

Plastic waste trade



Issues and concerns

In recent years, the consequences of the massive global trade in plastic waste have come to light: toxic pollution of land, air, and water, and harm to human health and livelihoods. Top exporters such as the United States, Germany, the UK, Japan, and Australia are [placing a disproportionate toxic burden on the environment and communities in importing countries, exacerbating environmental injustice through “waste colonialism.”](#) Despite the global outcry, [plastic waste dumping continues unabated](#), shifting at times to new destinations, primarily in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and South and Southeast Asia.

Plastic waste is mostly exported under the banner of plastic “recycling.” Significant quantities also travel as contaminants in paper waste, as well as in electronic and automotive waste streams. Further, a majority of textile waste is plastic waste. Much of this exported plastic waste ends up being burned, including in open fields or in small-scale industrial cookers. Other plastic waste is exported to be intentionally burned in cement kilns, often as pelletized “refuse-derived fuel.” When recycling does occur, it is usually highly polluting, threatening the health of workers, communities and the environment, due to toxic additives and other toxic chemicals in the plastic waste, or toxic pollutants formed when plastics are heated. [Worker and environmental protections are often weak or poorly-enforced in the importing countries.](#)

Because the Basel Convention treaty on transboundary movement of wastes introduced important restrictions to better control plastic waste trade in 2019, much of the export that does take place is actually illegal. INTERPOL has documented [the surge in illegal plastic waste trade and treatment, as well as the involvement of organized crime in some of these operations.](#) They have also shown that illegal plastic waste trade and treatment often involves [financial fraud and corruption.](#) Criminal groups involved in illegal plastic waste trade and treatment [have threatened environmental defenders and local officials who exposed illegal operations.](#)

While the Basel Convention provides a legal basis for prosecuting illegal trade and generally obliges parties to minimize waste generation, the treaty lacks the power to address plastic across its entire lifecycle and thus attack the root causes of global plastic waste dumping. For instance, banning plastic waste exports without reducing plastic production will likely trigger more dumping, landfilling, and burning, causing toxic pollution and exacerbating the climate crisis. Meanwhile, banning toxic chemicals in plastic products is essential to achieving a safe circular economy and ending toxic recycling but the Basel Convention has yet to address the harmful additives in plastics.

The out-of-sight, out-of-mind nature of the plastic waste trade obstructs a clear assessment of the true impact plastic has in our world, our economies, and lives. Because problematic plastics often end up in farmlands and industrial outskirts in countries far from where they are consumed, they escape scrutiny and prevent us from addressing their production and use at source.

Recommendations

The global plastics treaty must:



1. Strengthen regulations on the plastic waste trade:

- **Ban all plastic waste exports from OECD to non-OECD countries.** The Basel Convention should be amended again to place *all* plastics on Annex VIII (hazardous waste).
- **Strictly minimize all other plastic waste trade.** Plastic waste exports should only be allowed to ensure safe management of plastic waste where exporting countries lack corresponding infrastructure and environmental regulation. Importing countries retain the right to refuse shipments through prior informed consent (PIC). A strict contamination threshold (0.5%) is needed as mixed or contaminated plastics often end up burnt or otherwise mismanaged.
- **Ban the export of plastic waste for thermal treatment** including incineration, co-incineration in cement kilns or other boilers, pyrolysis, gasification, or plastic-to-fuel processes.

2. Support the waste hierarchy:

- **Prioritize reducing plastic production and use**, eliminating single-use plastic and promoting reuse and improved design.
- **Require source separation and cleaning of plastic waste**, to reduce mixing and contamination of plastic waste, but also of other waste streams such as paper.

3. Support the Basel Convention and transparency:

- **Enforce existing restrictions on plastic waste exports** under the Basel Convention and at the regional and national levels. Container checks at land borders and ports are key to combat illegal plastic waste trafficking. Exporting countries must cooperate with importing countries to swiftly repatriate illegal shipments and provide reparations for any harm caused.
- **Harmonize all definitions of plastic waste in national and regional legislation, as well as in a new plastic treaty, with the Basel Convention.**
- **Mandate full public transparency** in local and national laws for plastic waste generation and management. Data should be disaggregated by polymer and additive type, as well as by treatment type (recycling, other recovery, final disposal) and location (local, imported or exported).

Further reading

- Environmental Investigation Agency. "The Truth Behind Trash: The scale and impact of the international trade in plastic waste." 2021. <https://eia-international.org/report/the-truth-behind-trash-the-scale-and-impact-of-the-international-trade-in-plastic-waste>
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