

COMMENT



AFRICA UNDER THREAT FOR PLASTIC DUMPING

BOBBY PEEK

WHEN China took action to protect its borders from foreign plastic pollution by effectively shutting its doors to plastic waste imports in 2018, it threw the global plastic recycling industry into chaos.

In 2017, according to the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, South Africa was exporting about 315 000 tons of plastics waste.

Until then wealthy countries had become accustomed to exporting plastic waste problems, with little thought or effort to make sure the plastic went towards being recycled responsibly and did not end up harming people or the environment in less developed countries.

In particular, North Americans and Europeans exported not just their plastic waste, but the pollution that goes with getting rid of it. However, the plastic waste, once exported, did not just “go away” – inevitably mismanaged in poorer countries, it ended up clogging public infrastructure, causing public health problems and most visibly circulating globally in our oceans.

A recent report by a global zero waste alliance called GAIA found the impact of plastic waste exports to Asian countries alarming. Global South countries simply don't have the policies, capacity or infrastructure to safely manage their own waste, let alone the deluge of plastic and hazardous waste that the Global North has thrown at them.

With more Asian countries closing their doors to dumping of plastic waste, Africa is now in a position of threat. Recently Senegal has been receiving waste from the US, and more recently Liberia had received waste from Greece.



This leaves us in a difficult situation. Undoubtedly, any plastic waste dumped into African countries will begin with being burnt as a means of treatment and disposal, or designated as a secondary fuel source for industries such as cement plants, never designed for such a purpose.

Open burning of waste is common in Africa and is among the least desirable waste management practices globally because of dangerous potential health impacts.

Similarly, burning waste in cement kilns releases a harmful class of chemicals called dioxins and furans. They last a long time in the environment and stay in the food chain. One of the major sources is the open burning of municipal waste. These chemicals are also known for their reproductive and endocrine disruption properties.

There are global waste treaties that seek to address the global trade in hazardous waste. In 1989, the Basel Convention was agreed in Switzerland as a global response to unrestricted global toxic waste.

However, the original treaty did not ban the trans-boundary movement of hazardous waste but instead required prior informed consent.

To address this gap, the second meeting of the parties adopted the Ban Amendment, to prevent member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the EU, and Liechtenstein exporting hazardous wastes as defined by the Convention to less developed countries. It came into effect last year.

Similarly, the Bamako Convention is an African Regional treaty (in 1998) prohibiting the import into Africa of any hazardous (including radioactive) waste. The reason African nations entered into this agreement was because of continued toxic waste exports to Africa from developed countries (most notably the Probo Koala case in Ivory Coast). This is because of the failure of the Basel Convention to prohibit trade of hazardous waste to less developed countries.

History taught us that global waste treaties cannot alone protect us: neither the Basel convention nor the Bamako Convention were or are sufficient to protect our global commons from plastics and toxic waste mismanagement.

Peek is groundWork director