

SDG 12

Initiatives to reduce the production and consumption of plastics

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The way we currently produce and consume plastics is not sustainable. The massive production and consumption of plastics, especially single use plastic products, have contributed greatly to the plastic pollution crisis. Plastic pollution impacts our ecosystems, endangers animal lives and also threatens human health. There is just too much plastic to be managed, and recycling itself is not enough. Plastic pollution is a multidimensional problem that requires a holistic approach. Tackling this issue and enhancing sustainable production and consumption of plastics requires rethinking the way economic development is pursued. Game-changing steps have to be taken by all economic players – producers, policy-makers, businesses and consumers worldwide.

The crisis: Current unsustainable production and consumption of plastics

Over the past 50 years, global production and consumption of plastics have increased more than 20 times over, and plastic production has reached 320 million tonnes a year.¹

The impacts of plastic litter, especially of single-use and disposable items (e.g., bags, straws, coffee cups, beverage bottles, most food packaging) are growing as each year more plastic waste accumulates in our environment and oceans.

Single-use plastics are a major source of pollution, especially marine litter. Around 18 billion pounds of plastics enter the ocean each year.² Plastic is choking our oceans and marine life: in March 2019, we've been shocked by the news that a whale was washed up dead in the Philippines with 40 kilograms of

plastic in its stomach.³

Also, plastic is a persistent material. Once in the environment, it does not go away, it will take centuries to degrade. To have an idea, one single water bottle can remain on the planet for around 450 years. What's more, plastic often contains toxic chemicals, and exposure to plastics can impact human health in different ways throughout the entire life cycle, for instance by entering our food chain as micro particles (microplastics) that can concentrate toxic chemicals, such as persistent organic pollutants. As plastic production increases, this exposure will only grow.

Alongside this massive plastic production came increased pollution. Of the estimated 8.3 billion tonnes of plastic produced since the 1950s, only 9 percent has been recycled.⁴ In fact, the recycling systems in place have not kept pace with the excessive

1 Gaia/CAG/BFFP (2019).

2 National Geographic (2019).

3 See <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/18/asia/dead-whale-philippines-40kg-plastic-stomach-intl-scli/index.html>.

4 Gaia/CAG/BFFP (2019).

consumption of this material. Only an insignificant amount of the plastic on the market is recycled; most plastic goods and materials ultimately become waste and are being dumped in landfills, littered, or burned.

The harm caused by plastic vastly outweighs the benefits it brings to society, and the profits realized by companies will never compensate for the damage caused by the pollution it creates, including increased greenhouse gas emissions, impacts on biodiversity, and impacts on tourism, fisheries, public safety and human health.

The reason why we have reached such an unprecedented level of pollution is the way we currently produce and consume plastics, which is linear⁵ and inefficient. Mostly plastic products are used in short-lived applications, which are not designed for re-use or even for recycling.

Tackling this problem and promoting a sustainable use of plastics requires a drastic reduction of plastic production, particularly of single-use, low-value, disposable plastics.

The movement for a change has (just) begun

Due to the impact and increased awareness of the effects of plastics on the world's oceans, environment and on our health, many organizations have gathered strength, unified by the same vision: a future that is free from plastic pollution.

Break Free From Plastic (BFFP) is one of the biggest global movements envisioning a future free from plastic pollution.⁶ Since its launch in September 2016, nearly 1,500 organizations across the world have joined to demand massive reductions in single-use plastics and to push for lasting solutions to the plastic pollution crisis.

These organizations share the common values of environmental protection and social justice, which guide their work at the community and global level. Among their activities are brand audits based on beach clean-ups, to identify the brands which are the biggest responsible for plastic pollution.⁷ Last year, BFFP member organizations engaged nearly 10,000 volunteers in 239 clean-ups in 42 countries on six continents, collecting and analyzing over 187,851 pieces of plastic pollution. The action revealed the **top 10 polluters** worldwide:

- Coca-Cola
- PepsiCo
- Nestlé
- Danone
- Mondelez International
- Procter & Gamble
- Unilever
- Perfetti van Melle
- Mars Incorporated
- Colgate-Palmolive

Also, BFFP members have produced and published reports alerting society and policy-makers to plastic pollution and its hidden costs, which include the impacts on human health.⁸

In Europe, BFFP is also represented by the Rethink Plastic alliance, which brings together 10 leading European NGOs working closely with European policy-makers to design and deliver policy solutions to curb plastic pollution.⁹

5 That is, based on a 'take-produce-consume-throw away' approach to resources.

6 See <https://www.breakfreefromplastic.org>.

7 BFFP (2018a).

8 See www.breakfreefromplastic.org/reports/.

9 See <https://rethinkplasticalliance.eu/>.

Thanks to the influence and hard work of the movement to break free from plastic worldwide, several countries have already taken important steps to cut down on single-use plastics.

In Europe, tackling plastic pollution has been a key priority on the EU agenda. In January 2018 the European Commission launched its Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy, and in December 2018 the EU agreed on pioneering new laws to reduce the environmental impact of certain plastic products, the so-called Single-Use Plastics Directive.¹⁰

Several other countries have already adopted legislation or are considering proposals to target disposable plastic products. In early 2018, BFFP published a report listing existing national prohibitions, restrictions and levies on single-use plastics worldwide, including in Belarus, Montenegro, the UK, India, and many countries in Asia and Latin America.¹¹

¹⁰ See <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5483-2019-INIT/en/pdf>.

¹¹ BFFP (2018b).

But it is just the beginning. Because of the borderless nature of the plastic pollution, a global solution is needed.

The need for a global solution

There is no doubt that plastic pollution is a growing global problem. Plastics are transported by ocean currents and end up beyond national boundaries. Many floating masses of plastics have been discovered in the ocean – the so-called ‘garbage patches’ in oceanic gyres.¹² Actually, almost every corner of the world has been impacted by this material, contaminating our environment and harming living beings.

The international community needs to come together and agree on an ambitious framework to resolve the crisis: we need a legally binding international agreement to tackle plastic pollution with a full life-cycle approach, and promote the prevention of plastic waste.

¹² The Ocean Clean Up (2018).

The EU Single-Use Plastics Directive

Box 12.1

The Directive includes a set of measures to tackle marine litter,¹ including:

■ **A ban on selected single-use plastic products** for which market alternatives exist: cotton bud sticks, cutlery, plates, straws, stirrers, balloon sticks, as well as cups, food and beverage containers made of expanded polystyrene, and all products made of oxo-degradable plastic

■ **Measures to reduce consumption** of plastic food containers and beverage cups and specific marking and labelling of certain products

■ **Extended Producer Responsibility schemes** covering the clean-up cost of litter, applied to products such as tobacco filters and fishing gear

A 90 percent separate **collection target for plastic bottles** by 2029 (77% by 2025) and the introduction of design requirements to connect caps to bottles, as well as a target to incorporate 25 percent of recycled plastic in polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles by 2025 and 30 percent in all plastic bottles by 2030.

¹ See http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-19-1873_en.htm.

In fact, tackling plastic pollution has become an integral part of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Implementing SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production patterns is especially important in curbing plastic waste generation.¹³

Anchored by the SDGs, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) has recognized the plastic crisis as a serious and rapidly growing issue of global concern, which requires an urgent global response. At the close of the fourth session of the UNEA in March 2019, governments adopted a Ministerial Declaration titled ‘Innovative Solutions for Environmental Challenges and Sustainable Consumption and Production’, that commits to significantly reduce the manufacturing and use of single-use plastic products by 2030.¹⁴

Many civil society organizations and legal experts have identified huge gaps in the existing frameworks addressing plastics and plastic pollution. The United Nations Environment Programme (UN Environment) agreed that “current governance strategies and approaches provide a fragmented approach that does not adequately address marine plastic litter and microplastics.”¹⁵

The BFFP members call for a new global Convention on Plastic Pollution with a mandate to manage the lifecycle of plastics, including production. “The new Convention should anchor, build upon, and complement existing regional and global voluntary and binding frameworks, allowing them to contribute within their core competencies.”¹⁶

All sectors of the economy must be addressed with new global agreements, especially regarding corporations, as the way they operate has a significant impact on how resources are deployed. Producers are at the root of the problem by extracting fossil fuels

(including by fracking, one of the most environmentally damaging processes), to incessantly produce plastic and inundate the planet with single-use goods.

In fact, plastic pollution does not start when it enters the environment, but from its very first production stage. This is why tackling plastic requires a lifecycle approach, taking into account the whole value chain.¹⁷

The way is upstream: prevention and reduction

Plastic is one of the fastest growing pollutants in the world. The way we currently design, produce and consume plastics is both unsustainable and inefficient. Tackling this issue and enhancing the sustainable production and consumption of plastics requires rethinking the way economic development is pursued. Game-changing steps have to be taken by all economic players – producers, policy-makers, businesses and consumers worldwide.

Notably, urgent measures are needed in three key areas: reduction of plastic production and consumption, redesign of plastic products to be safe and sustainable, and better management of plastic waste.

Production and consumption patterns need to be ethical, and not solely driven by economics. Most products are created purely in pursuit of profit, with little regard for their environmental and health impacts. We need to shift away from economic models that value growth for growth’s sake, towards a new mindset that respects planetary boundaries.

Changing the current way plastics are produced and consumed requires a fine balance between regulations and incentives, and government policies have an important role to play in driving the necessary paradigm shift from downstream solutions, such as recycling, to more upstream solutions, such as reduction, prevention and alternative business models.

¹³ See also Plastic Soup Foundation (2018).

¹⁴ UN Doc. UNEP/EA.4/HLS.1, para. 5(l). See also the Progress on Plastic Update, Issue 10: UNEA4 (www.ciel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Progress-on-Plastics-Update-Issue-10-UNEA4-Mar-2019-1.pdf).

¹⁵ UN Environment (2017), p. 5.

¹⁶ CIEL et al. (2018).

¹⁷ Cf. CIEL et al. (2019).

Recycling alone is not sufficient, neither are the heroic efforts of the 'beach clean-up' volunteers. There is just too much plastic to be managed. Coca-Cola has recently declared that they produce around 200,000 plastic bottles per minute.¹⁸ We need to close the tap and get to the source of the problem by preventing the generation of plastic waste in the first place, and build virtuous cycles within resilient economic systems. This can be done successfully through upstream measures such as redesigning plastics for circularity (e.g., quality long-life products free of toxic chemicals), and implementing extended producer responsibility schemes (EPR) to ensure producers bear the full costs of waste management and the clean-up of their products.

Plastics that cannot be recycled should not be produced in the first place, and single-use plastic applications for which sustainable alternatives are widely available should be restricted from the market. Also, reusable local schemes should be promoted and scaled up where possible. Countries all over the world should follow the example of the new European Single Use Plastic Directive, to implement the right economic incentives as well as bans on wasteful single-use products: such measures can really open the door to innovative alternatives.

Zero Waste solutions already exist, and new business models are already proving successful outcomes. Moving away from a disposable and packaging intensive market to more local and resilient economies based on services and short supply chains is within reach. In fact, the transition to a post-single-use plastic era can bring new jobs and thriving economies. However, for this to happen, we need a solid and supportive legislative framework to put the right economic incentives in place.

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¹⁸ The Guardian (2019).