

A safe(r) circular economy for plastics in the Pacific Region

Plastics pollution, including marine litter, is a global social, economic, and environmental emergency requiring urgent attention. Plastics are produced from fossil fuels, and once released into the environment, they never disappear. Instead, they degrade into physical and chemical forms, leading to the contamination of all biophysical systems. If we carry on business-as-usual this will culminate to 1.1 billion tonnes having entered the world's oceans by 2030.¹

¹ Borrelle, S.B. et al., (2020). Science 369, (6510), 1515-1518.

Small Island Developing States, which include Pacific Island nations, have strong cultural, economic, and social ties to their ocean. While traditionally self-sufficient, the current economy has made Pacific communities import dependent. They are threatened by the transboundary movement of plastics (trade, tourism, the fishing industry, and marine litter that flows in on ocean currents), and by climate change exacerbated by the full life cycle impacts of plastics.

Pacific nations are currently ill-equipped to manage the costly and harmful impacts of the externally generated problem of plastic pollution. Fortunately, robust policy and best practice solutions exist to prevent negative impacts on future generations.

Recommendations:

Develop a plastic pollution policy framework that supports a safe(r) circular economy for plastics in the Pacific region.

A safer circular economy for plastics will help protect Pacific Islands peoples and their marine and terrestrial environments from the chemical and physical harms of plastics, including marine litter. It will protect communities from the harmful impacts on livelihoods, food security and culture. It will also support state obligations to adopt and implement legal and institutional frameworks that protect the right to a healthy environment for current and future generations.



Safe(r) Economy for Plastics

A Safe(r) Circular Economy for Plastics will

- prevent problematic plastics entering the region and becoming marine litter. Problematic plastics are avoidable, unnecessary, non-recyclable, toxic, and non-durable and include primary/intentionally added microplastics;
- prioritise safe reuse, refill, repair and return systems, materials, and infrastructure, offering local employment opportunities and social benefits;
- remove legacy plastics including marine litter from the environment;
- set targets to reduce the overall volume of plastics in circulation;
- acknowledge that no circular economy for plastics is 100% safe;
- minimise the leakage of plastics and toxicants into the environment and of marine litter into the oceans;
- establish protocols to minimise microplastics and chemical (liquid and gas) leakage; and
- support the realisation of the human right to a healthy environment, safe working environments, and sustainable livelihoods.



Safe Supply

Pre-production pellets and plastic products and packaging

- Toxic and hazard free
- Energy efficient
- Regulated renewable feedstocks
- Caps on virgin plastics and plastic products



Safe Supply and Safe Design and Manufacture

Plastic products and packaging

- Toxic and hazard free
- Essential
- Durable
- Reusable
- Recyclable
- Targets for recycled content



Safe Work

Protection of the health, safety, and rights of formal and informal workers along the full lifecycle of plastics (supply, design and manufacture, recycling, tourism, fishing, and retrieval).



Safe Transport

- Standardised protocols, monitoring, and reporting
- Energy efficiency
- Short supply chains
- Reverse logistics



Minimal Leakage

- Minimise material leakage
- Minimise CO₂ emissions
- Minimise toxic chemical emissions



Safe Consumption

- Ecolabelling (inform consumer about toxic content, safe handling, and recycling post-consumption)
- Toxic and hazard free plastics
- Safe, convenient, affordable, and accessible reusables



Safe Recycling

- Hazardous plastic monomers and additives in plastics minimized or removed
- Recyclability and recycled content of materials maximized and targets set



Safe Tourism

- Targets set to reduce overall volume of plastics materials in circulation
- Toxic chemical, energy, water, and material leakage minimized



Safe Reuse, Refill, Repurpose, and Repair

- Prioritised investment in safe plastic-free delivery systems and products
- Energy and water efficient
- Durability and safety standards
- Short supply chains
- Accessible
- Incentivised
- Affordable
- Non-profit managing agency



Safe Fishing

- Durable fishing gear
- Marked fishing gear
- Incentivised Indigenous plastic-free fishing gear
- Reporting of lost and discarded fishing gear
- Incentivised retrieval and repair
- Regulated fish aggregating devices
- Standardised auditing of plastics onboard
- Container return schemes (e.g., for fish bins)
- Port reception facility upgrades
- Reduced, reused, repaired and recycled plastics in land and sea-based operations



Safe Retrieval

- Standardised protocols, monitoring, and reporting
- Incentivised retrieval
- Energy efficiency
- Port reception facility upgrades
- Repatriation/ safe end-of-life management