

Grassroots Innovations in Solid Waste Management

FROM GRASSROOTS INVESTIGATION TO TREATY ADVOCACY: THE EVOLUTION OF PLASTIC WASTE TRADE ACTIVISM IN MALAYSIA

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1. INTRODUCTION

"The river is on fire."

My sister Noor tosses her words in the air, yee sang-like, nonchalance in tone, anxiety in the crease of her brow, eyes, weary, darting across the scene below. We perch on the edge of a longkang, monsoon drain, peering over the edge, our house around the corner. We wait for Maghrib to beckon our return, but we don't need Azan prayer calls blaring from speakers to know that evening creeps forth.

Amber retreating into charcoal, a sunset choked by smog. Black patches scrape the air. The bats are coming out. We are roadside, but traffic is distant now, rush hour discord diffused into background buzz.

Noor points at the river again.

Heaps of refuse clogs up a drainpipe-dirty containers, contaminated canisters of Allah-knows-what, stained fabrics, globular clusters of close-to-bursting plastic bags, an orgy of polyethylene and PVC, an accumulation of foam polystyrene, a dumpsite dotted with splotches of little flames here and there. It can be pretty dreary.

You can travel the world through a Malaysian dumpsite's unwanted-British food boxes, Canadian agricultural film, German tubing. Nowhere in the peninsula has there ever been a Walmart, but their old smiley face logo, American, flashes at us menacingly from crinkled plastic bags, snagged onto soda cans. Every day, after school walks weave themselves through, along the monsoon drains, where plastic waste ingrains itself into topographies of home, geographies of discard, discard from within the country, discard from outside, through the plastic waste trade and the country's imports.

In 2018, this practice saw a shift, when China, formerly the largest importer, implemented its National Sword Policy (NSP), a sweeping ban on plastic waste imports. Many Global North countries rerouted their exports of plastic scraps to Global South locations, feeding a dynamic of uneven waste processing infrastructure and capacity. Consequently, Malaysia became the world's largest importer of plastic waste (Wang et al, 2022). Between January and July 2018, Malaysia imported 456,000 tonnes of plastic waste compared with 316,000 tonnes imported in all of

the prior year signalling that though the import was a normative activity for Malaysia, the frequency and volume increase in the wake of NSP, was not (Latiff and Harris, 2019; Otsuka & Skrobe, 2019). The influx included contaminated shipments that could not be legally or technically recycled. The Malaysian government returned 254 containers containing 5,512 tonnes of plastic waste back to their country of origin (C4 Center, 2021). This surge contributed to open dumping, open burning, and illegal processing near communities such as Jenjarom, Klang, and Sungai Peetani in Malaysia (Greenpeace Malaysia, 2018).

The impacts of such a surge have been significant; large quantities of plastic waste have entered communities as unrecyclable residues, with 17,000 tonnes of it unloaded onto Jenjarom, a small town of around 30,000 residents (Tan 2019; Zulkefli, 2019). The impacts have been deleterious on health and the environment; sampling at Malaysian plastic waste processing and disposal sites found heavy metals and brominated flame retardants in soil and ash; surface waters near or downstream from some sites also contained solid waste and chemical contamination consistent with plastic dumping and processing activities; and the open burning as attempts to rid the waste accumulation sites rendered carcinogenic pollutants airborne (C4 Center, 2021; Greenpeace Research Laboratories, 2020; Oanh et al, 2025). As the imports continue to stream into the country, so do the health and environmental impacts of accumulating plastic waste. Even as the Malaysian government introduces interventions such as 2025's SIRIM and MITI permit approval for plastic waste imports, 26.4% of the country's plastic waste continues to be mismanaged (Bernama, 2026).

Though the government's initial enforcement directly following the increase in plastic waste imports was lauded, imports remain substantial with 478, 092 tonnes in 2020, a 43% increase from 2019, and 406,000 tonnes in 2023 (C4 Center, 2021; World Bank, 2025). 2024 data shows that the imports continue to play a significant role in Malaysia's plastic waste flows, with the country importing 332,080 tonnes of waste, parings, and scraps of polymers of ethylene in that year alone (World Bank, n.d.). But how have

people engaged and responded? People don't sit idly while plastic waste accumulates in their homes, choking air and polluting water supplies. Some take up activism.

How has plastic waste trade activism in Malaysia evolved since China implemented its National Sword restrictions in 2018? How have activists' repertoires, targets and relationships with state and non-state actors changed during this period?

2. CONCEPTUALIZING PLASTIC WASTE TRADE ACTIVISM

Responses to plastic waste and environmental activism, which plastic waste trade activism falls under, are not to be conflated with each other. Distinguishing the two is important for several reasons; the former, while there is overlap with the latter, focuses primarily on plastic waste as a pollutant or resource that is not necessarily tethered to notions of environmental justice nor systems challenging. For example, in 2025, a community plastic waste clean-up organized by the Global Environment Centre and the Petaling Jaya (a prominent Malaysian city) City Council, hosted 300 volunteers in picking up over 300 kilograms of waste. The focus of the initiative was on beauty and aesthetic. Activism, on the other hand, is grounded in intentional efforts to influence other actors, public opinion, policy, corporate conduct, or social arrangements (Stern, 2000). Activism itself is not a monolithic, static engagement, and can take multiple forms.

Conceptualizations generally characterize activism as intentional action directed toward achieving or resisting social, political, institutional, or cultural change (Corning & Myers, 2002; della Porta & Diani, 2020). Yes, environmental activism can be taken individually, but it frequently operates through collective identities, shared purposes, and claims directed towards actors they understand to be responsible for a particular harm (Snow et al., 2004; Tarrow, 2011; Tilly & Wood, 2013). Environmental activism can consequently be distinguished from private environmental behaviour and non-activist public participation by its explicit effort to influence collective decisions, organizations, policies, or broader social practices (Dono et al., 2010; Stern, 2000). In other words, there is an intent for systemic, social change and there is an articulation or expression of that intent.

In the Malaysian context, this conflation can sometimes occur with culturally rooted practices. A culturally specific concept within the Malaysian, Indonesian, and Singaporean contexts is the concept of 'gotong-royong', or 'collective community action', sometimes mutual aid and often in the contemporary sense, a community cleanup. The term, sometimes associated with activism, is etymologically Javanese, whereby gotong translates to 'to carry' and 'royong' meaning 'together', denoting communal mutual assistance practiced across the region (Yuhertiana et al., 2022). Historically, gotong-royong has deep cultural roots in Javanese communities, including diaspora, whereby post-independence state campaigns had co-opted its resonance with citizens for nationalist social engineering (Suwignyo, 2019). This co-optation is not intended to challenge the waste regimes that developed in the post-inde-

pendence landscape, but rather it repositions a pre-existing culturally ingrained community practice towards bolstering said waste regime. In this sense, although it is a collective action in response to waste, participation within the logistics of gotong-royong do not themselves constitute activism. Gotong-royong should not automatically be classified either as activism or as depoliticized community service. As an example, gotong-royong's classification depends on how organizers frame the activity, whether responsibility is assigned, and whether participants expressly articulate demands extending beyond removal of visible waste.

There is a difference and sometimes, disconnect, between 'doing activism' and 'being an activist' that challenges the assumption that collective action depends on alignment between personal and collective identity (Bobel, 2007). Importantly, many individuals and communities engaging in systems-change may not identify as activists. Incorporating this consideration, activism for the scope of this paper, concerns actions undertaken with the intent of systemic change, that an action is classified as 'activism' when it meets these criteria. With this logic, gotong-royong, a common community response to plastic waste accumulation, may not necessarily be considered as activism, unless it overlaps with expressed intent to systemic change. The systemic change in question may be brought about by an endogenous force, that is from within a system, or pressured from outside, that is, exogenous. Due to the fluid and heterogeneous nature of activism, and literature's proclivity of talking or writing about activism without explicitly defining it, I adopt Mathias' framing that argues activists are defined not by motion but by motive (Cabrera et. al., 2017; Mathias, 2026). Here then, motive is explicitly expressed as being aligned with systemic change. This is also adopted to avoid exonymic tendencies by researchers.

There are many forms activism can take. Social movement activism specifically involves collective, sustained, and organized extra-institutional efforts to bring about or resist change (Coley & Schachle-Gordon., 2025). Thomas and McGarty distinguish benevolent support like charitable giving from activist support like socio-political action, as qualitatively different forms of behaviour rather than degrees of the same behaviour, arguing the form of action is more descriptive than the person performing it (2017). They acknowledge that categories of people are multifaceted and fuzzy, whereas behaviours are specific, making action-based classification more precise. Neumayer and Svensson offer a typology of activism that argues that one individual or group can adopt different forms of activist participation (2016). Their activist types are neither static nor fixed and may differ depending on the political demand for which activists are fighting.

This is the way that plastic waste trade activism has unfurled within the Malaysian context, with community members developing into self-proclaimed activist roles, and collaborations with NGOs, government and corporate actors, in different phases of flux. How does this summation come into form? Through the examined corpus of publicly available reports on activities targeting the Malaysian plastic waste trade.

3. THE EXAMINED TEXTS

With this operational understanding of what constitutes activism, the body of text, or sometimes referred to as ‘corpus’, for examining plastic waste trade activism is constructed. Modelling after Bowen (2009), Braun and Clarke (2006), and Benford & Snow (2000), I combine qualitative document analysis and social movement framings to examine a purposefully selected corpus of materials, primarily news articles, on Malaysian plastic waste activism. Initial codes were informed by collective-action framing theory, identifying actors, type of actors, actions, type of actions, intended target of actions, and responses of targets. Analyses of selected Malaysian activist responses to plastic waste were carried out on a timeframe of 2018, the year that China implemented NSP, to the current year as of this writing, 2006. The purpose was to plot out geogra-

phies of plastic waste activism in a post-NSP landscape. Following Bowen (2009), publicly available documents were treated as sources through which activist organizations represent problems, strategies, objectives, and forms of action. Search engines on Google News, and Malaysian news platforms were utilized with variations of ‘activism’, ‘plastic waste’, ‘plastic waste trade’, ‘plastic import’, ‘protest’ and the Bahasa/Malay language counterparts, ‘plastik’, ‘sisa-sia plastik’, ‘protes’, entered as search inquiries. Bahasa, being my native tongue, renders the task straightforward, and though I reviewed translations through Google Translate, the results were not as accurate nor relevant as that of a native speaker’s. Figure 1 distills the aforementioned information into an accessible flowchart of the data sourcing and analysis process.

The same searches were also carried out in major NGOs such as Sahabat Alam Malaysia and Greenpeace Malay-

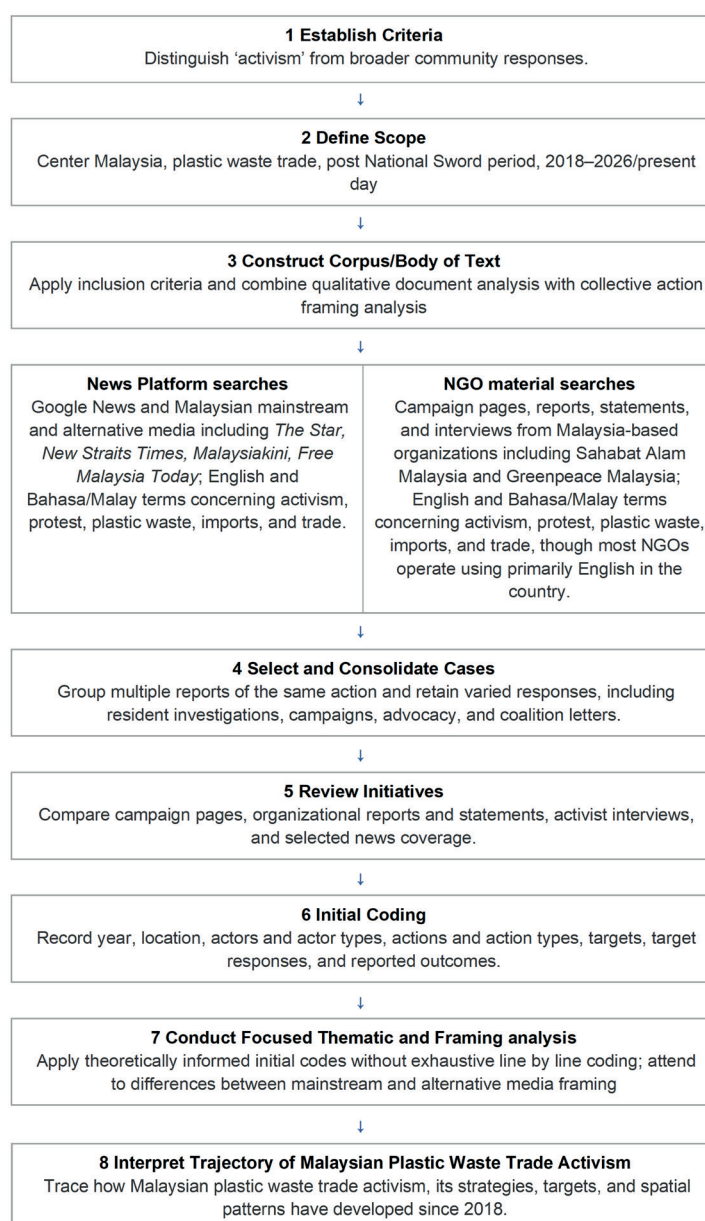


FIGURE 1: Method for examining Malaysian plastic waste trade activism.

sia. Multiple reports of an action were grouped together for ease of analysis, and a variation in activist responses were noted, such as the resident-led investigation carried out by Jnejarom, Klang Valley community members, and coalition letters addressing the Malaysian government in plastic waste advocacy. For each initiative, campaign pages, organizational reports or statements, activist interviews, and selected news coverage were reviewed. A structured extraction table was used to summarize each initiative's year, activities, types of activities, targets, and responses. I did not employ exhaustive line-by-line coding, but rather than comprehensive claims about Malaysian plastic waste trade activism, I seek to trace the trajectory and development of the aforementioned activism as it continues to unfold in real time, as Malaysia is party to the international Basel Convention currently attempting to forge a global plastics treaty.

Keeping in mind, prior framing analysis research on Malaysian media framing of waste has shown slight differences in information source and conflict-driven framing of the plastic waste crisis between mainstream news outlets and alternative platforms that stress just reporting in the face of biased state-controlled media (Ong and Diong, 2023). Given this slight difference, materials were drawn from across mainstream and alternative media.

My primarily conversational precedent is Dauvergne and Islam's examination of anti-plastics activism in Indonesia and Malaysia (2023). They combine a review of existing literature with interviews and less structured conversations with activists. Their analysis discusses the principal activities activists undertake, including education, recycling initiatives, clean-ups, advocacy for waste workers, lobbying, and campaigning within the backdrop of political constraints, but my focus differs in its narrower scope, that is, plastic waste trade activism and not the broader plastics activism that they explore. I also examined how grassroots participation changed across these dimensions, whether affected residents-initiated actions, produced evidence, formulated demands, or remained publicly visible as campaigns expanded through NGO, governmental, and transnational networks. Therein lies my scholarly contribution here.

4. ANALYSIS-PHASES OF MALAYSIAN PLASTIC WASTE TRADE ACTIVISM

Amidst the sea of information available, of different actors ebbing and flowing in their plastic waste trade-targeted actions, it can sometimes seem sporadic and reactionary. I rebuke this and assert that we can break down the events of activism around plastic waste into patterns of actors and actions. I propose four phases to better understand responses and engagement with the Malaysian plastic waste trade. Phases were derived by comparing changes across three dimensions-activist repertoires, targets, and scale. The phases do not imply that Malaysian activism developed in a linear or uniform manner, nor that one repertoire disappeared when another emerged. The key purpose here is to outline how activists engage in different forms of not just organizing, but solidarity-building and how their

actions, and targets of their actions are framed and articulated to different audiences. This information is built from publicly available data, that is, news reports and grey literature. In activist spheres, not every action is reported in news publications, whether oppositional or backed by the ruling party in the case of Malaysia, that would be Malaysiakini, Free Malaysia Today for the former and News Straits Times and The Star for the latter. This constitutes a limitation as not all forms of activism are reported, and they can be curated in ways that reduce their visibility (Wong, 2026). To slightly remedy this, I included NGO materials from Sahabat Alam Malaysia and Greenpeace Malaysia as they have worked together and with regards to a contested disposal site, publicly highlighted how Malaysian environmental reporting has contained inconsistencies (Sahabat Alam Malaysia, 2020). This approach aligns with scholarly recommendations aimed at addressing the biases and limitations of event-based and activism reporting in newspaper research (Earl et. al, 2024; Demarest & Langer, 2022)

The phases identified are:

- **Phase I: 2018-2020**
Frontline Resistance and Evidentiary Activism

The first phase emerged after China's National Sword restrictions redirected plastic waste shipments toward Southeast Asia as per the inclusion criteria. Malaysia's reported plastic waste imports rose from 316,600 tonnes in all of 2017 from its largest importers alone, to approximately 456,000 tonnes between January and July 2018; with other estimates covering a longer portion of 2018 are higher because they use different periods and datasets (Gunia, 2019; Ananthalakshmi & Chow, 2019). Malaysia, flooded with plastic waste, to send back some scrap to source. Reuters.). In Jenjarom and the surrounding Kuala Langat district of Selangor, close to Port Klang, residents encountered smoke, chemical odours, polluted waterways and nighttime burning as unlicensed recycling operations proliferated.

In this phase, activists mainly took the form of residents/community groups bringing light to the matter of illegal plastic waste facilities cropping up in the Klang Valley area. Chemist and community organizer Pua Lay Peng became a leading figure in the movement (Danowitz, 2023). She recruited other neighbours and residents in surrounding areas in tracking, monitoring, and investigating plastic waste reprocessing sites as they surfaced. Importantly, the racial dynamics of the plastic waste accumulation locations are predominantly in Chinese neighbourhoods.

Racial dynamics are an important, but often underlooked facet of plastic waste flows in the Malaysian context. This is despite a body of literature that traces the lineage of racial urban planning from British Empire land and waste management to modern nation state racially informed organizations of neighbourhoods. Jenjarom, where Peng is from, was historically used as a 'new village' or British concentration camp, as part of the Empire's Briggs Plan in 1951 (Hisham & Ling, 2025). A historically agricultural town nestled between rivers Sungai Langat and Sungai Semenyih, 54 kilometres from the nation's capital, Jenjarom's relegation as one of the 'new villages' saw the British corral predomi-

nantly Chinese residents in the Malay Peninsula, accusing them of being communists, starving, shooting at them in the process. This initiative, Malhi argues, reconstituted the resulting independent Malaysia as a racial state (2021).

That Jenjarom's Chinese majority makeup is not lost on the township's plastic waste organizers. Pua Lay Peng's parents were among the corralled in Jenjarom. Shared history informs how the activists steadily built their ranks, seeking out others in nearby ethnic Chinese townships that were also plagued by plastic fires. "“This (Jenjarom) is a nice Chinese village. We must have seemed perfect for them,” Pua has said of Jenjarom's designation as a plastic waste accumulation site (Winn, 2019). Along with other impacted residents, Pua then brought their evidence to the authorities, handing over binders of paper filled up with GPS coordinates and damning pictures.

Environmental NGOs like Greenpeace Malaysia would establish waste flow patterns through co-investigating with community organizers like Pua. Their action type combined community investigation, citizen monitoring, public complaints, documentation and transnational advocacy. Residents photographed and filmed burning, used drones to locate facilities, identified foreign packaging, contacted journalists and government officials, circulated evidence through social media, and worked with Greenpeace Malaysia on field investigations particularly in Jenjarom, Klang and Ipoh. Greenpeace Malaysia and community activists subsequently launched The Recycling Myth on 27 November 2018 and delivered it to Selangor's 56 state assembly representatives. Pua also travelled to confront one of the exporting countries, New Zealand, with evidence of how its

waste was being handled in Malaysia (Greenpeace Malaysia, 2018, 2019; Heng, 2021). The primary targets of activist actions were illegal factory operators, local and state regulators, Malaysia's federal government and waste-exporting countries.

The initial target response was substantial but incomplete. Malaysian authorities imposed a temporary freeze on plastic waste import permits in July 2018, announced an intended three-year phase-out of imports, raised import requirements, and closed approximately 30-33 illegal factories around Jenjarom. Despite this initially strong response, the proposed complete phase-out was not ultimately implemented, and imports continued (Parker, 2018; Rosengren & Pyzyk, 2018). The reported local outcome was a reduction in visible illegal operations and improved air conditions in Jenjarom, but through a follow-up, roughly 17,000 tonnes of abandoned waste reportedly remained, while activists documented dumping surfacing into Teluk Gong, Pulau Indah and as far north as Ipoh and Sungai Petani (C4 Center, 2021; Heng, 2019; The Malaysian Insight, 2019). A pattern in response was established, as Peng puts it “Those illegal factories, they would multiply by two times, three times. They can copy and paste so fast!” but the exact locations of where the factories would resurface remained difficult to predict. Figure 2 shows an accumulation site in Ipoh in the state of Perak, 234 kilometres north of Jenjarom. Figure 3 shows these locations on the Malay Peninsula.

The federal government also announced in May 2019 that it would return as much as 3,000 tonnes of contaminated waste to exporting countries and, by January 2020,



FIGURE 2: Plastic waste accumulation in Ipoh, Malaysia. Note. Photograph courtesy of Greenpeace. Copyright (2018) by Greenpeace. Reproduced with permission.



FIGURE 3: Locations of selected plastic waste accumulation sites in Malaysia. Note. The map identifies Jenjarom, Klang, Ipoh, and Sungai Petani in Malaysia. Map created by the author using Natural Earth raster administrative-boundary data.

reported sending 150 containers to 13 countries (Associated Press, 2020; Reuters, 2019). These developments are consistent with Chen et al.'s (2021) finding that Malaysia's plastic crisis involved fragmented governance, inadequate management capacity and weak enforcement, and with Ong and Diong's (2023) finding that post-National Sword Malaysian news frequently framed imported plastic as an international controversy. This framing sidelines or perhaps even occludes Malaysia's dual role as a leading producer of plastics and importer of plastic waste. Dauvergne and Islam (2023) identify the Jenjarom grassroots activism campaign as an important example of intensifying Malaysian anti-plastics activism, while cautioning that policy reform and plant closures do not by themselves demonstrate lasting control over plastic production, trade or regulatory evasion.

- **Phase II: 2019-2022**

- **Geographic Expansion and Widening Targets**

In the second phase, activists expanded their campaigns beyond Jenjarom and beyond the immediate target of illegal factory closure. This tracks with the revelation that plastic waste reprocessing facilities resurfaced in other places on the peninsular after being shut down. They would move. In Sungai Petani, Kedah, Ipoh, north of Jenjarom and Port Klang, where ensuing plastic waste accumulation sites surfaced, the organization, Persatuan Tindakan Alam Sekitar Sungai Petani (PTAS), organized residents concerned about factory emissions, fires from plastic waste incineration, and illegal dumping. Many of

the plastic waste processing facilities, accumulation, and incineration sites like Jenjarom and Sungai Petani, sited in close proximity with palm oil plantations, another adopted relic of the British Empire, monoculture farming, that has since been ballooned to national identity association (Liu, Ganesan, and Smith, 2020). Its action types included community health monitoring, petitions, meetings with officials and public demonstrations. An August 2019 protest reportedly involved approximately 150 participants, while about 250 people joined a peaceful rally at Kedah Halal Park on 21 September 2019 (C4 Center, 2021). PTAS associated periods of intense plastic burning with increased respiratory illness and hospital use, although its figures were community-produced rather than a controlled epidemiological study (Sahabat Alam Malaysia, 2021). Greenpeace Malaysia simultaneously documented new sites and fires in Sungai Petani and Pulau Indah, while its 2020 Recycling Myth 2.0 investigation (a follow-up to their 2018 publication) reported metals, brominated flame retardants and other contaminants in material sampled from burned or abandoned waste sites (Heng, 2019; Greenpeace Malaysia, 2020). The plastic issue consequently broadened from imported waste alone to include toxic burning, health, factory displacement, abandoned residues and proposed waste-to-energy incineration. Targets now included municipal and state regulators in Kedah and Selangor, federal permit authorities and advocates of incineration. The concern also expanded beyond the binary of legal/illegality into concerns over impacts of hosting the plastic waste reprocessing sites.

Activists also targeted the infrastructure and corporations enabling waste movements, a shift towards upstream accountability. Beginning in 2021, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth Malaysia), Greenpeace, the Basel Action Network, GAIA and dozens of international organizations wrote to nine major shipping companies, asking them to stop transporting plastic waste from richer OECD economies to countries with weaker processing and regulatory capacity. In June 2022, the Malaysia Stop Waste Trade Coalition directly requested that shipping company Maersk disclose plastic waste volumes and stop shipments into Malaysia (Sahabat Alam Malaysia, 2022). Maersk's eventual public response was this: in February 2023, it stated that it would not accept HS 3915 plastic waste imports into Malaysian ports and that this restriction had been in place since 26 October 2019 (A.P. Moller–Maersk, 2023).

Government enforcement also became more closely connected to international coordinated efforts, primarily the Basel Convention's Plastic Waste Amendments, effective in 2021. Malaysia had sought to return a US-origin container for violating the new rules in March 2021, but upon closer inspection, allowed it to enter, with the following month finding Malaysia returned 267 illicit containers since 2019, with another 81 being processed at the time (Reuters, 2021a; Chu & Ananthalakshmi, 2021). The reported outcomes of this phase were thus geographic mobilization, stronger community networks, greater scrutiny of shipping companies, expanded use of Basel rules and hundreds of returned containers, not the demanded termination of plastic waste imports. Research on the changing geography of waste trade supports the interpretation that the National Sword Policy redistributed, rather than eliminated trade, while receiving states continued to face regulatory, infrastructural and enforcement constraints (Wahab & Lim, 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

• **Phase III: 2022-2025**

Coalition-Building And Plastics-Treaty Politics

The third phase shifted the principal problem definition from mismanaged imported waste toward the entire plastic life cycle, from manufacturing to consumption to disposal. Key actors included the Malaysia Stop Waste Trade Coalition, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, the Consumers' Association of Penang, C4 Center, Greenpeace Malaysia, Zero Waste Malaysia, Environmental Protection Society Malaysia, Zero Waste Sabah and international Break Free From Plastic and Friends of the Earth networks. Their action types consisted of coalition formation, policy drafts, public education, exhibitions, opinion surveys, ministerial dialogues, international treaty interventions and advocacy against production growth and incineration. These organizations targeted plastic and petrochemical producers, consumer-goods companies, waste-to-energy proponents, Malaysian ministries and Malaysia's delegation to the UN Global Plastics Treaty negotiations.

Activists argued that cleanups and recycling could not keep pace with production. They demanded mandatory production reductions, removal of hazardous chemicals, extended producer responsibility, product transparency and accessible reuse systems. For example, in October

2024, a coalition of activists and NGOs organized a three-day Journey to End Plastic Pollution at Pavilion Bukit Jalil in Kuala Lumpur, using art, film, storytelling and a "People or Plastic?" discussion involving then-environment minister Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, human-rights representative Edmund Bon and SAM researcher Mageswari Sangaralingam (Consumers' Association of Penang, 2024; Sahabat Alam Malaysia, 2024). Greenpeace had also published Malaysian polling before INC-4 indicating that 87% of respondents supported reducing plastic production, turning public-opinion evidence into a lobbying resource (Greenpeace Malaysia, 2024).

The government response in this phase was dialogic but internally contradictory. Take Nik Nazmi for instance, who engaged with the 2024 event, but when questioned over the implementation of Malaysia Plastics Sustainability Roadmap 2021-2030 (MPSR), invoked the focal responsibility to individual Malaysian consumers for the increase in plastic packaging during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bernama, 2024). On the international stage, Malaysia participated in plastics treaty negotiations but generally favoured downstream waste management and national discretion over binding global production limits. This placed it closer to the lower-ambition group than to the parties demanding mandatory production caps, despite Malaysia's earlier diplomatic rhetoric against foreign dumping (Lee, 2025; Gomes & Tan, 2025).

From the articles analysed, reported outcomes include a durable multi-organization coalition, direct ministerial engagement as in the case of Nik Nazmi, greater public visibility for production reduction and human rights-framed arguments, as well as the delivery of a memorandum supported initially by more than 100-130 Malaysian organizations. No global treaty was concluded at Busan in 2024 or Geneva in 2025, however, and Malaysia did not adopt the coalition's proposed 75% production reduction. This mixed result accords with Dauvergne and Islam's (2023) conclusion that Malaysian activism is intensifying and can energize communities and pressure governments, while entrenched petrochemical and corporate power limits systemic change. It also reflects research showing that Malaysia simultaneously faces imported waste, high domestic plastic consumption, weak waste-management, recycling infrastructure capacity and a large plastics-manufacturing sector (Chen et al., 2021; Goh et al., 2025).

• **Phase IV: 2025-Present**

Implementation Watchdog Work And Organized Reuse

The fourth phase (so far, as this is an ongoing development) combined continued treaty advocacy with closer monitoring of enforcement and experiments in reuse. Actors included Greenpeace Malaysia, SAM, CAP, C4 Centre, Zero Waste Malaysia, Zero Waste Sabah, Environmental Protection Society Malaysia, genREuse volunteers, participating restaurants, public-health researchers and affected residents. Their action types included parliamentary lobbying, petitions, legal and trade monitoring, community-based research, and criticism of government negotiating positions. On 23 July 2025, coalition representatives delivered their plastics treaty memorandum to MPs in Par-

liament, asking them to convey its demands to the prime minister and responsible ministers before INC-5.2 in Geneva (C4 Centre, 2025; Sahabat Alam Malaysia, 2025a). Greenpeace's genREuse initiative recruited volunteers and restaurants to trial reusable dining systems, shifting part of the movement from opposition toward demonstration of alternative infrastructure. Meanwhile, in an overlap with prior phases, advocates continued targeting imported plastic, misleading recycling narratives, single-use food-service material, the petrochemical lobby and Malaysia's opposition to internationally binding production limits. The locations of action therefore encompassed a more varied range of scales, from local restaurants and affected communities to Parliament, federal ministries and the Geneva negotiating venue for ongoing plastics treaty formation.

The most concrete governmental action was the import regime effective 1 July 2025. The Malaysian government appointed SIRIM to assess and issue Certificate of Approvals for HS 3915 imports, partly to standardize a part of the plastic waste flow process. This restricted eligibility primarily to Basel Convention parties or countries covered by qualifying agreements, and introduced pre-approval, inspection and contamination requirements. Importantly, plastic waste imports from the United States are excluded for they are not part of the convention and continue to resist binding plastics proposals. Importantly, the US Census-based data shows continuing exports to Malaysia, and Basel Action Network recorded 1.6 million kg in July 2026, describing those imports as prohibited by Malaysia despite the SIRIM move, highlighting an enforcement or reporting gap (Basel Action Network, 2026). It was not a comprehensive ban on plastic waste imports from every country, but a noteworthy step (Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry, 2025).

In response, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, and allied organizations welcomed the restriction but demanded transparent enforcement, stronger customs procedures, anti-corruption measures and prosecution of traffickers, showing the movement's transition into an implementation-watchdog role (Sahabat Alam Malaysia, 2025b). At INC-5.2, the Malaysian delegation still did not support the binding production cuts sought by activists, submitting no text under Article 6 on plastic production reductions, and the talks ended without agreement. Activists lauded an increase in a crackdown on plastic waste imports but expressed frustration at the failure of upstream treaty ambitions (Greenpeace Malaysia, 2025; King, 2025). In February 2026, Malaysia completely prohibited e-waste imports and considered, but had not yet adopted, a temporary plastic waste import moratorium, amid corruption investigations involving senior environmental officials and licensing for reprocessing facilities (Latiff, 2026). The reported outcomes of this phase are thus stronger import controls, exclusion of some exporting countries, increased parliamentary and media scrutiny, continued reuse experimentation and renewed attention to pollution around recycling facilities. Evidence of national reductions in plastic production, consumption or pollution has not yet been reported, making this an ongoing rather than completed phase (Table 1).

What do these phases mean for activist responses to Malaysian plastic waste trade?

Plastic Waste Trade Activism as Dynamic

The adaptiveness of Malaysian plastic waste trade activism must be lauded. While not romanticizing the circumstances, it is noteworthy that everyday citizens have formed coalitions with other actors and other activists, depending on their goals and targets. It may seem simple to offer that plastic waste trade activism changes because the plastic waste trade itself changes. The reality, from the information gathered and analysed, is that it changes in a way that a simple chronology of activism belies its dynamism-activists are not merely becoming more sophisticated over time, but rather, their repertoires change because their target of contestation moves. Like the closing-down-then-resurfacing-elsewhere movements of the plastic waste reprocessing facilities, activists are consequently expanding their networks and targets, scaling, shifting, moving as their targets move.

Plastic Waste Trade Activism as Expanding into Upstream Accountability

Another interesting and important note is the shift, or expansion, of targets towards upstream actors. Targeting illegal operators expands into exporting countries (the UK, US, Canada) and the federal government's waste governance instruments, towards shipping companies (Maersk), towards transboundary treaty negotiations (the Basel Convention). Documented in Greenpeace's 2019 recorded investigation show initial concerns of 'someone is illegally burning plastic waste near me'. Eventually, the problem becomes focused on 'why is so much plastic being produced or traded in the first place?' By Phase III, activists are making whole life cycle demands on production caps, chemicals, reuse, and petrochemical influence, where Phase IV adds monitoring of implementation and practical alternatives. Activists highlight their fatigue with mainstream recycling narratives that ignore final accumulation sites, the communities they affect, and larger systems of export/import and producer accountability. "For all these years developed countries relied on China to recycle their plastic, so they didn't care," activist, chemist, and Jenjarom resident Pua is quoted as saying "Now China is trying to take care of its pollution problem, so the burden is shifting to us. But recycling is a myth. The root cause of the problem is we are too dependent on plastic."

Plastic Waste Trade Activism and Social Dynamics

The story of plastic waste trade and its impacts in Malaysia is a story of race, ethnicity, class, ingrained dynamics that cannot be ignored when considering solutions. From Jenjarom's predominant Chinese make-up bearing the brunt of initial plastic waste accumulation to the informal waste labourers working for around 10 dollars a day, who are primarily Bangladeshi straddling different immigration categories, who have continuously faced stigma not just as waste labourers but as Bangladeshi residents (Bengali, 2018; Reza & Islam, 2026). They are racialized in the Malaysian context, often facing discrimination from the state and society. Their labour in the plastic waste repro-

TABLE 1: Phases of Malaysian plastic waste trade activism after implementation of China's 2018 national sword policy.

Years	Phase	Activist	Organizing Actions	Target of Actions
2018–2020	Frontline resistance and evidentiary activism	residents/community group, environmental NGO	Community investigations, drone mapping, complaints, journalist visits, exporter-country advocacy and chemical sampling.	Illegal operators; Malaysian authorities; exporting states
2019–2022	Scaling and target expansion	residents/community group, environmental NGO, multi actor coalition	Monitoring displaced factories, waste-colonialism framing, brand audits, anti-incineration organising and shipping-company pressure.	Exporters; brands; incineration advocates; shipping companies
2022–2025	Coalition and treaty politics	residents/community group, environmental NGO, multi actor coalition	Whole-life-cycle demands, production caps, chemical controls, reuse and scrutiny of petrochemical influence.	Malaysian negotiators; plastic and petrochemical producers; UN treaty process
2025–Present	Implementation watchdog and practical reuse	residents/community group, environmental NGO, multi actor coalition	Monitoring import-rule enforcement, challenging Malaysia's treaty position in the Basel Convention, piloting reuse and producing community-health evidence.	Enforcement agencies; treaty negotiators; restaurants and consumers

cessing facilities is mentioned in some articles and reports but not expanded upon. Interviews tended to focus on the owners and managers of the facilities with interviews focusing primarily on their employers and owners of businesses near the plastic waste accumulation sites. Despite evidence that migrants perform low-paid manual labour in Malaysia's plastic waste reprocessing economy, post-2018 waste-trade activism has rarely centred migrant workers as political actors or articulated demands concerning wages, immigration status, occupational exposure or labour rights (Bengali, 2018). Similarly, activism in historically racialized settlements such as Jenjarom and its Chinese residents, has principally framed imported waste through community health, illegality, governmental failure and waste colonialism rather than through an explicit analysis of race. Race and labour consequently constitute significant silences within the activism's publicly reported framing.

5. CONCLUSIONS

I love my home, Malaysia and it is frustrating to navigate its relationship to the plastic waste trade. Plastic waste trade activism spurs critical optimism though. The grassroots activism of early phases was not just a reactionary local engagement. Residents grew into activist roles, transforming embodied experiences of risk, of smoke, odour, illness, and environmental damage into evidence that travelled in directions that ran counter to plastic flows, where the latter moved downstream, activism expanded towards upstream accountability through the photographs, coordinates, packaging labels, drone footage, complaints, and chemical samples, some through citizen science, some via collaboration with NGOs, which in turn, established the evidentiary foundation upon which NGOs, journalists, and government officials subsequently acted. The dynamism of Malaysian plastic waste trade activism gives me hope that challenges the binary of success/failure in measuring actions and outcomes, that adaptiveness and coalition-building that has been unfurling since 2018 offers me, other Malaysians, and plastic waste trade activists at large

not only considerations for moving forward, but a reason to appreciate the progress made.

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