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Plastic bricks are being made out of recycled plastic waste at a factory in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. © UNICEF/Milequem Diarassouba

New UN Report Shows How to Drastically Slash Plastic Pollution

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By J Nastranis

NEW YORK, 17 May 2023 (IDN) — A new UN Environment Programme (UNEP) report says countries and companies could reduce plastic pollution by 80 percent by 2040 using existing technologies.

According to UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen, “the way we produce, use, and dispose of plastics pollutes ecosystems, poses health risks, and destabilizes the climate.”

UNEP’s report released on 16 May lays out a roadmap to drastically reduce these risks by adopting a circular approach that keeps plastics out of ecosystems, out of our bodies, and out of the economy.

In *Turning off the Tap: How to end plastic pollution and create a circular economy*, the authors outline the magnitude and nature of the changes needed to end plastic pollution and create a sustainable circular economy.

By accelerating three key shifts—reuse, recycling, and reorienting and diversifying—and actions to deal with plastic pollution’s legacy, the report proposes a system change.

In 2040, 100 million metric tons of plastics from single-use and short-lived products will still need to be disposed of safely, according to the report.

Circular economy building

UNEP suggests setting and implementing design and safety standards for disposing of non-recyclable plastic waste and making manufacturers responsible for products that shed microplastics.

When costs and recycling revenues are taken into account, a circular economy would save \$1.27 trillion overall. Moreover, the avoided externalities of health, climate, air pollution, marine ecosystem degradation, and litigation costs would save \$3.25 trillion.

A shift of this magnitude could create 700,000 jobs by 2040, primarily in low-income countries, improving the livelihoods of millions of workers in informal settings.

It is estimated that the recommended systemic change will cost \$65 billion per year, compared with \$113 billion if no systematic change is implemented.

Investing in new production facilities or levying on new plastic production could mobilize much of this capital.

A fixed period of time

A five-year delay could result in an increase in plastic pollution by 80 million metric tons by 2040, the report warned.

Based on an analysis of concrete practices, market shifts, and policies that can inform government thinking and business action, the report found that operational costs are highest in a throwaway and circular economy.

By requiring producers to finance the collection, recycling, and end-of-life disposal of plastic products, extended producer responsibility schemes can cover operational costs of ensuring the integrity of the plastic system. Regulations can ensure plastics are designed to fit a circular model.

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Opportunities for business growth

The report shows that international policies can help to overcome the limitations of national planning and business action, support a flourishing circular global plastics economy, unlock business opportunities, and create jobs.

A global fiscal framework could be part of a policy pact to enable recycled materials to compete on a level playing field with virgin materials, create an economy of scale for solutions, and establish monitoring systems and financing mechanisms.

The UNEP report encourages policymakers to embrace a life cycle approach that integrates regulatory instruments and policies. Additionally, specific policies are discussed, such as standards for design, safety, compostable and biodegradable plastics, and recycling objectives.

UNEP's chief said if we follow this roadmap, including in negotiations on plastic pollution, we can achieve major economic, social, and environmental gains.

Circular markets: RRR + D

In order to cut plastic pollution by 80 percent by 2040, the report suggests eliminating problematic and unnecessary plastics and reorienting and diversifying products.

By 2040, 30 percent of plastic pollution can be reduced by promoting reuse options, including refillable bottles, bulk dispensers, deposit-return-schemes, and packaging takeback schemes. Governments must assist in building a stronger business case for reusables in order to realize its potential.

A further 20 per cent can be reduced if recycling becomes more profitable and stable. The share of economically recyclable plastics would rise from 21 to 50 percent if fossil fuel subsidies were removed, design guidelines to enhance recyclability were enforced, and other measures were taken.

Replace plastic wrappers, sachets, and takeaway items with alternatives (such as paper or compostable materials) to reduce plastic pollution by an additional 17 percent, states the report. [IDN-InDepthNews]

NEWSLETTER Photo: Plastic bricks are being made out of recycled plastic waste at a factory in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. © UNICEF/Milequem Diarassouba

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