Global plastic treaty needs to address chemicals

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Authors:

Tridibesh Dey, Department of Global Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark; tdey@cas.au.dk

Leonardo Trasande, Departments of Pediatrics, Environmental Medicine and Population Health, New York University Grossman School of Medicine, New York, New York, USA; leonardo.trasande@nyulangone.org

Rebecca Altman, Independent Scholar, Providence, RI, USA; rebecca.altman@gmail.com

Zhanyun Wang, Empa – Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Science and Technology, Technology and Society Laboratory, 9014 St. Gallen, Switzerland; zhanyun.wang@empa.ch

Anja Krieger, Berlin, Germany; mail@anjakrieger.com (science writer, creator of the podcast Plastisphere)

Melanie Bergmann, Deep-Sea Ecology and Technology, Alfred-Wegener-Institut Helmholtz-Zentrum für Polar- und Meeresforschung, Germany; melanie.bergmann@awi.de

Deonie Allen, School of Physical and Chemical Sciences, University of Canterbury, Christchurch 8041, New Zealand; School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK; deonie.castle@canterbury.ac.nz

Steve Allen, Ocean Frontier Institute, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada; steveascotland@gmail.com

Tony R. Walker, School for Resource and Environmental Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada; twalker@dal.ca

Martin Wagner, Department of Biology, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway; martin.wagner@ntnu.no

Kristian Syberg, Dept. of Science and Environment, Roskilde University, Denmark; ksyberg@ruc.dk

Susanne Brander, Dept. Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Sciences, Coastal Oregon Marine Experiment Station, Oregon State University, Oregon, USA; susanne.brander@oregonstate.edu

Bethanie Carney Almroth, Dept. of Biological and Environmental Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden; bethanie.carney@bioenv.gu.se

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In March, the global community agreed to establish a legally binding treaty to end plastic pollution. To deliver on this goal, the treaty needs to cover all issues of plastics chemicals as an inseparable part of the problem.

Plastics are complex materials consisting of chemical mixtures, including polymers, additives, residual monomers and processing aids, and non-intentionally added substances. Such mixtures leach across the plastics life cycle, from feedstock extraction, production, use, to recycling and disposal, also recombining along complex, unplanned pathways. This results in widespread human exposure and poses serious consequences to the environment.

Out of over 10,000 known plastics chemicals, at least 2,400 are classified as toxic, such as many phthalates and brominated flame retardants. Documented health effects include premature births, low birth weight, obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, endometriosis, infertility, and cancers, thus spanning generations. In the US alone, associated costs of endocrine-disrupting chemicals amount to USD 300 billion/year. The total burden on community, ecosystem health, and biodiversity is far greater.

Even with material recycling, plastics chemicals ultimately proliferate in the ecosystem, whether as emissions or by entering new products, entailing new chemical cocktails and exposures for waste-laborers, consumers, and (frontline) communities. An effective, fair and safe circular economy can only be achieved by phasing out toxic chemicals from plastic production.

As negotiations for a global treaty begin, plastics chemicals need to be front and center. However, preparatory meeting documents published officially over September and October focus on downstream plastic waste and work from a narrow definition of chemicals as hazardous additives. To enable the treaty to fully address plastics’ ecological, health and environmental justice problems, it is essential to redefine plastics as complex chemical mixtures and to integrate chemical issues across the life cycle within the scope and core obligations of the legal instrument.

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