Response to Core Obligations 5, 6, 7, 8

Matt Peryman
Indigenous Social Scientist
Aotearoa Plastic Pollution Alliance
Tāngata Whenua Coalition for an Effective Plastics Treaty

Statement: End the narrative that plastics can ever be 'circular'

We support the New Zealand delegation in their statement that the concept of circularity, as with the rest of the Global Plastics Treaty, must incorporate and be grounded in perspectives from Indigenous sciences and knowledge.

- In Indigenous worldviews, true circularity is regenerative and restorative. Circular systems/materials honour and reflect our circular relationships with the Earth, from which we descend and return to when our time comes.
- As novel entities, plastics are as artificial as a product can be. Plastics do not biodegrade but only break down into smaller, still hazardous particles, while releasing toxic chemical additives into ecosystems and human bodies.
- If a system, practice, or product entails a risk of releasing harmful contaminants and it is harmful to the wellbeing of ourselves and our planet, it is not circular.
- That which is natural provides life from life. Plastics are the opposite. As 99% are made from fossil fuels, plastics are manufactured from our dead ancestors and when released into the world they cause immense harm, bringing death to death.
- The negative socio-ecological impacts of fossil fuels are evident across the death-cycle of plastics from extraction to manufacturing to transport to pollution. Plastics demonstrably contribute to climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecocide.

The majority of the chemical additives found in plastics are toxic and yet due to a lack of proactive regulation, many of these toxic chemical additives are released when transported, traded, used, and disposed of, eventually making their way into our homes, oceans, soils, bodies, and even placentae.

- As endocrine disruptors, plastics and their chemical additives have been shown to affect our hormonal and reproduction cycles. Plastics therefore impose upon humanity's inherent rights to reproduction and a healthy environment.
- Plastics disrupt natural food systems by contaminating food sources and reducing biodiversity.
- The issues involved with chemical contamination are carried along the food chain where organisms like ourselves ingest them. This can cause trophic cascades that lead to widespread changes in how our ecosystems function.
- This puts undue pressure on local communities who depend on reliable access to food in places that are now contaminated by plastics and their chemical additives.

- These impacts are disproportionately felt by frontline communities such as waste pickers, communities near plastic production/waste management sites, Indigenous peoples, and coastal communities.
- This all demonstrates how plastics are inherently not a circular material/product and cannot be described as such by industry, governments, or others who are denying independent and peer-reviewed science, often due to a clear conflict of interest.

Plastics recycling is not a safe or circular solution

The false solution that the plastics/petrochemical industry is purporting - a 'circular economy for plastics' - ultimately means increased recycling. This is not a truly circular solution, as only 9% of plastics are currently recycled globally, most plastics are not (able to be) recycled, and recycling systems themselves have been proven unsafe and hazardous.

- Recycling has become a vague and meaningless term in relation to plastics.
- Focusing on plastics recycling allows industry to maintain and even increase upon current levels of virgin plastic production.
- Plastics recycling reinforces linear single-use models.
- Plastics recycling is often actually downcycling, which is when products are turned into something of lesser value than the original product (e.g. plastic bottles turned into carpeting, soft plastics into fence posts/eco-bricks, etc).
- Recycling involves the release of micro- and nano-plastics, which are non-biodegradable pollutants already causing significant socio-ecological harm.
- The mixing of different types of polymers and chemical additives during recycling has been shown to result in even more toxic chemical compounds that are then exposed to waste workers and ecological systems.
- Many countries are unequipped to deal with the amount and various forms of plastics in the market through local recycling schemes. This leads to (usually developed/wealthy) nations exporting plastic waste to other (usually developing/overexploited) nations, in a process called waste colonialism.

True solutions to be centred in the Global Plastics Treaty:

- Capping and significantly reducing the production of virgin plastics.
- Implementing a precautionary approach with strong regulation around the manufacturing of all chemical additives in plastics. Creating a blacklist/whitelist of unsafe/safe chemical additives would be useful.
- Ending fossil fuel subsidies, which are highly problematic for multiple reasons, including leading to plastics becoming the cheaper and more convenient material option in many circumstances.
- Banning linear and single-use alternatives like bio-based/compostable plastics/packaging and other false solutions like incineration, waste-to-energy, plastic credits, and waste exports/colonialism.
- Investing in Indigenous- and community-led waste prevention education, reuse, and composting initiatives.

- Product and system redesign founded on non-toxic, safe, precautionary, restorative and regenerative principles.
- Investment in truly circular solutions at the top of the zero waste hierarchy (reuse, refill, repair).
- Reparations for those most disproportionately affected by plastic pollution to address the historical, contemporary, and ongoing impacts of plastics on their communities.
- Implementing a just transition away from plastics that is led by waste pickers, Indigenous Peoples, and other frontline communities. This transition must also consider those who currently need plastics for medical reasons, unless or until safe and non-toxic alternatives are available.