, cell phone covers, and pens.

The places and people Ms. Sedaghat visited gave her the data she needed to answer her Geo-Inquiry Question.

## Visualize Data

The next step was to analyze the data. Ms. Sedaghat looked at her photos, videos, sketches, and notes. She realized that Taiwanese people care about their garbage. In fact they think about it as a resource—something valuable that can be made into something new.



One of Ms. Sedaghat's trash map sketches ©Lillygol Sedaghat

Because they care, they are willing to carefully separate trash. Volunteers sort recyclables into 33 categories. To sort trash correctly, they have to know a lot—what products are made of, how to clean things, how to take things apart, and how many times things can be reused. Glass and metal can be used over and over. But plastic is melted to make new things. It gets weaker each time it is reused. It cannot be used forever like glass and metal.

## Create Geo-Inquiry Story

Ms. Sedaghat realized that to help solve the problem of plastic waste, she would have to get people to care about garbage. She wanted to help more people become recycling experts. They just needed good information.

Ms. Sedaghat worked with dancers, illustrators, musicians, filmmakers, and others to tell the story of plastic waste. She wanted to send her message in different ways. Some people would like her dance video. Some people would like the music made with sounds of machines crushing waste. Some people would like reading her blog or seeing her presentations.

One of Ms. Sedaghat's favorite ways of sharing the story is with postcards. The postcards have four important messages:

1. Understand where your trash goes.
2. Wash your recyclables—only clean plastic is recycled.
3. Reuse.
4. Think about how your choices impact the world.

You can write a personal message on the back of the postcard and send it to someone you love.



[9/30/20: I put this edit on Mara's release to DSN]

Two of Ms. Sedaghat's postcards with recycling messages

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Photograph Lillygol Sedaghat

## **Act Based on What You Learned**

Everyone in the world is connected. We are all on the same planet. But we are also connected by what we make, use, and throw away. A plastic cup is made in Taiwan. A person in California drinks milk tea from the cup. The cup is thrown away. It ends up in a big ugly pile of trash.

Can there be a different story?

Someone brings her glass container into the café. It is filled with milk tea. She drinks it and then washes her glass. She uses the glass over and over. She never throws it away. It never ends up in the land or water.

Ms. Sedaghat has made this her new story. And now she shares it with as many people as she can. Other people take the same action. The goal of her storytelling work is to get people to think about how they are connected to the world and especially to each other. Then they begin to make new choices that may be small, but they are also powerful.