Whether this is your first zero waste event, or one of many, this guide provides key steps and useful tips to ensure the event runs smoothly!
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The Basics: What Is A Zero Waste Event?

Zero waste events can come in all shapes and sizes, but are united by a common goal: to minimize the amount of waste produced by of event!

At the least, this typically requires providing waste streams for all types of materials disposed at the event (i.e. compost, recycling, and landfill/incinerator waste) and support to ensure proper sorting of event waste.

A more extensive zero waste event could also include (but is not limited to):

- Encouraging attendees to bring their own reusable supplies.
- Preventing the use and distribution of any single-use, landfill/incinerator-destined materials.
- Staffing waste stations with volunteers to ensure proper sorting.
- Conducting an audit of all waste streams at the end of the event.
- Setting waste diversion goals for the event, or setting total waste minimization goals (by weight or volume) for the event.
- Collaborating with food recovery organizations to provide leftovers to local food banks or shelters.
- Following the principles of the Waste Hierarchy (which prioritizes waste reduction and reuse before composting and recycling) throughout the event planning process.

Regardless of the extent of your event’s zero waste ambitions, this guide will help you think through each step of the process. (If you plan to incorporate a waste audit to measure your event’s diversion rate, consider checking out PLAN’s Waste Audit Manual, available through the PLAN Member Hub.) Keep in mind that after your first zero waste event, you’ll have a better sense of waste materials to anticipate, and how you want to prioritize waste reduction in the future.
Like waste stations, the number of wash stations you provide at your event will depend on the number of attendees. However, each station should consist of the following:

• 4 Tote bins/tubs (one each for: soapy water, clean water, sanitizer, and used towels)
• Labels for each bin that are laminated (i.e. waterproof)
• Tap water
• Liquid dishwashing soap (ideally in bulk)
• Liquid sanitizer (ideally in bulk)
• 2-4 Scrub brushes and/or sponges (for the soapy water bin)
• Hand towels for drying

Set up the totes in a space that creates enough room for one line on either side of the station (this will help prevent crowding). Drying towels will get soggy pretty quickly, so have a wet towel bin nearby the station for depositing used towels, as well as a pile of fresh dry towels for restocking.

Place your tote of soapy water first, your clean water tote second, the sanitizer third, and the dry towels and used towel bin last. Put up clear explanatory signage by the station to call attention to it, and guide attendees step-by-step through the process.
PLAN’s “Swag Hierarchy” is inspired by the Waste Hierarchy. Here, the top represents the most preferable approach to event “swag,” but as you move down the triangle the items become decreasingly desirable.

A HIERARCHICAL ETHICAL GUIDE TO SWAG

If you’re going to buy new...

Avoid It
Try experiences instead such as photo booths, event tickets, food, movie screenings, repair stations, and more. The options are endless!

Upcycle/Reuse
Consider options that don’t require buying new such as decorating water bottles, clothing swaps, shoes or book binding from reused paper, or screen printing items students already own.

Useful & Ethical
If you must purchase new, consider products that students will actually use, are durable, and come from trusted, ethical sources. We recommend checking out some PLAN’s discounts on brands such as To-Go Ware, Kuun Kanteen, People Towels, and more.

Useful or Ethical
We understand you can’t always find affordable useful and ethical swag. At least try to buy one or the other! Useful items can include durable ballpoint pens, carabiners, or sewing kits. There may be other swag options which are less useful but come from ethical sources. We recommend using these options as a last resort.

Useless & Questionable
Please avoid buying useless swag from questionable retailers. This can include items such as fidget spinners, foam fingers, slap bracelets, and so much more.