

Global Water Partnership – PRESS RELEASE

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Treaty will not be ‘silver bullet’ for problem of plastic pollution – says Chatham House & Global Water Partnership paper

The paper finds that the treaty will be an important mechanism to improve the global governance of plastics but may be limited in addressing the problems of plastic pollution if it does not address the lack of reliable data, economic incentives, infrastructure, and pricing models.

Stockholm – June 1st – Efforts to tackle plastic pollution are still highly uncoordinated, hampered by data gaps, and focused on downstream solutions, including clean-ups which consume significant resources that would be better invested in proven policy solutions, waste management, and recycling infrastructure, finds a paper by Chatham House and the Global Water Partnership (GWP).

The paper, *Why lifecycle solutions are needed to tackle marine plastic pollution* argues that the complex \$100 billion per annum problem of plastics pollution shows no sign of abatement but that proven policy approaches in the EU, Japan and Chile can serve as a starting point for countries seeking to curb plastic pollution as well as providing a baseline for the plastics treaty negotiations.

The most cost-effective solution, if designed correctly, is the introduction of a suite of upstream and downstream policy measures ranging from product design requirements and targeted bans, through to Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes, finds the paper.

In the EU, a frontrunner in tackling plastic pollution, the Waste Framework Directive and Packaging Directive have set recycling targets and circular design requirements on plastic packaging products for over a decade which have been instrumental in reducing plastic leakage into the environment.

On the other side of the world in Chile, the 2018 [Chile Plastics Pact](#) has set targets to eliminate problematic single use plastics, including that a third of household and non-domiciliary plastic packaging be recycled, reused or composted, and a requirement that 25 per cent of plastic containers be produced from recycled content.

Successful policy solutions are therefore available, but it is crucial for countries to increase their ambition to invest in infrastructure, new technologies and capacity building, especially in the Philippines, India and Malaysia which are home to the highest levels of riverine plastic pollution.

Clean-ups

The paper also criticises the current uncoordinated and expensive focus on downstream clean-up efforts by governments, industry and civil society, which fail to address the source of plastic leakage and have negligible impact on the overall amounts of plastic waste in the environment.

“It’s hard to recover the costs from marine and coastal debris clean-ups. For example, it cost around \$8,900 per tonne of plastic removed from the [Aldabra Atoll](#) beaches, and with an estimated 513

tonnes of plastics on the Atoll's beaches, this approach would cost over \$4.5 million making it clearly unaffordable," said **Dr. Patrick Schröder, Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House.**

"While community beach clean-ups are a good means of raising public awareness about marine pollution, available funds would be better spent on waste management given that 2 billion people currently lack waste collection services," he added.

Plastics data

For effective, evidence-based policymaking to tackle plastic pollution, reliable and disaggregated data on cross-border trade flows across the lifecycle of plastics is required.

"In many low- and middle-income countries, even basic data about national waste management systems, including collection rates, plastics imports and exports, access to adequate recycling facilities, non-recycling data by type, including disposal, incineration, and dumping, are lacking," said **Dr. Jack Barrie, Research Fellow Environment and Society Programme, Chatham House.**

"The economic data about prices of informally collected materials, wages and incomes of workers, are also scarce, all of which are important for inclusion and formalization," he added.

On a positive note, the paper notes that there are many new digital applications for traceability of plastics from design to end-of-life. For example, remote sensing and satellite imagery can be used to identify areas of plastic pollution as well as track the movement of plastic waste in rivers and oceans.

Mobile apps, such as [Debris Tracker](#), can be used to crowdsource data on plastic waste, and Blockchain is also being used to track the movement of plastic waste throughout the supply chain.

Potential limitations of the plastics treaty

The paper argues that while the plastics treaty, which aims to address plastics pollution across the full lifecycle, will be an important mechanism to improve the global governance of plastics, a 'Paris Agreement-style' outcome would fall short, given the experience with the climate negotiations.

"The treaty may not be able to address all the problems of plastic pollution, in which case the hard lifting will still need to be done by national governments. What limits its potential impact is a lack of reliable data and the misalignment of economic incentives, infrastructure, and pricing models. Market-based instruments can help redress this but there must be a comprehensive approach," said **Niamh Brannigan, Head of Communications, Global Water Partnership.**

The treaty also has a role to play in levelling the playing field for more circular solutions and addressing existing economic incentives that drive plastics production. The current system is not set up for a circular plastics economy and incentives, infrastructure and pricing models are misaligned.

The paper makes the following recommendations:

1. Reduce demand for unnecessary or harmful plastic products through the likes of levies, bans or removal of subsidies.
2. Encourage design for circularity through approaches such as mandatory recycled content levels, modulated extended producer responsibility schemes and eco-design standards.
3. Enhance recycling rates, for example, through introducing deposit return schemes, landfill taxes and source separation and pay-as-you-throw collection models.
4. Close the leakage pathways in the identified hotspots through improvement of collection systems including support to the informal sector.

Marine plastics pollution is a global crisis that requires urgent action from decision-makers across the public and private sectors. It is essential to adopt a lifecycle approach to plastic production and consumption, focus on cost-effective solutions and create an ambitious policy agenda that targets countries with leakage points and high potential for abatement.

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###End of Press Release###

Notes to Editors

About GWP

The mission of the Global Water Partnership (GWP) is to advance governance and management of water resources for sustainable and equitable development. GWP is an intergovernmental organisation and a global network of 13 Regional Water Partnerships, 85 Country Water Partnerships and more than 3,500 Partner organisations in 172 countries. The GWP network is committed to building a water secure world.

About Chatham House

Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, is an independent policy institute based in London. Our mission is to help build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world.

The full paper will be available for sharing once the embargo breaks on this link:

<https://circulareconomy.earth/publications/why-lifecycle-solutions-are-needed-to-tackle-marine-plastic-pollution>