reloop

resources
remain
resources

Addressing the global plastic waste crisis

Position paper

"Flip Flop Road" - This captivating photo was taken by Huw Cordey of Silverback Films in Aldabra, one of the world's most remote islands in the Indian Ocean. These abandoned flip flops drifted from mainland Africa, collecting within 25-30 metres of the centre of this picture.

Introduction

The issue of plastic pollution in rivers and seas has gained significant attention in various publications and papers. The prevailing consensus is that the primary cause of this pollution is the "mismanagement" of discarded plastic products, parts, and packaging. However, this term fails to capture the true nature of the problem. When communities lack proper waste collection infrastructure, they are left with limited options for dealing with plastics and other waste. In such cases, discarding into the environment, open dumping or resorting to burning are the only viable alternatives. The absence of waste management options, rather than mismanagement by individuals, is the root cause of the problem. It is essential to recognise this reality and focus on **providing adequate waste management solutions** to tackle the issue effectively.

Banning and Substituting Problematic Plastics

Among the proposed possible core obligations in UNEP´s background document are measures that ban or substitute plastic items deemed problematic. While defining what constitutes a "problematic" item and creating a comprehensive list poses challenges, it is important to note that in areas without waste collection infrastructure, all plastic becomes problematic. The context in which an item is consumed and the available options for its proper management determine its problematic nature. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritise the universal provision of **sustainable, holistic, appropriate waste services (SHAWS)** as a central objective of the instrument. By doing so, we can address the primary reason for pollution on land, in rivers and oceans as long as plastics continue to be widely used.

Challenging the Position on Waste Collection Services

Despite its overall excellence, UNEP's **Turning Off the Tap** study, published the week before INC2, downplays the importance and feasibility of delivering quality and convenient waste management services. This study contends that the scale and costs involved make it impractical to implement comprehensive waste collection services for all. However, this perspective can and must be challenged.

The task can be conducted by all manner of jursidictions working to achieve this in parallel, as long as institutional and financial barriers can be overcome. If all municipalities, including cities, towns, and villages, initiate the process within five years, the task can be completed within a decade for all but the most remote and isolated communities.

The cost of collection systems is often poorly understood, but it plays a vital role in determining the overall cost of waste management. Far too often, in the pursuit of capital to support waste management infrastructure, collection systems are designed to support the capital, largely ignoring the local context in relation to how best to collect waste. This top-down approach misses out on the opportunities to collect far more plastic waste and improve the overall outcomes.

Questions arise regarding whether separate systems should be established for plastic collection or if they should be integrated with other materials. If the Instrument focused only on plastic, then it's unclear how SHAWS would be delivered in future. Coordination problems might arise between systems dealing with 'only plastics', and the approach to managing other materials at end of life. When extended producer responsibility (EPR) is introduced for cost recovery, should it be limited to plastics? Moreover, should institutional capacity building and technical assistance focus solely on waste plastics? Who will fund facilities for managing plastics which are not recycled? These questions must be addressed during the negotiations.

Plastics in Waste: Wider Perspective

UNEP's **Turning Off the Tap** report envisages that more than 40 million tonnes of short-lived plastic waste would still be mismanaged in 2040 under its system change scenario. Supposing this quantity fell linearly from the 107 million tonnes estimated to be mismanaged in 2020, then **1.48 billion tonnes would have been‘mismanaged’** over the period 2020-2040. Unless all plastics are to be banned wherever SHAWS are absent, then mismanagement of plastics will continue for as long as SHAWS are not universal. Logically, if plastics are to continue to be used, SHAWS need to be extended to wherever they are currently absent.

Eliminating the mismanagement of plastic waste necessitates confronting the institutional, technical, and financial challenges involved in implementing high-quality waste management systems worldwide.

The Benefits of Improved Waste Management

Promoting universal implementation of SHAWS is beneficial for multiple reasons. Improved waste management plays a crucial role in mitigating climate change by helping industries reduce the carbon and energy intensity of their production. The value of the materials in waste - readily apparent to waste pickers reliant for their livelihoods on sale of collected materials – provides further motivation. Reducing the need for primary materials also reduces pressure on habitats, and hence, threats to biodiversity, linked to primary resource extraction. SHAWS also leads to improved air quality by reducing open burning and lowers the incidence of vector-borne diseases and other health impacts. For these reasons, incorporating comprehensive waste management systems is a critical piece of the puzzle in achieving a sustainable future.

Prioritising SHAWS for a Sustainable Future

Addressing the issue of waste management may be perceived by some as disconnected from the principles of a circular economy. Moreover, waste management is often regarded as a messy and challenging endeavour. However, it is crucial to recognise that failing to confront this problem directly will result in an alarming amount of plastic waste mismanagement in the future. If 40 million tonnes of ¨short-lived plastic waste¨ are still being mismanaged in 2040, it would signify a significant failure of the proposed instrument.

To prevent such a failure, it is imperative for negotiators to maintain their focus on waste management as a fundamental component in the fight against river and ocean pollution. The outcomes of both the Pew/SYSTEMIQ and UNEP visions clearly indicate the urgent need to address this issue head-on. By prioritising SHAWS, we can avoid the staggering consequences of continued plastic waste mismanagement.

1.48 billion tonnes

You could fill the Paris section of the Seine River with 1.48 billion tonnes of plastic waste, approximately 822 times.

Call to Action: A Key Element for Success

In conclusion, there's no obvious reason why universal provision of SHAWS is an unrealistic goal. Neglecting this crucial aspect will perpetuate the alarming levels of mismanagement of plastic waste which are predicted in system change scenarios which, in all other aspects, are relatively optimistic. As long as plastics continue to be used, this is an essential measure to reduce plastic pollution. We urge Members to ensure the institutional, technical and financial barriers can be overcome so that SHAWS are universalized in a socially responsible manner.

Endnotes

i. The perspective regarding the centrality of the issue of waste collection is common in the views expressed in a range of high-profile reports:
   - The **McKinsey 2016 report**, Stemming the Tide state that "Of the leakage that comes from land-based sources, we found that 75 percent comes from uncollected waste, while the remaining 25 percent leaks from within the waste-management system itself"
   - ISWA Marine Task Force, 2020: "There is very strong evidence that providing adequate waste collection services in developing economies could significantly reduce quantities of plastics finding their way to marine environment."6
   - "Investments in effective waste management systems, particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America will be critical in reducing the leakage of plastic waste into the ocean in the short-term".
   - **Trucost (2016)** estimated that "if the municipal waste collection rate in Asia was increased to a GDP weighted average of 80%, the yearly worldwide plastic contribution to the seas could be cut by more than 45% (equivalent to 1.1 Mt), reducing the natural capital cost of plastics waste by approximately$2 billion."
   - **Jambeck et al. (2015)** estimate that reducing mismanaged waste in key rapidly developing economies could reduce quantities of litter escaping into the sea by over 40% by 2025.

ii **Turning off the Tap: How the world can end plastic pollution and create a circular economy**, UNEP, May 16, 2023. The following are considered as possible core obligations:
   - banning, phasing out and/or reducing the use of problematic and avoidable plastic products
   - phasing out and/or reducing the supply of, demand for and use of primary plastic polymers
   - banning, phasing out and/or reducing the production, consumption and use of chemicals and polymers of concern
   - fostering design for circularity
   - encouraging reduction, reuse and repair of plastic products and packaging
   - promoting the use of safe, sustainable alternatives and substitutes

iii "Short-lived plastic products are defined in the UNEP report as 'plastics within packaging and consumer products. These are the two categories of plastic products with shortest average use cycles – 0.5 and 3 years respectively (Geyer, Jambeck and Law 2017).'

iv. "Eunomia (2021) **Waste in the Net-Zero Century: How Better Waste Management Practices Can Contribute to Reducing Global Carbon Emissions,** July 2021.

@ReloopPlatform

@reloop_platform

Reloop Platform

Reloop

reloop

resources
remain
resources

www.reloopplatform.org