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PLASTIC POLLUTION GETS WORSE PRODUCTION INCREASED SINCE 2019

A philanthropic organisation, the Minderoo Foundation, published on 6 February last, the *Plastic Waste Makers Index*, a report using data on plastic production from 2021. This data is compared to the data collected in 2019 for the first issue of this Index.

Its first key finding is that 6 million metric tonnes more single-use plastic was produced in 2021 than in 2019. This could be partially attributable to the Covid-19 pandemic, with single-use plastic used in products such as testing kits, disposable masks, face shields and other protective clothes and accessories. But research also revealed very little progress in reducing single-use plastics elsewhere.

Most of these plastics will have ended up in landfill, incineration or in the natural environment. There is simply not enough global recycling capacity to handle all the single-use plastics manufactured annually. The Foundation notes that capacity for recycling is concentrated in developed markets where demand for recycled plastics is stronger and that 85% of the global population suffers 'chronically underfunded' plastic waste management. Furthermore, some single-use plastic simply cannot be recycled using existing technologies.

The Foundation concluded that, despite pledges from businesses to source more recycled and bio-based plastics¹, the global single-use plastic stock in 2021 was 'still almost entirely made from fossil-fuel-based materials. This is partly due to challenges in scaling up recycling capacity. Just 2% of the single-use plastics produced in 2021 were from recycled material, according to the report.

ExxonMobil, Sinopec and Dow were the top three petrochemical companies in terms of total virgin plastic production in 2021 by the Foundation's calculations. More than half of global production that year could be traced back to just 20 petrochemical companies.

The Foundation warns that this problem is unlikely to be rectified this decade, with most plastic-producing companies investing in recycling as 'a marginal activity at most'. Where global single-use plastic production in 2021 stood at 137 million metric tonnes, Minderoo Foundation is predicting that it will increase to 154 million metric tonnes by 2027.

¹ **Bioplastics** are a type of plastic that can be made from natural resources such as vegetable oils and starches, thus reducing the use of petroleum for the production of plastics.

It is expecting just 3% of the plastics produced in 2027 will be recycled. The Foundation is using the report to call on all polymer producers to aim for at least 20% of the single-use plastics they produce in 2030 to be from recycled feedstocks. It also calls on investors in these firms to support this ‘clear, ambitious, time-bound target’ – or, at the very least, to demand specific targets on recycled vs virgin feedstocks.

Emissions focus

The report highlights how, because plastics are derived from fossil-fuels and commonly dumped on land, in waterways and oceans, or burned, they are a significant contributor to annual global greenhouse gas emissions.

Petrochemical companies have kept plastics so cheap by failing to reflect any of their negative impacts in their price, leaving it to others to pay the environmental and social costs of plastic pollution. This industry must play its part in providing for the scale of recycled content. It must also acknowledge that it must not plan for continuing growth into the future.

The Foundation concludes that it has only some ‘cautious optimism’ that the petrochemical industry will make these changes without pressure from elsewhere.

It states that the vast majority of companies are only ‘paying lip service’ to the net-zero transition² and the circular economy³. Even so, the report sets out a series of interventions that can be made by policymakers, investors in the petrochemical sector and companies involved in the plastics value chain⁴.

Sian Sutherland, co-founder of Plastic Planet, comments that ‘the report demonstrates that we must urgently wean ourselves off plastic derived from fossil fuels, but recycling plastic alone will not achieve the change we require... If we are truly to protect our planet, it is only comprehensive systemic change that will put a halt to the dangerous path we continue to walk down’.

Source: Sarah George, 7th February 2023. www.edie.net (business media promoting sustainability in the UK). Submitted by Alison Healey.

WHO WILL RIDE THE TIGER? WHAT WILL REPLACE DYING NEOLIBERALISM?⁵

According to Sociologist, Walden Bello, the world’s prevailing socio-political models will not survive the pandemic. What’s going to replace them? According to Dr. Bello, three lines of thinking are emerging in response to the coronavirus crisis.

² Net-zero transition describes the pathway for the global energy sector to achieve net-zero CO2 emissions by 2050, with advanced economies reaching net-zero emission in advance of others.

³ A circular economy is one in which products are recycled, rather than discarded as scrap, and then replaced with newly extracted resources. In such an economy, all forms of waste, such as clothes, scrap metal and obsolete electronics, are returned to the economy or used more efficiently.

⁴ The term value chain refers to the various business activities and processes involved in creating a product or performing a service. A value chain can consist of multiple.

⁵ Neoliberalism is a political ideology of free market capitalism, that favours deregulation of labour, financial markets, commerce and investments, together with reduction in government spending. It asserts that these policies have the potential to create unprecedented social well-being.

One is that an emergency necessitates extraordinary measures, but the basic structure of production and consumption is sound, and the problem lies only in determining the moment when things can return to normal. Governments are intervening in the markets to stabilise them; there is no systemic risk. This is the dominant opinion among political and business elites.

The *second*, view is that we are now in the ‘new normal’ and while the global economic system is not significantly out of kilter, important changes must be made to some of its elements, such as redesigning the workplace to accommodate the need for social distancing, strengthening public health systems, and even moving toward a universal basic income.

The *third* response is that the pandemic has provided an opportunity for transforming the present system that is ridden with deep economic and political inequalities and is profoundly destabilising the Earth’s ecology. We must determine to move toward a qualitatively new economic system.

In the North, the needed transformation is often articulated in the form of demands for a ‘Green New Deal’, marked not just by ‘greening’ the economy but by a significant socialisation of production and investments, democratisation of economic decision-making and radical reductions in income inequality.

In the global South, proposed strategies, while addressing the climate crisis, stress the opportunity offered by the pandemic to tackle deep-seated economic, social and political inequalities.

The first two perspectives downplay the possibilities of radical change. Those holding these views refer back to the popular response to the 2008 financial crisis: people were feeling dislocated but had no appetite for much change, especially radical change. However, it is a mistake to equate two crises in this way. Significant change resulting from a crisis depends on the interaction between two elements: an objective one, namely, a systemic crisis, and a subjective one, which is the people’s psychological response to the crisis.

The global financial crisis of 2008 was a profound crisis of capitalism, but the subjective element – popular alienation from the system – had not reached critical mass. Owing to the boom already created by consumer spending over two decades, people were shocked by the crisis, but they were not alienated from the system during the crisis and its immediate aftermath.

Things are different today. The level of discontent and alienation from neoliberalism was already very high in the global North before the coronavirus hit, because of the inability of the established elites to reverse the decline in living standards and the skyrocketing inequality that followed the financial crisis. In the USA, the period was summed up in the popular mind as one where the elites prioritised saving the big banks over saving millions of bankrupt home-owners and ending large-scale unemployment. In much of Europe, especially in the South, the peoples’ experience of the last decade is captured in one word: austerity.

And in much of the global South, the chronic crisis of underdevelopment, made worse by neoliberal so-called ‘reforms’ since the 1980s, had already shredded the reputation and

legitimacy of key institutions of globalization - the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation.

So, the subjective element, the psychological critical mass, is present. It is a whirlwind that is waiting to be captured by contending political forces. The question is, who will succeed in harnessing it? Neoliberalism is dying; it's only a question if its passing will be 'swift' or 'slow'.

Only the Left and the Right are serious contenders in this race to bring about another system. Progressives have offered a number of exciting ideas— a Green New Deal, democratic socialism, de-growth, de-globalisation, ecofeminism, food sovereignty, and 'Buen Vivir'⁶.

The problem is that these strategies have not yet translated into a critical mass on the ground. Unfortunately, it is the extreme right that is best positioned to take advantage of current global discontent. Even before the pandemic, the Right had co-opted to its purpose some features of anti-neoliberalism, such as anti globalisation, greater state intervention in the economy and the expansion of the 'welfare state' – but putting them in a right-wing framework.

Source: Walden Bello, 'The Race to Replace a Dying Neoliberalism' June 7, 2020, condensed by Mary Boyd.

Meeting with the Popular Movements, Pope Francis asks for change in a system that is 'an idolatrous cult of money and global indifference. We must 'do so with courage but also with intelligence. With tenacity, but without fanaticism. With passion, but without violence..'Jesus would call *hypocrite* those who want to face the scandal of poverty by promoting strategies of containment that only convert the poor into domestic and inoffensive beings.

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⁶ Buen Vivir is a movement in South America promoting a way of living that is community centric, ecologically-balanced and culturally-sensitive.