

POSITION PAPER ON MARINE LITTER AND MICROPLASTICS

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Views on major barriers to combatting marine litter and microplastics:

Plastic litter in the environment has become a global issue and a growing concern since the rise of the plastic industry nearly a decade ago. Larger plastics which are described as degradable are hugely persistent within the marine environment. These fragments degrade over time due to several factors and ocean phenomena. The increase in the number of plastics, including a number of pressures that have seen a rapid decline in ocean health has the potential of affecting marine life with an extended socio-economic consequence. Although plastics have been seen as a vector for the transport of several elements and associated compounds, there is still a lot to understand about potential impacts and pathways.

Plastics in our oceans threaten marine life, human health and the sustainability of critical marine ecosystems. Marine life dies from plastic ingestion and entanglement, and when covered by litter, coral reefs and food chain become gradually contaminated. Plastics never go away, instead, they break down into smaller particles. When eaten by fish, and other marine organisms microplastics work their way up the food chain and into our food supply.

According to the Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP) of the United Nations, approximately 80% of the global litter found in the coastal and marine ecosystems has originated from land. Critical to social and economic development, the chemical make-up and physical compositions of marine litter and microplastics are responsible for the slow decomposition and breakdown of properties allowing components to persist within the coastal and ocean environment for decades.

Understanding the transport of plastics from land into marine systems is important for demonstrating distribution patterns and trends of plastic in the ocean and estimating its impact on national and regional economies. Litter accumulation in our seas and on our beaches depends upon both the rate at which litter is entering the system and the rate at which it is removed or decomposed. Estimates for the rate of litter accumulation in the world's seas and oceans vary substantially. Recent study suggests that approximately 9 million tons of plastic flows to the ocean each year, mainly from major urban centers. However, there is not sufficient data collected to date to document the existence of these extensive plastic accumulation around major cities and urban centers.

Plastic breakdown and subsequent pollution invade ecosystems and disrupt food chains. Plastic plumes never cease to exist; and thus, constitute both economic and environmental impacts.

Despite global effort to reduce the impacts of marine litter and microplastics on the marine environment, there are several barriers to combatting these sources of marine pollution.

1. Lack of knowledge on the impacts of marine litter and microplastics from policy makers and scientific experts; especially in developing countries.
2. Lack of education and awareness, particularly in developing countries, and the dissemination of information to relevant stakeholders across the maritime spectrum.
3. Lack of adequate data to describe the extent of damage caused by marine litter and microplastics globally.
4. Accessibility of single-use plastic products.
5. Lack of alternative-use of plastic products to reduce impacts from land-based sources.
6. Unclear or non-existence of policies to deter the use of and reduce the impacts of marine litter and microplastics on the marine environment.
7. Absence of standardized framework – national and regional policy instrument(s) to determine economic benefits for recycling plastics.
8. Lack of waste infrastructures, particularly in developing countries, for the sustainable management and use of plastics and related products originating from land.
9. Lack of adequate source of funding to support national and regional policy actions to reduce the impacts of marine litter and microplastics on the marine environment.

View on potential national, regional and international response options and associated environmental, social and economic costs:

Plastic pollution in the coastal and marine environment is a challenge and thus poses threat to the sustainability of the ocean and resources. The solutions to reducing plastic pollution is complex and mostly require global and particularly transboundary efforts.

Liberia recognizes that there is a gap in international hard law particularly addressing land-based marine pollution resulting from plastics and related products. Although the United

Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) specifically addresses the protection of the marine environment, it identifies six different sources of marine pollution, including land-based sources with not sufficient details about pollution types and rules-in-use. However, various legislation relevant to plastic litter have failed to identify, comprehensively, the main sources of plastic pollution and fall short of a broad set of enforcement standards to reduce potential impacts of marine litter and microplastics globally.

In addition to existing legal provisions, Liberia endeavors to work with Member States and development partners to use the best practical means to reduce marine pollution originating from plastic litter particularly from land-based sources. Liberia hosts the inaugural celebrations of the Africa Day of Seas and Oceans in October 2018. The conference will present the platform to discuss and develop an integrated approach to address marine litter and microplastics in the coastal and marine environment, among other themes.

Correspondingly, Liberia identifies that the London Dumping Convention, among other Conventions is designed to promote control over – and listing of substances that should not be dumped at sea, but; stresses that the Convention is not self-regulating and require Member States to implement national legislation for enforcement purposes.

In addition, Liberia aims to promote the prevention of plastic wastes at the national level through several kinds of actions ranging from learning and sharing experiences on plastic pollution and management strategies to passing legislation. The flow of plastics into the marine environment has reached a critical level, and the devastating impact is most evident in our oceans.

As part effort to develop Liberia's Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (PPAD), the government will work with relevant stakeholders on the national level to launch a campaign this year to reduce plastic pollution as part of its mission agenda. This effort is geared towards providing opportunities and to set the stage for policy makers and scientists to collaborate and work towards a campaign to develop plastic waste reduction programs.

Views on the feasibility and effectiveness of different response options:

Liberia recognizes that there are several measures or response options that could be identified to address challenges associated with marine litter and microplastics. There are adapted programs that meet regional and international requirements to reduce marine litter and subsequent impacts on the marine environment. These programs and activities range from the 'so-called' Polluter Pay Principles (PPP) to Incentives for Fishermen to 'fish-out' Debris. Some of these activities are heavily resource-dependent. These conditions, however, do not favor developing countries which lack the financial capacity to support such initiatives. Although

donor funding could be attracted, sustainability of these activities on the local and national level is difficult if not impossible.

Furthermore, Liberia identifies that there is a need to act at all levels to improve marine litter management i.e. local, national and international levels. However, Liberia emphasizes the need to act and develop cost-effective and sustainable programs to reduce plastic litter on the local level. A country located along the West Coast of Africa, Liberia has a coastline of approximately 570 km – and 9 counties (of 15) are located along the coast. This demonstrates the importance of the coastal and marine environment of Liberia; and how the effective use and management of both sea-scape and land-scape have the potential to promote social and economic development of the State.

However, Liberia recognizes the following available response options at the national level to address problems associated marine litter.

1. Legislation – there are no policy and/or legislation in place to combat the use of plastics. Liberia looks forward to working with international development partners and relevant stakeholders to employ policy and develop programs to address marine litter and plastic pollution.
2. Banning the usage of ‘single-use plastic’ – there are yet no legislation to address the multiple or single use of plastic materials. However, the management and limited-use of plastic materials will be implemented in Liberia in the short and medium term consistent with the development of the Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (PPAD).
3. Stakeholder participation – to address plastic pollution on the local and national level, there is a need for the participation of relevant stakeholders to engage the process. There is also a need to develop adequate control measures to address challenges posed by plastic pollution to ensure proper implementation by relevant institutions.
4. Management infrastructures – facilities and support tools for plastic management is important to reduce littering and reduce the quantity of plastic materials that end up in the marine and coastal environment. Also important is the recycling of plastics as part of policy and concept to combat marine litter and plastic pollution.
5. Education and awareness – public awareness and education are essential to combatting plastic pollution. Beach clean-up and stakeholders’ involvement are important ways to raising awareness about the impact of plastic littering and pollution.
6. Waste removal at seas and in rivers.

Finally, Liberia recognizes that there is a need to act at all levels – i.e. local; national; and international. To improve the management of plastic litter globally, there is need to improve decentralized governance at each of these levels to encourage dialogue and strengthen the relationship between relevant institutions.