

Plastics Pollution Policy Gaps in the Pacific Region

Pacific Islands policy frameworks do not capture **the full life cycle of plastics**. Yet, plastics emit greenhouse gases and ozone depleting chemicals, create marine litter, shed **microplastics**, and leach **toxic chemicals** throughout their full life cycle. For example, these toxic chemicals include carcinogenic monomers, additives, and persistent organic pollutants. These plastics and chemicals impact the enjoyment of the right to a healthy environment.¹

The **zero-waste hierarchy** which prioritises waste **prevention** over waste management does not guide Pacific Islands' policy frameworks. There is weak **horizontal and vertical integration**, few commitments to the **long-term elimination of marine litter and discharges** of plastics, and the safe retrieval of plastics from the environment.

The absence of the **precautionary principle** in Pacific Islands' policies exposes **human health** and marine, freshwater, atmospheric, and terrestrial environments to plastic toxicants. **Microplastics** do not feature as a hazardous material and **environmental standards**, including standards for labeling, monitoring and reporting, seldom mention plastics.



Without robust policy frameworks, the volumes of problematic plastics and marine litter entering, and remaining, in the region and the marine environment, are forecast to increase rapidly over the coming decades. This will continue to compromise **intergenerational environmental and human rights** and exacerbate plastics-related **climate change impacts**.

Weak plastics policy cannot protect Pacific communities

Recommendation:

Consider the development of a robust plastics pollution prevention policy framework for a safe(r) circular economy for plastics to

- help protect present and future generations of Pacific Islands peoples and environments from the chemical and physical harms of plastics; and
- support state obligations to adopt and implement legal and institutional frameworks protecting the human right to a healthy environment.



Policy instruments needed to achieve a safe(r) circular economy for plastics in the Pacific



PREVENTION

Eliminate hazards along the entire life cycle of plastics. All plastics policy should draw explicit links between plastics pollution and

- climate change
- biodiversity loss
- microplastics
- toxic chemicals
- human rights

Restrict importation of pre-production pellets and plastic products, and packaging including the following:

- Best practice on pellet handling
- National reduction targets, caps, and graduated taxes on imports of pre-production pellets and problematic plastic products
- Incentives for traditional and plastic-free reusable and refillable alternatives and systems.

Regulate domestic manufacturing of plastic products and tourist services including the following:

- Caps on virgin plastics
- National targets for recycled content
- Toxic additive restrictions
- Eco levies for tourist services
- Incentives for durability, reuse, refill, repurpose, repair, and eco-design



MANAGEMENT

- Invest in reduce, reuse, refill, repurpose, and repair infrastructure
- Establish safe(r) recycling alternatives
- Develop sustainable financial mechanisms
- Legislate extended producer responsibility
- Standardise monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of plastics imports, plastics manufacture, and plastics pollution and marine litter (including impacts on economic development)
- Safely remove, retrieve, and repatriate plastics, including marine litter supported by mandatory backloading/reverse logistics

Definitions

Backloading/Reverse logistics: A supply chain mechanism to ensure post-consumption plastics are returned to point of production. E.g., filling empty shipping containers with plastics waste and repatriating for safe and environmentally responsible management.

Evaluation of impacts on economic development: Plastics pollution is presented as a potential business risk and the costs of pollution on business is evaluated.

Extended producer responsibility: An environmental protection policy approach that shifts the bulk of responsibility and costs to the producer for the full life cycle impacts (including economic, social, and environmental) of plastics pollution.

Horizontal integration: Coordination and integration of plastics pollution prevention and management policies and legislation across government departments and ministries.

Long-term elimination of discharges: Sustainable long-term policy mechanisms aimed to eliminate plastics pollution along the full life cycle of plastics.

Precautionary principle: Lack of scientific data or certainty is an inadequate excuse for failing to prevent serious or irreversible damage.

Primary microplastics: Intentionally added microplastics in products such as cosmetics, marine and other paint, and industrial abrasives.

Problematic plastics: Avoidable, unnecessary, hard to recycle, toxic plastics including primary (intentionally added) microplastics, and non-durable products.

Safe(r) recycling: There is currently no 100% safe circular economy for plastics including plastics recycling. However, the following can minimize hazards: eliminate 'substances of concern'; establish ecolabelling schemes informing consumers about chemical/recycled content; establish handling and recycling standards; maximize recyclability and recycled content of materials and set targets (exceptions include food and beverage contact materials); set targets for reduction of overall volume of materials in circulation; minimize material (including microplastics), CO₂, water, and toxic emissions.

Sustainable financial mechanisms: E.g., waste-management fees, deposit-refund schemes, plastics taxes and levies, graduated taxes, advanced disposal fees, polluter pays, and user pays.

Vertical integration: Faithfully domesticate obligations to international and regional agreements into coherent plastics pollution prevention policy frameworks.

Zero Waste Hierarchy: Designing and managing products and processes to systematically avoid and eliminate the volume and toxicity of waste and materials, conserve and recover all resources, and not burn or bury them. The zero waste hierarchy prioritises prevention over management.

Healthy environment: Includes a safe climate, clean air, clean water and adequate sanitation, healthy and sustainably produced food, non-toxic environments in which to live, work, study and play, and healthy biodiversity and ecosystems.