

Brussels, 1.07.2022

Subject: Ending plastic waste trade as a solution to marine plastic pollution

SDG 14 stresses the need to conserve and sustainably use the world's oceans, seas and marine resources. Yet, conversations rarely touch upon the need to end the plastic waste trade, wherein rich countries ship their plastic waste to weaker economies.

The advancement of SDG 14 is guided by specific targets including Goal 14.1, which aims to prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, and Goal 14.2, which aims to protect marine and coastal ecosystems. SDG 14 is one of the least funded goals and the global community is not on track to meet the targets. If current approaches to plastic waste mismanagement are continued, it is clear that SDG 14.1 will not be achieved.

Plastic is the main contributor to marine debris and pollution, affecting more than [800 animal species](#) globally. In 2021, [3.75 million tonnes](#) of plastic waste were shipped from the top ten plastic waste exporting countries including US, Japan, Germany, UK, and the Netherlands — equivalent to 7.13 tonnes per minute. As long as this practice continues, transporting plastic waste to countries in the Global South with insufficient capacity to manage domestic plastic waste, strategies to eliminate the discharge of plastic litter and microplastics into the oceans will not be effective. Access to imported waste in destination countries [undermines](#) domestic plastic waste collection, segregation, and management, and enables the continuous leakage of plastic and microplastic into the marine environment.

The trade of plastic waste is also a matter of environmental injustice and waste colonialism. Both Kenya and Portugal, hosts of the 2022 UN Ocean Conference, have faced problems with plastic waste exports. The plastic waste trade, exacerbated by elements of criminality, has severe implications on the environment in destination countries, causing toxic pollution of land, air, and water, and harming human health and livelihoods. A [recent report](#) by Greenpeace UK, Turkey, and Germany showed strong evidence of the toxic pollution caused by illegal dumping of imported waste and burning activities in Adana, Türkiye. Even worse, problems arise not only through illegal waste dumping and burning; even the [mechanical recycling](#) of plastic has been found to be a significant source of microplastics pollution.

In addition, the waste trade increases ship traffic in the ocean. After finished consumer goods, waste, including plastic, makes up the second highest volume of items shipped. In 2019, [225 containers of plastic waste per day](#) were estimated to be shipped from the US alone to countries with poor waste management. The total shipments carrying waste from all major exporting countries over time contributes significantly to ship traffic, which poses a threat to [seabed sedimentation](#), [marine fauna](#), and [air quality](#). Moreover, waste dumping at sea is also extremely difficult to regulate.

Finally, the plastic waste trade itself is a key creator and conduit of marine pollution. Researchers from the [U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#) and from the [National University of Ireland](#) have published peer-reviewed studies indicating that the plastic waste trade contributes significant amounts of plastic pollution to the ocean. The trade of plastic waste has also increased in correlation with the [expansion of plastic production](#). This export of plastic waste, ostensibly for recycling, creates the delusion of circularity for a material that is inherently linear, enabling ever increasing production and consumption of plastics. Recycling rates have struggled to match this trend, while plastic pollution soared.

The science is clear. Plastic waste shipped across the world contributes significant amounts of plastic pollution and chemical additives to the ocean, harming human health, wildlife, and ecosystems. The solution is simple, but challenging because it requires a change to an exploitative global export practice that has been employed for decades to dispose of plastic waste. Partnerships between governments, non-governmental organisations, community groups, waste picker groups, shipping companies, plastic waste exporters and importers, plastic waste recyclers, etc., are vital to phase out the trade of plastic waste, strengthen waste management systems, adopt zero waste practices, and importantly, reduce the production of plastics. Only then, can we be serious about implementing Goal 14 to conserve the world's oceans.

Statement supported by:

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