



Ad Hoc Open Ended Expert Group on Marine Litter and Micro-plastics

Item 6 Environmental, social and economic costs and benefits of different response options

Wednesday, May 30, 2018

Intervention by Imogen Ingram (ISACI/ Cook Islands)

I am from the Cook Islands in the South Pacific and would like to raise my concern of the health risks plastic waste poses to our community and other Small Islands Developing State.

The Secretariat has produced a comprehensive document UNEP/AHEG-2018/1/4/ about the environmental, social and economic costs and benefits of different response options, which refers to the gaps identified in Section 3 of the assessment. In particular, the document notes that “little is mentioned about the nature and magnitude of costs that the plastic component of marine litter and microplastics impose on society.”

We strongly support the reinforced call for prevention of plastic pollution as the primary focus of the outcomes recommended by the OEEG, to reduce environmental, social, and economic costs of plastic and marine litter and microplastics. Prevention can bring economic benefits through reducing the costs to industries as well as environmental damage, which are “avoidable costs. Prevention can also reduce the costs of remediation, which are another layer of costs attributable to removing marine litter.

Marine pollutants affect the ability of fish to reproduce, thus reducing fish stocks and therefore national GDPs, because fish exports are a significant revenue item for Pacific SIDS. From the Baltic Sea region, there is peer-reviewed research available documenting adverse effects on ecosystems and fish, derived from monitoring before the Helcom Transboundary Agreement on reducing marine pollution came into force. Studies after the

signing of the Helcom transboundary agreement showed that monitoring results for ecosystems and fish stocks improved within 6 years.

Monitoring of fish in the South Pacific for harmful contaminants are an important gap which we hope Option 3 will help to fill. It stands to reason that if the Helcom agreement were to be replicated in our region, similar results might be expected.

The sources of marine plastic litter in the Small Island Developing States of the Pacific are imported plastic articles or articles containing plastics; there is no industrial waste from manufacture. Environmentally sound disposal of plastic wastes is beyond our economic and technical capacities, so our best management plan is to collect and ship plastic wastes for appropriate disposal elsewhere. If plastic waste is merely dumped in the ocean, wave action fragments it into nanoparticles, and together with toxic additives used to colour the plastic, these contaminants are ingested by the fish and seafoods which we rely upon for our daily protein. Recent research indicates that plastics are found in marine life even in the deepest parts of the Pacific Ocean. It is therefore fair to say that Pacific SIDS populations are most likely exposed to plastics from toxins through their fish-rich diet. Preliminary hair sampling in seven Pacific SIDS indicated high levels of methylmercury, which is an endocrine-disrupting chemical or EDC. We would like a regional monitoring program to test fish for EDCs and other harmful substances.

Option 1 or status quo would not do anything towards this aim. Option 2 to amend existing multilateral environmental agreements, such as Stockholm, Basel or MARPOL, might go some way to deal with reducing contaminants from marine plastic litter, but a number of gaps still remain. In particular the issue of specific additives to plastic which adsorb to particles ingested by fish and human would not receive attention. Research shows that plastics-associated chemicals have been detected leaching into foods and found in urine samples. They are also linked to coronary heart disease, asthma, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, breast cancer, obesity and type II diabetes

We believe a new legally binding instrument under Option 3 would provide better safeguards for human health and the environment for Pacific SIDs. We would like to emphasize here that even if it takes time to negotiate such a new instrument, work under the existing international agreements will not cease.

Adverse health impacts for humans from dietary exposure to harmful chemicals in marine plastic litter put a strain on public health systems and productivity of the workforce. Businesses talk about the costs of making changes to achieve safer plastics, but any

changes will impose a heavier burden on workers and other vulnerable groups. Further, the cost to the public health budget would increase.

In a truly circular economy, producers would internalize costs by matching revenues earned against the full cost of the product, including environmentally sound disposal. At present, these disposal costs are externalized and borne by societies which can ill afford them. Industry makes huge profits from sales of plastics but in the process human health is threatened; a 1% charge against such profits could be channelled to a fund used to those who will suffer the impacts of decisions about labour markets.

To conclude, Marine plastic litter and microplastics represent a threat not only to our health, but more critically to the health of our children and grandchildren. If not addressed effectively, the adverse impacts mismanaged waste to human health and the environment will cause financial burden to the economies of Small Island Developing States, impeding our development.