**Disposing of Face Masks to Protect People and the Planet**

How do you provide care for patients in a way that does not harm the environment? - This is the question Doctors Without Borders (MSF) is trying to solve as the devastating impacts of the climate emergency are increasingly felt across the world. With the health sector responsible for around 5% of carbon emissions worldwide, health providers need to find ways to reduce their environmental impact. This is why MSF launched an initiative to find alternatives to single-use surgical face masks - one of the items most used by MSF medical staff across projects worldwide.

In June 2023, MSF medical teams in Mozambique and Kyrgyzstan started a pilot initiative to replace single-use surgical face masks with washable face masks that can be used up to 40 times.

The objective was to compare the environmental impact of the single-use face mask versus the washable one and to determine whether reusable masks can work logistically in the different settings in MSF works.

A life cycle assessment was carried out in partnership with the Technische Universität Berlin, which assessed the face masks “from cradle to grave”, meaning the material used to create the mask, the transport to the manufacturing facility, the production and packaging of the face mask, as well as transport to the point of use, any eventual reprocessing and the final disposal of the face masks.

This assessment showed that the washable face mask significantly outperformed the single-use one. MSF staff also generally preferred the washable one, saying it was more comfortable to wear.

The experience in Kyrgyzstan and Mozambique showed that it is not only feasible to reduce single-use surgical face masks but that it also has a positive impact on the environment and reduces carbon emissions without compromising the quality of care or safety of patients and medical staff.

The long-term ambition is to replace a significant proportion of single-use masks with more sustainable alternatives across MSF medical projects, and with these results in hand, the next step is to roll out the washable face masks as soon as possible.

Nelson Domingos Nuvunga, MSF nurse in Mozambique, says he is encouraging colleagues to use these face masks “because, as health workers, we understand the impacts of climate change very well. But also, I think it’s our duty as human beings to save our planet.”

Every effort counts. Changing just one mask won’t make a difference, but changing many will.