

My Mask - I Care Campaign at St Nicholas Secondary School Had-Dingli

Covid 19 - Lockdowns, air, land and sea traffic came almost to a halt, the cities went silent. The world went silent. What was the effect of this sudden change on the environment?

Students at Saint Nicholas College Secondary School Had-Dingli have been investigating the effect of Covid-19 on the environment. Lockdowns and teleworking may be having some positive impacts on our environment. Between 1 January and 2 March of 2020, the European Space Agency observed a marked decline in nitrous oxide emissions from cars, powerplants and factories in the Po Valley in northern Italy. Areas in the North of India such as Jalandhar and the Himalayas became visible again for the first time in decades as air quality improved. Rivers around the world, including the Ganges in India, became cleaner during the first lockdown period in 2020.

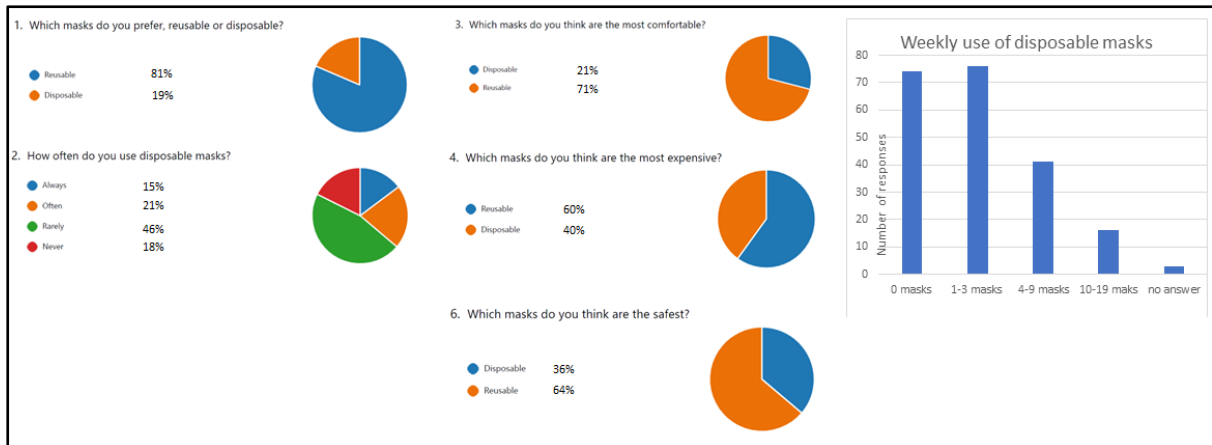
On the other hand, the use of disposable Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) has increased in order to ensure safety of health care workers and other frontliners and to reduce transmission of the virus. Unfortunately, data on the amount of PPE used and their disposal is minimal. Research is still emphasising the safe use of PPE rather than the impact of their use on the environment. Amongst the most used PPE is the face mask, which is not only used by frontliners and health workers but also by the general public. In fact, its use has become mandatory in various countries around the world.

About 129 billion masks and 65 billion surgical gloves are used globally on a monthly basis. Disposable face masks, "are the new cigarette butt," according to the Guardian. According to a UN news report, "75 per cent of the used masks, as well as other pandemic-related waste, will end up in landfills, or floating in the seas." Thinking about the problems created by the dumping of these disposable masks can be saddening to say the least. A short google search shows several reports of birds that get entangled in masks. What a paradox – Something that was created to protect the life of humans is threatening the life of other species!

Unfortunately, it doesn't look like we'll be getting rid of face masks any time soon. At St Nicholas College Secondary School we believe that each and every one of us is responsible for conserving the environment so each and every one of us needs to act and take an active role to protect it. No use pointing fingers at other institutions – we need to take responsibility for our actions. So we decided to take action and promote the use of safe reusable masks both at school and in our community. We decided to encourage other students and the wider school community to trash disposable masks and use reusable masks that follow WHO safety criteria. This is how the campaign **My Mask – I Care** came about.

We started off the campaign by researching the impact of Covid 19 on the environment and presented the findings to all the students during a school assembly. More research and another presentation followed about the pros and cons of using different types of masks. This sparked the idea of creating a facebook challenge that encourages students, parents and friends to post photos of their reusable masks. The challenge is available on the [school facebook page](#). The local councils of [Had-Dingli](#) and [H'Attard](#) are sharing this challenge on their facebook pages in order to spread the message among the school community. AtoZ Electronics have also collaborated in this initiative.

During a brainstorming activity, trying to come up with further activities to promote reusable masks, we realised we knew very little about the habits related to the use of masks amongst students. And with the help of our teachers of geography, we investigated these habits amongst year 9 and year 10 students in our school. The responses received show that 81% of students prefer using reusable masks over disposable masks. 18% and 46% of the students respectively never or rarely use a disposable mask. 71% of students think that reusables are more comfortable but only 64% think that reusable masks are safer than disposable masks. Unfortunately, 60% of students think that reusable masks are expensive. These results are shown in figure 1.



Data collected from 201 students.

The next move was to produce a campaign video to try to convince more students to trash their disposable masks. It's only a minute long but we think the message does get through. We decided to submit this video for the Litterless Campaign organised by Young Reporters for the Environment.



The Campaign video

After all this we still thought we could do more. And so we organised a casual day with the aim of raising funds to sew a reusable mask for every

year 9 and 10 student in the school. This initiative would have not been possible without the collaboration of the Local Councils of Ħad-Dingli and Ħ'Attard. In this campaign safety has been as much a priority as safeguarding the environment. We chose a local seamstress to minimise the carbon footprint of this project. The masks were sewn according to the safe masks criteria of the World Health Organisation and are made of three layers of fabric. The inner layer is an absorbent material, such as cotton. The middle layer is sewn of non-woven non-absorbent material, such as polypropylene and the outer layer is made of non-absorbent material, such as polyester or polyester blend.



Join our facebook challenge!

Have we convinced you to join forces with the students of St Nicholas College Secondary School Ħad-Dingli to trash your disposable mask? Less trash means a safer environment for us all! Make the swap and save the planet!

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