

Side Event during INC-2, May 30th 2023

The water quality perspective to beat plastic pollution *Systems thinking towards achieving the SDGs*

The international policy perspective : Source to sea water quality protection

The treaty should include explicit reference to the Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (UNWC) and the Convention on the Protection and Uses of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention). Both Conventions address directly or indirectly the need to ensure the protection of marine environment including from plastic pollution which comes from riverine systems.

Article 23 of UNWC expressly links the protection of freshwater resources with the marine environment. This Convention provides that:

“Watercourse States shall, individually and, where appropriate, in cooperation with other States, take all measures with respect to an international watercourse that are necessary to protect and preserve the marine environment, including estuaries, taking into account generally accepted international rules and standards”.

The Water Convention emphasizes that riparian Parties “shall agree upon pollution parameters and pollutants” (art.11.2) and that they have the duty to:

“carry out joint or coordinated assessments of the conditions of transboundary waters and the effectiveness of measures taken for the prevention, control and reduction of transboundary impact. The results of these assessments shall be made available to the public” (art.11.3).

The negotiations of an internationally legally binding instrument on plastic pollution should include the implementation of cross-boundary watershed-based water quality monitoring, transparently made available to all, so as to support actions that improve water quality, in particular from mis-managed plastics, but also recognizing that plastics are making visible many other concealed water pollutions.

The scientific and practitioner perspective : precaution principle and increased knowledge

- Include in the treaty a list of authorized polymers and additives, rather than only a list of banned substances. Given that over 66,000 plastic substances exist, this is the only way to control environmental risks and recyclability.
- At national level, there is a need to develop harmonized know-how on the quantification of different plastics ending up in water, with the ultimate objective of being able to trace them back to their uses, and thus enlighten decision-makers on the levers of action. This know-how is important to develop in order to support the effectiveness of future regulations.

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Perspective 1: Reduce the volume of plastics

The number one priority is to reduce the overall volume of plastic waste. This is fully aligned with the solid waste sector ambition to reduce the global volumes of waste produced. Reducing the volume of plastics requires to strategically tackle in priority the plastics that are most harmful and thoroughly think through the impacts of the proposed alternatives. A science-based approach underpins this strategy to inform decision makers at all levels, on which plastic usages trigger which pollutions and their associated impacts on health and biodiversity.

Key messages from event organizers:

- *Recommendation to the negotiators for the treaty : Reduction strategies and policies require instruments to **monitor plastic flows by polymer type and usage**, and to further develop scientific knowledge of their impacts on health, water and soils. These instruments could include:
 - 1/ a **scientific observatory** for plastics to inform the plastics-using industries and users about the impacts of each type of polymer and additive ("IPCC of plastics");
 - 2/ **Indicators of plastic volume reduction** by type of polymer, identifying associated usage where possible, in order to set reduction ambitions and associated levers for action that avoid shifting to less recyclable options;
 - 3/ Mechanisms to strengthen the **accountability of the possessor** of plastic materials;*
- *Recommendation to the negotiators for the national implementation: Reducing plastic volumes requires a transformation of our industries towards eco-design to reduce unnecessary plastics and ensure the recyclability of products and packaging. This transformation needs to be planned and supported by local policies.*

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Perspective 2: Reduce the “Leakage” of plastics from mis-managed waste

A well functioning collection system prevents plastic waste from ending up in the environment. The treatment should be thought through in the local context and aim to prevent the pollution from plastics to reach the natural environment: sanitary landfills for un-valorized waste streams, recycling schemes when adapted to the local market needs and when they can be controlled and monitored, waste to energy solutions.

Key messages from organizers:

- Recommendation to the negotiators for the treaty : **mandatory objectives** committed by the signatories **to gradually improve** a holistic, locally adapted **waste management**. These objectives should refer to the three main success factors :
 1. the proximity principle (waste managed locally is managed more responsibly) ;
 2. a fiscal environment that allows the financing of prevention, collection and treatment ;
 3. adequate financial and human resources for local authorities in charge of waste, with the necessary leeway to experiment with solutions;
 4. clear definition of roles and responsibilities between public and private actors.
- Recommendation to the negotiators for the national implementation :
 - Systemic thinking is a key factor: Plastic waste management must be part of a holistic waste management system and not as an issue isolated from other materials and waste streams.
 - Waste management solutions have to be co-constructed with the local authorities / local population to be adapted to the local context and capacities.
 - Set clear and ambitious collection and recycling targets and establish a monitoring mechanism to gradually increase them over time, with mandatory deadlines.

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Perspective 3: Recycling

Recycling markets often need to be created. Recycled materials are still economically more expensive. The market initiation mechanism needs to initiate recycling schemes that lead to resource conservation, energy savings, reduced GHG emissions, and ensure that the recycled material / objects do not put harmful plastics in the environment (example of recycled plastics banks put in urban space that leak toxic plastics). The challenges and complexity in setting up such systems include the recycling infrastructure, creating a market demand for the products, behavior change in consumers as well as stakeholder cooperation.

- *Recommendation to the negotiators for the treaty to include :*
 - *A regulatory framework to initiate and control the recycling of the remaining plastics for which there are no sustainable alternatives. This framework should include:*
 1. *The control of social, sanitary and environmental risks of recycling activities;*
 2. *Mechanisms to initiate new markets through economic incentives or obligations while allowing for adjustments to avoid that the usage of recycled objects put harmful molecules in the environment or to ensure that the desired volume reductions are induced.*
 - *A list of banned materials that need to be removed from the market, to ensure that products (virgin or recycled) are not harmful to the environment in their planned usage and can be safely disposed of or recycled.*
- *Recommendation to the negotiators for the national implementation :*
 - *System thinking is a key factor: Plastic waste management must be part of a holistic waste management system and not as an issue isolated from other materials and waste streams.*
 - *Initiating recycling markets for waste and driving volume reduction are essential for sustainable waste management. However, achieving these goals involves addressing challenges related to infrastructure, stakeholder cooperation, behavior change, market demand, and technological advancements. Overcoming these complexities requires a collaborative effort from governments, businesses, communities, and individuals to create a circular economy that minimizes waste and maximizes resource efficiency.*