

MARINE PLASTIC POLLUTION AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE ISSUE

Insights from the Global South

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THIS INFORMATION-SHEET INTRODUCES:

The environmental justice dimensions of ocean plastic from the perspectives of:

- Marginalized communities
- Countries in the Global South
- Those responsible for causing ocean plastic

PLASTIC POLLUTION AFFECTS MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Plastic pollution disproportionately affects marginalized communities. A report¹ by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and environmental justice non-governmental organisations² outlines how predominantly people from marginalised communities live near plastic production and waste sites. This constitutes an environmental injustice (where there is an unjust **distribution** of costs and burdens where marginalized communities bare extensive costs and burdens – see INFO-SHEET No 3).

Recognition and participation of communities affected by plastic waste for real solutions and meaningful responses

¹ UNEP (2021). NEGLECTED: Environmental Justice Impacts of Marine Litter and Plastic. UNEP <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/neglected-environmental-justice-impacts-marine-litter-and-plastic-pollution>

² Zhongming, Z., Linong, L., Wangqiang, Z., & Wei, L. (2021). Plastic pollution is an environmental injustice to vulnerable communities—new report. Global S&T Development Trend Analysis Platform of Resources and Environment. <http://119.78.100.173/C666/handle/2XK7JSWQ/321903> (sourced 12 October 2021)



Photo: Nessim Stevenson

UNEP calls for the recognition of communities affected by plastic waste and their participation in local decision making¹ around responses to marine litter and ocean plastics. This representation and inclusion are vital for those most impacted by marine plastics as an environmental justice matter of recognition and participation, as well as epistemic justice (see INFO-SHEET No 3).

Bans on unnecessary single-use plastic are already beginning to make a mark on plastic waste generation at city, national, and regional levels. A growing number of communities across the planet are implementing zero waste initiatives in order to maximize waste prevention. These initiatives reduce waste through toxic-free circular loops.⁵ Critically the ones that offer just solutions work with and ensure that the most marginalised are included and benefit from these circular loops. Equally, proposed solutions need to avoid creating additional, potentially unanticipated, negative impacts on vulnerable communities, including human rights violations (see INFO-SHEETS No 5-6).

Recognition and participation of wastepickers

In the Global South, Wastepickers are at the frontline of recycling materials and diverting plastics from landfill. Wastepickers are

workers in the informal economy who earn livelihoods from recovering and recycling waste, both at a street level and at landfills. Recycling plastic waste reduces the demand for plastic manufacturing from natural resources, and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.³ These entrepreneurs contribute daily to the fight against climate change through diverting a substantial tonnage of plastic waste from landfills in many cities globally. They are often stigmatised for working with waste, have no social protections and receive little recognition for their important role in zero-waste initiatives. Wastepickers world-wide are increasingly mobilised to demand that their needs, contributions and knowledge be recognised and integrated into decision-making.⁴ As governments start to negotiate a new global plastic treaty (see info-sheet No 2), it is critical that they also recognise and include waste pickers to ensure environmental and **epistemic justice** (see INFO-SHEET No 3) for the workers who have contributed significantly to reducing the plastic crisis.

Waste pickers are undermined by waste to energy technologies

Wastepickers' successes are being undermined by "waste-to-energy" technologies. Incineration and landfill gas schemes conflict directly with recycling and

³ <https://www.no-burn.org/wp-content/uploads/wastepickers-CC-EN.pdf>

⁴ <https://globalrec.org/>



Photo: Screenshot, The Menace of Ocean Plastics film



Photo: Georgina Yaa Oduro

composting, competing for similar materials: paper, cardboard, plastics and organics. Recycling reduces emissions 25 times more than incineration does. Recycling provides productive work for an estimated 1% of the population in developing countries, in processes such as collection, recovery, sorting, grading, cleaning, baling, processing and manufacturing into new products. Even in developed countries, recycling provides 10 times as many jobs per ton of waste as do incinerators and landfills.⁵

MARINE PLASTIC WASTE IS A THREAT

Marine plastic waste threatens the environment and livelihoods in the Global South

Plastic constitutes a large percentage of marine debris and contributes to a myriad of health problems for people and animals who consume seafood infested with toxic micro- and nano-plastics^{1,2} (see INFO-SHEET No 1). Once used and discarded, plastic waste threatens the livelihoods of those who depend on aquatic and marine resources for livelihoods (often subsistence and small-scale fishers), income, and culture (thereby having negative impacts on a series of human rights - see INFO-SHEETS No 5-6). As many Global South countries have less developed or available solid waste management and recycling systems, they are more vulnerable to the impact of plastic and other solid wastes,⁶

⁵ <https://www.no-burn.org/zerowastejobs/>

⁶ Bundhoo, Z. M. (2018). Solid waste management in



Artwork: Dylan McGarry



as much of this waste enters water systems and the oceans. This raises environmental justice issues in terms of **capabilities** (see INFO-SHEET No 3).

Dr. Max Liboiron's recent 2021 publication⁷ titled: "Pollution is Colonialism" argues that colonialism is not 'a thing of the past' but continues into the present in the material form of pollution.⁵ Plastic waste pollution (along with other pollutions) is occurring around us and inside of our bodies. Furthermore, the impacts of plastic pollution inside and around us are felt differently across race, class and context.⁸ Liboiron argues that marine plastics, alongside other pollutions are not to be oversimplified as simply an act of environmental damage, but instead to look at it as a systemic act of violence towards a land, and the peoples who have lived with, in, on the land for centuries and millennia prior to colonialism.⁹

Recognising marine plastic pollution as a material contemporary manifestation of colonialism requires considering the distribution of cost, labour and political will from countries responsible for colonialism and industrial expansion. This would require a critical paradigm shift, of seeing plastic waste pollution not as a global problem, but a priority and responsibility for the richest nations that came to power through colonial practices of extractivist and capitalistic expansion.

Need to look at capacities and infrastructure of ocean plastic waste management and recycling

The dominate narrative sees plastic waste as a crisis within the waste management system. This narrative points the finger at leakages from waste management systems in Global

least developed countries: current status and challenges faced. *Journal of Material Cycles and Waste Management*, 20(3), 1867-1877.

⁷ Liboiron, M. (2021). *Pollution is colonialism*. Duke University Press.

⁸ Iles, A. (2004). Mapping environmental justice in technology flows: Computer waste impacts in Asia. *Global Environmental Politics*, 4(4), 76-107.

⁹ Ruben Baart, M. 2021. Max Liboiron: "Pollution is Colonialism" *Geo Design. Technology is our next Nature*. <https://nextnature.net/magazine/story/2021/max-liboiron>. (Sourced 12 October 2021).

South countries. In doing so, it pushes for technological fixes, such as waste-to-energy incineration and chemical processing of plastic waste¹⁰. These are misguided solutions as even the most sophisticated Global North waste management systems cannot cope with the exponential rise of plastic production and waste⁵. As the UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights emphasized, the international community needs to support the development of infrastructure in the Global South for collecting and safely recycling plastics (see INFO-SHEET No 2), which is a matter of environmental justice in terms of distribution of costs and burdens.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Holding those responsible for causing ocean plastics accountable.

In attempting to address the plastic crisis we must be cautious about misplacing the burden on those who are not responsible for causing ocean plastics but are negatively impacted by it. Attention should thus be paid to ensuring responsibility for restorative justice (see INFO-SHEET No 3). Wealthier societies tend to recycle high-quality plastic domestically and export low-worth plastics to Global South countries, burdening these countries with the occupational and environmental health hazards that arise from processing these materials¹¹. Many times people in exporting countries have little idea of where their waste actually goes.

The largest plastic pollution frequently comes from richer countries, as do the major global producers of plastic. Yet there is an expectation that marginalised communities in less resourced countries must labour to fix the plastic crisis.

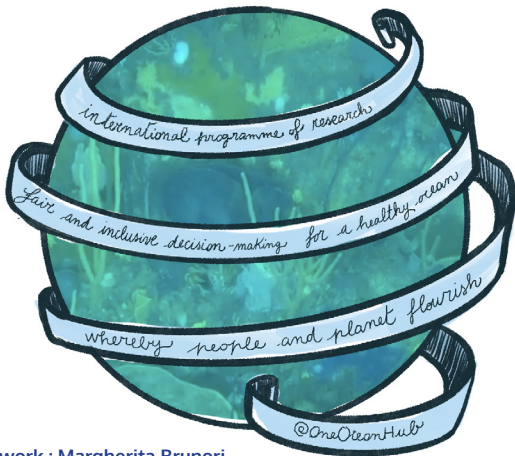
This begs the question, how then are those in positions of power and who are responsible for marine plastics held to account? These questions can be addressed to some extent through legislative measures (see INFO-

¹⁰ GAIA. (2020) fact sheets: False solutions to the plastic pollution crisis https://www.no-burn.org/wp-content/uploads/False-solutions_Nov-9-2020.pdf Soutced 19 October 2021.

¹¹ <https://www.no-burn.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Report-July-12-2019-Spreads-no-marks-1.pdf>



Photos: Nessim Stevenson



Artwork : Margherita Brunori

SHEET 2), and business responsibility to respect human rights that may be negatively affected by ocean plastics (see INFO-SHEETS 5-6). It is important however that careful thought is given to legislative changes in relation to ocean plastics. For example, Extended Producer Responsibilities (EPRs) legislation may work well to encourage recycling in Europe. However, in the Global South encouraging new markets for private companies seeking to make profit from waste,¹² and who have capital to collect at scale, will result in millions of waste pickers losing their livelihoods. In this sense EPR legislation does not equate to environmental justice without simultaneous legislation that secures the rights of waste pickers to be included and integrated into city level waste management structures.

PLASTIC POLLUTION IS NOT SOLELY A WASTE MANAGEMENT PROBLEM

It is linked to fossil fuel production, hence the need to consider impacts from "Well to Waste" and reduce plastic production¹³

Understanding plastic pollution requires a full lifecycle approach. In other words, it is important to focus on more than just the end product of plastic waste. We need to ask critical questions about the upstream production of plastic. Why and how is it produced and who benefits from the continued production of "new" and single-use plastics? Forms of

¹² <https://www.no-burn.org/resources/unea-5-briefing-series-plastic-and-waste-pickers/>

¹³ <https://www.no-burn.org/wp-content/uploads/Recycling-is-Not-Enough-UPDATE.pdf>

environmental injustice and environmental racism that occur from plastic pollution exist from its manufacture to the 'fallout' waste. This is because plastic is a by-product of extractive oil and gas industries. These industries have a history of environmental injustices; including processes of deforestation, polluted drinking water, reducing biodiversity (which has significant cultural heritage implications) and the displacement of indigenous peoples¹⁴, often in the Global South, to make way for fossil fuel extraction¹⁵. Growing awareness of the climate risks associated with our over-reliance on fossil fuels has seen oil and gas companies exploring the production of plastic as a leading profit stream¹⁶. There is a very real concern that making profit through plastic means designing plastic to be difficult or impossible to recycle. In addition, a flood of new plastic into the market thwarts any chance of reducing plastic pollution through recycling.

A just response to the plastic crisis thus requires comprehensive policy solutions that directly address the petrochemical industry. Reducing fossil fuel extraction and shifting our plastic production and consumption patterns⁵ offer viable and just responses to marine plastic pollution, including as action under the Paris Agreement (see INFO-SHEET No 2). This is a way to offer restorative justice and redress unfair distribution of benefits, costs and burdens (see INFO-SHEET No 3). Overproduction of plastic puts an extra burden on municipalities, forcing them to manage increasing quantities of plastic, most of which is not recyclable⁵. Any responses that prioritize end-of-pipe technology over addressing the root cause of plastic production will not only be futile but also increase emissions of toxic and climate pollutants to the environment,⁵ as underscored by the UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights (see INFO-SHEETS No 1-2 and 5).

¹⁴ O'Rourke D and Connolly S, 'Just Oil? The Distribution of Environmental and Social Impacts of Oil Production and Consumption' (2003) 28 Annual Review of Environment and Resources 587

¹⁵ Gonzalez, C. G. (2021). Racial capitalism, climate justice, and climate displacement. In Oñati Socio-Legal Series, symposium on Climate Justice in the Anthropocene (Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 108-147).

¹⁶ <https://theconversation.com/oil-companies-are-ploughing-money-into-fossil-fuelled-plastics-production-at-a-record-rate-new-research-169690>.

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