

Talking Trash

*The corporate playbook
of false solutions to the plastic crisis*



The information in this document has been obtained from sources believed reliable and in good faith but any potential interpretation of this report as making an allegation against a specific company or companies named would be misleading and incorrect. The authors accept no liability whatsoever for any direct or consequential loss arising from the use of this document or its contents.

This report was written and researched by the Changing Markets Foundation in collaboration with independent researchers. Main authors (in alphabetical order): Alice Delemare Tangpuori, George Harding-Rolls, Nusa Urbancic and Ximena Purita Banegas Zallio.

We would like to thank all our contributors and reviewers.

Published in September 2020



www.changingmarkets.org
www.talking-trash.com

Designed by Pietro Bruni - toshi.ltd
Printed on recycled paper

This report investigates industry tactics in the face of an unprecedented plastic pollution crisis and growing public pressure to address it. Based on research and investigations in over 15 countries across five continents, it reveals how - behind the veil of nice-sounding initiatives and commitments - the industry has obstructed and undermined proven legislative solutions for decades.

We have critically analysed voluntary commitments from the biggest plastic polluters, dissected the most prominent group initiatives (some of them championed by governments and NGOs) and revealed how companies across the plastic supply chain - from the oil industry to consumer brands and retailers - really act behind the scenes.

Our case studies show that not only have voluntary initiatives failed to contain the plastics crisis, but also that companies have used these initiatives as a tactic to delay and derail progressive legislation - all while distracting consumers and governments with empty promises and false solutions.

Executive summary

The plastic pollution crisis: blighting our ecosystems and our health

Rarely in the history of the environmental movement has an issue engendered such outrage, awareness and calls for change. Plastic-filled oceans and strangled sea creatures have become the poster children of the damage done to the natural world by our wasteful consumption – but, in truth, gyres of floating trash and washed-up whales bloated with plastic bags are only the most visible fallout of this pollution. Plastics are not just problematic when mismanaged at the end of life; virgin-plastic production is a major contributor to climate change, generating enough emissions – from the moment they leave the ground as fossil fuels, and throughout their entire life cycle – to use up 10–15% of our entire carbon budget by 2050 at current rates of growth.

Processing, use and disposal of plastic also poses a toxic fallout with an array of consequences for human and planetary health – whether from harmful chemical additives or via microplastics ingested by humans, animals and plants with as-yet unknown health consequences.

As such, we now understand the plastics crisis to be a climate crisis, a biodiversity crisis, a public-health crisis and a crisis of accountability blended into one. Yet, regardless of the increased awareness, plastic production is skyrocketing – and is expected to double by



2030 – and, despite all the talk of clean-ups and recycling, plastics keeps ending up in our rivers and oceans. In the face of public ire, those deemed truly responsible for flooding the world with plastic pollution – fossil-fuel companies, consumer-goods companies, packaging producers and retailers – have rapidly coalesced to form a glut of individual or group initiatives aimed at tackling the problem. On the surface, they appear to be championing solutions to the crisis; but this report reveals that, behind the scenes, they are doing everything they can to protect their profits and continue flooding the world with cheap and easily disposable consumer products and packaging.

Co-opting the Covid-19 crisis to fight legislation

Despite years of industry attempts to distract, delay and derail legislation, at the beginning of 2020 it seems the tide had started to turn against plastic pollution, with governments from Europe to Africa introducing legislation to ban certain problematic single-use plastic products, implement deposit return systems (DRS) and oblige producers to take responsibility for their waste. This followed China's 2018 ban on plastic-waste imports, which sent shockwaves throughout the waste-management industry globally. With the ever-growing realisation that plastic pollution is a global problem that requires global solutions, governments from around the world have also begun to call for a global agreement on plastic pollution. At the same time, more and more people across the world have been trying to reduce their plastic footprint, and the number of cities going zero waste has continued to increase.

Nevertheless, since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, plastic producers have co-opted the public-health crisis and capitalised on people's fear to call for regulatory rollbacks on environmental legislation. While life-saving personal protective equipment (PPE) represents a small percentage of overall plastic output, Big Plastic has capitalised on the crisis to argue the case for single-use plastic – and against anything threatening their business. It has presented scientifically dubious studies to cast doubt over reusables, and pushed for the reverse of both deposit systems and bans on single-use plastic items.

This report shows this is far from one-off opportunism; rather, it follows Big Plastic's decades-old template of undermining and obfuscating meaningful action on plastic pollution. Numerous examples collected through our investigation show we cannot rely on corporations to do the right thing; even if they appear to be talking the talk, they are not walking the walk.

A flurry of voluntary initiatives

We analysed voluntary commitments from the 10 biggest plastic polluters – Coca-Cola, Colgate-Palmolive, Danone, Mars Incorporated, Mondelēz International, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Perfetti Van Melle, Procter & Gamble, and Unilever – on the basis of the two most recent Break Free From Plastic brand audits. We assessed their commitments based on their support for progressive legislation (for example, calling

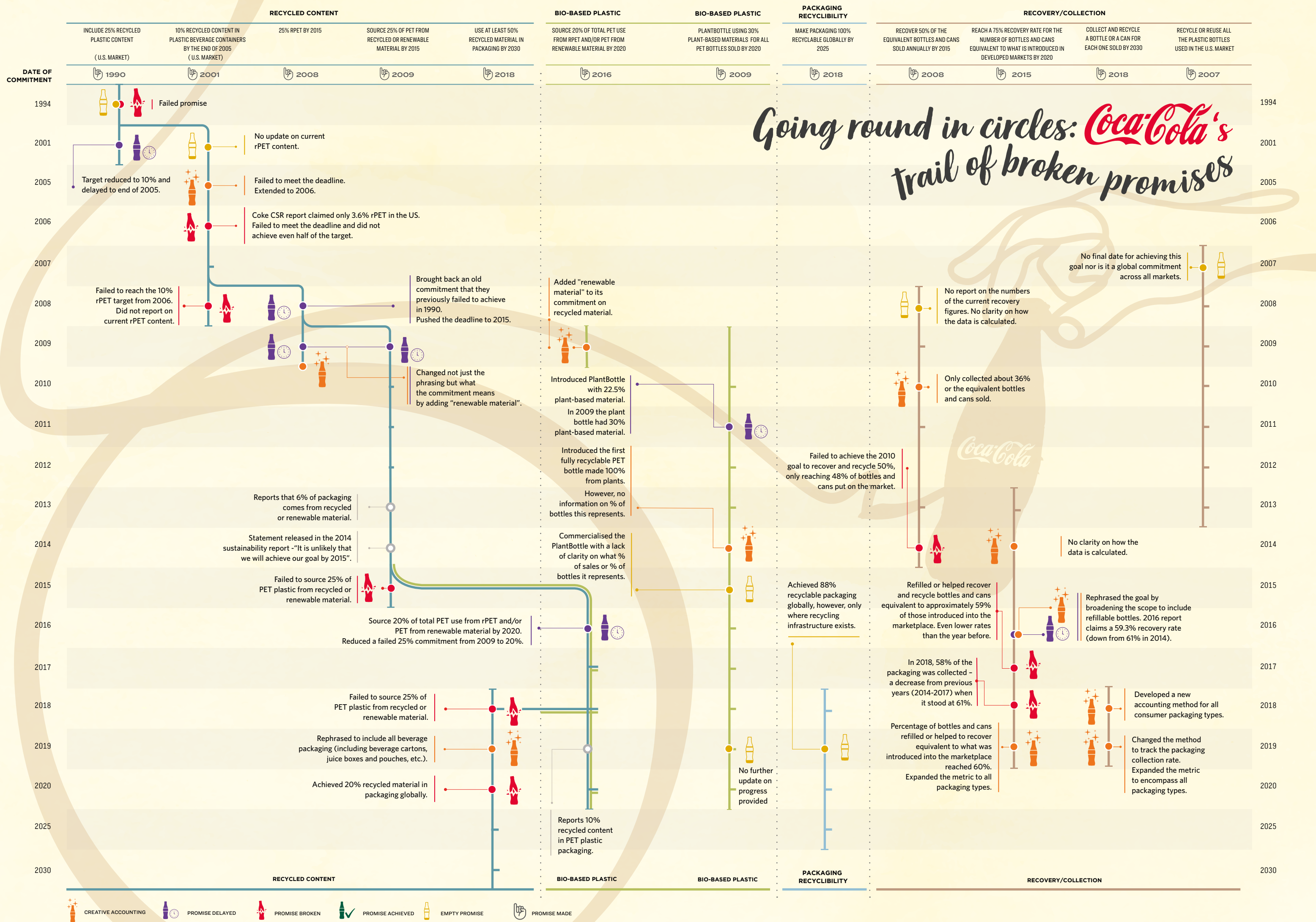
for mandatory collection of more than 90% plastic packaging); the ambition of their targets for plastic reduction; their commitments to reuse; their introduction of recycled content; and their transparency and accountability – including whether their commitments are applied across all markets in which they operate. We also analysed whether companies ensure their reduction of single-use plastics avoids regrettable substitution with other single-use materials, and whether their commitments to increase recycling and recycled content rely on false solutions, like chemical recycling.

Our analysis shows that companies have widely differing levels of commitment, ranging from near zero (Perfetti Van Melle and Mondelēz International) to more impressive-sounding commitments (Unilever, Danone and Coca-Cola). However, even the more ambitious commitments are not commensurate to the severity of the plastic pollution crisis. Most come with serious problems around transparency and accountability; companies fail to report independently verified data, and consistently miss their own targets. Coca-Cola, for example, set itself a goal to start selling soft drinks in bottles made from 25% recycled polyethylene terephthalate (rPET) as far back as 1990 – but, three decades later, their bottles still only contain 10% rPET. Instead of implementing its pledges, Coca-Cola – the biggest plastic polluter of all – has left behind a 30-year trail of broken promises, ranging from missed targets on recycled content to failed commitments on recovery and the introduction of alternative materials. This starkly illustrates that, regardless of how ambitious voluntary commitments sound, most companies regard them as just paper promises, easily warped, reframed or ignored while conveniently generating favourable headlines. Many companies, like Mars and Mondelēz International, also seem to be pinning their hopes on chemical ('advanced') recycling – a false solution with not only a history of failing expectations but also severe climate and toxicity consequences. Companies also rarely apply their policies and commitments consistently across all markets in which they operate; many still seem to have a few small (but heavily publicised) token projects in specific geographies, but lack joined-up global efforts to reduce their overall plastic footprint.

Group initiatives do not fare much better. We analysed over 50 prominent national and international initiatives and found they mostly focus on products' recyclability and end-of-pipe solutions, such as clean-up initiatives and consumer education on recycling. These initiatives were sometimes established by companies themselves; for example, the Alliance to End Plastic Waste, to which members have committed \$1.5 billion. While this might sound like a significant amount of money, members of the Alliance invested \$186 billion into new petrochemical facilities between 2010 and 2017, and continue to invest considerable amounts into new plastic-production capacity. Others have been spearheaded by governments (such as the European Plastic Pact) or NGOs (such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's (EMF) New Plastics Economy Global Commitment). The barrier to entry into these initiatives is startlingly low; in some cases, even the most basic requirements – such as reporting a total plastic footprint or committing to meaningful targets – seem not to be required of signatories. While the New Plastics Economy is one of the most prominent and publicised recent initiatives, with over 450 organisations signing up to targets by 2025, their commitments not only don't go far enough but also fundamentally lack accountability. Although the EMF publishes annual progress reports, there is no apparent enforcement of consequences for failing to meet targets, and participants are not ranked by performance or called out for lack thereof, nullifying any potential accountability or stimulus to improve.

This proliferation of voluntary initiatives has brought the world no closer to reducing the amount of plastic in the oceans. At best, by lending credibility to the worst polluters without accountability or enforcement, group alliances are helping to construct a smokescreen of sustainability behind which plastic producers and consumer brands can continue to pump the world full of plastic unabated. At worst, these groups are complicit in actively delaying and undermining more transformative legislative action. In fact, our analysis found a shocking amount of overlap between corporate membership of the initiatives that claim to solve plastic pollution and trade associations and lobby groups that actively work to undermine ambitious legislation. With the existence of this well-connected united front, it is not surprising that none of the companies or group initiatives analysed are proactively calling for ambitious legislation on mandatory collection, reuse and effective recycling, which are all proven solutions to the plastic crisis. While companies operating in the European Union (EU) are now forced to comply with the EU Single-Use Plastic (SUP) Directive, our case studies show they are still working through a network of organisations and trade groups to weaken and delay its implementation.







| Credit: Les Stone

Tactics to distract, delay and derail

Distracting from mandatory measures through well-publicised voluntary commitments is just one tactic in a corporate playbook of false solutions to the plastics crisis. We define these tactics as falling into three main categories: delay, distract and derail.

Industry delaying tactics include lobbying to delay unfavourable legislation, to protect the status quo for longer and to remain primed for future opportunities to influence or weaken legislation. Delaying can also be a subtler art of convincing legislators that mandatory measures are not necessary, via impressive-sounding voluntary commitments, withholding or misrepresenting data to mask the seriousness of the problem, calling for implementation delays or adding conditionality to legislation, giving corporations more time to either continue business as usual or seek other loopholes.

Delaying tactics go hand in hand with a campaign of distraction. For many years, this has pivoted on fundamentally skewing broader understandings of who is truly to blame for the plastics crisis. Protracted campaigns by spurious environmental organisations (like Keep America Beautiful) and consumer brands (like Coca-Cola) have kept the finger of blame pointed firmly at consumers – or ‘litterbugs’ – distracting from the true responsibility of plastic producers for the plastics pollution crisis. Other distraction tactics include fixating

on sticking-plaster solutions, like beach clean-ups, or products made from marine plastic; promoting recycling without mandatory collection; claiming plastic products are more recyclable than they actually are; touting other single-use alternatives, such as bio-based, biodegradable or compostable plastics; pushing magical technological solutions, such as chemical recycling; funding studies engineered to support their point of view; and widely publicising their green credentials to consumers through well-funded media and advertising campaigns (see Annex for ‘An overview of individual FMCG companies’ voluntary commitments on plastic pollution’).

Finally, Big Plastic is constantly watching for chances to derail legislation before it sees the light of day. Many consumer brands and other companies in the plastics supply chain have direct lobbyists influencing governments around the world; their interests are also indirectly represented through numerous trade associations and other organisations established or funded to influence policy. In some cases, they even set up fake environmental groups, or fund existing groups as mouthpieces. Tactics identified include pushing pre-emptive laws to avoid future bans on plastic products, seeking exemptions to proposed laws for products argued to have better sustainability credentials, challenging the legality of implementation, weakening enforcement and even cynically misdirecting legislation by promoting measures that do not address the problem at source.

Putting the tactics into play

Spanning 15 countries and regions across five continents, and involving investigative journalists, researchers and experts across the world, our global investigation reveals how these tricks and tactics are used on the ground to prevent progressive legislation taking hold. This report is based on literature reviews, interviews, freedom of information (FOI) requests and on-the-ground investigations. The picture that emerges shows a well-organised network of organisations that lobby at every level, mobilising against even the smallest attempt to restrict or otherwise regulate plastic production. It also reveals the hypocrisy of large multinational corporations, like Coca-Cola, which recently proclaimed support for some legislation in the EU but still lobbies against it in Africa, China and the United States.

Key findings from the case studies

- In the **United States**, we reveal how the industry has successfully shifted the blame and responsibility for plastic pollution from the corporations to consumers and public authorities, all while promoting recycling as a convenient excuse to produce ever more plastic. We see how fake environmental groups and increasing numbers of new voluntary initiatives are used to distract from accountability, while legislation – such as plastic-bag bans and bottle bills – has been furiously fought against for years.
- In **Europe**, we investigated the industry's efforts at the EU level to weaken and delay the EU Plastics Strategy and the EU SUP Directive. We also zoomed into specific case studies in Europe, including Coca-Cola's tactics in attempting to nix deposit return schemes (DRS) in **Scotland**; efforts by retailers, beverage producers and producer-responsibility organisations to undermine DRS in **Austria, Spain** and the **Czech Republic**; and a missed opportunity in **France**, where reuse targets were introduced without the systems to deliver them at scale.
- In **Asia**, we looked at **China** and **Japan**. The former shook the world of waste in 2018 by banning plastic-waste imports, and has an appetite for big policy moves. This is contrasted by low corporate action, with the only focus on clean-ups and an array of commitments to switch to biodegradable and compostable alternatives. In Japan, despite citizens' very high commitment to separate collection, there is little awareness that most waste is actually incinerated or exported. Beyond Japan's borders, the government is also pushing problematic incineration technologies and bio-based, biodegradable and compostable plastics as part of its foreign aid 'solutions'.
- Elsewhere, we investigated **Uruguay**, where we see more brazen industry lobbying, and **Bolivia**, where we witness the knee-jerk industry reaction to an ambitious plastics ban. Finally, in **Kenya**, we find a country slowly suffocating in plastic waste pushed by companies looking to grow in Africa. We see how Coca-Cola – despite its recent U-turn in support of DRS in Europe – is still up to its old tricks of fighting against DRS in Kenya.

No more time to waste

As NGOs and investigative journalists have dug deeper and exposed their tricks, big corporations – and the network of organisations they support – have become ever more sophisticated in their deception. They hide behind nice-sounding commitments and put seemingly significant resources towards solutions – but, as this report shows, much of this is smoke and mirrors. The vast majority of their commitments focus on recyclability and recycling, but they fight against proven solutions that would actually deliver these at scale. Many materials – not just plastic – can be recycled (and reused), and the industry could switch to those types of packaging, in combination with deposit systems that would enable consumers to return them. Instead of embracing these solutions, the industry has increased the quantity of cheap flexible and multi-layered plastics (such as wraps and pouches) that are impossible to recycle, and is now trying to push unproven and harmful chemical recycling as a 'solution'. When chemical recycling inevitably fails, the world will have lost several more decades of potential meaningful action on plastic pollution.

The findings of this report are, without a doubt, just the tip of the iceberg. However, they give an insight into how the industry operates – quickly mobilising to stop any attempt to regulate or restrict the use of plastics, vigorously lobbying against legislation, greenwashing via commitments that focus on end-of-pipe solutions, and shifting responsibility on consumers.

Our plastic-clogged oceans and rivers alone bear witness to the categorical failure of years of voluntary approaches, and show the urgent need to introduce robust legislation and mandatory mechanisms to draw back the tide of plastic pollution. Mandatory collection, in combination with recycled-content targets, is a proven method to reduce plastic pollution and virgin-plastic production and to incentivise product redesign. DRS, in particular, has a track record of achievement – and is a low-hanging-fruit opportunity to help set countries on a path of greater reuse and circularity. Until companies up their game, call for mandatory collection and producer responsibility, and stop delaying and derailing legislation and distracting from their true accountability for the plastics crisis, they are doing no more than talking trash.



People queuing to
return their beverage
containers in Californian
recycling center
Credit: Les Sotone

Recommendations

For policymakers

This report has shown that voluntary initiatives and commitments by the industry do not work. For this reason, policymakers should adopt progressive legislation, built on the following key elements:

Separate collection

- Introduce legislation mandating at least 90% separate collection of plastic waste (while systems for plastic bottles and other beverage containers are already well established, this should go beyond beverage containers to look at other types of packaging), and acknowledge that mandatory deposit return systems are the only proven and effective way to achieve high levels of collection and litter reduction.

Reuse policy

- Introduce reuse targets and other supportive policy mechanisms (such as differentiated deposits for refillables), built into policies from the outset - and, in doing so, acknowledge that plastics and other materials cannot be reused at a significant scale without at least 90% mandatory collection and deposit return systems.

Recycled content

- Implement minimum recycled-content targets in the production of packaging and containers of at least 50% for beverage containers and at least 30% for other items, as a starting point. This creates a market for effective plastic recycling, and maintains plastic in a closed loop without downcycling the material.
- Address the issue of hazardous chemicals, and ensure companies design products from the start that can be recycled in a healthy closed loop. For example, at the EU level, end exemptions for chemicals in recycled materials and regulate chemical groups (rather than individual chemicals) to avoid regrettable substitution.

The huge human-health and environmental ramifications of open waste burning and overflowing dump sites in Kenya.

Credit: Clean-Up Kenya



Virgin-plastic tax

- Introduce a tax on virgin plastic, which must ensure the use of recycled plastic is incentivised over virgin plastic. This should be accompanied with a clear position on the use of alternative materials, such as bio-based, biodegradable and compostable plastic, with justifications for what is – and what is not – a good use of these materials.

Ban harmful materials and chemicals

- Introduce bans on unnecessary or harmful plastic materials, such as PVC and polystyrene, and on single-use products that frequently end up as litter in the environment and ocean.
- Ban toxic chemicals across all products, and in recycled materials as well as in virgin materials.
- Prioritise reusable alternatives and act to avoid regrettable substitutions – for example, replacing single-use plastic with other single-use materials, such as bio-based, biodegradable or compostable plastic – which do not fix pollution problems and may also lead to other environmental problems.

Extended producer responsibility

- Introduce well-designed Extended Producer Responsibility schemes with modulated fees, the polluter-pays principle and reduction targets, and include funding for better alternatives to single-use.
- This report has also shown, however, that many PROs in the EU (ARA in Austria, Ecoembes in Spain, etc.) are being abused to lobby against progressive legislation, defending the interests of plastic producers and large retailers. If this is the case, governments should pass the necessary reforms to address it.

Zero Waste Cities

- Support the Zero Waste Cities approach by creating and implementing systems that continuously intend to phase out waste – not by incinerating, landfilling or exporting it, but instead by not generating waste in the first place.

Global action

- Establish an intergovernmental negotiating committee at the United Nations Environment Assembly to negotiate a dedicated global agreement – a Convention on Plastic Pollution – that eliminates plastic discharges into the environment while also promoting a safe circular economy for plastics; one that addresses the full life cycle of plastics, from production and design to prevention and waste management.

Include affected communities

- When legislation is developed in countries with informal waste-collection sectors, it is important that it is context-specific and actively includes waste-picker communities in its development.

For companies

Support legislation

- Ensure commitments are more ambitious than existing, or proposed, legislation to address plastic pollution.
- Openly express support of – and call for – progressive legislation to address the plastic crisis, encourage peers to do the same and leave any industry initiatives that oppose, delay or undermine progressive legislation – including its implementation.

Transparency

- Be transparent about the company’s full plastic footprint (including products and packaging) and progress against targets

on plastic, setting out a holistic approach to discourage ‘virtue signalling’ with tokenistic gestures (e.g. products from ocean plastic).

- Ensure reporting includes achievements across all markets and brands, and is based on independently verified data.

Reduction

- Commit to meaningful measures that would lead to a significant reduction in single-use plastics and other single-use materials. These measures need to be specific, measurable, time-bound and independently verified, and should include support for reuse, redesign of products and effective recycling.
- Ensure transparency in reporting progress on the number of units.

Clarity on alternative materials

- Outline clear positions on the use of alternative materials, such as bio-based, bio-degradable and compostable plastic, with justifications for what is – and isn’t – a good use of these materials, including clear sustainability criteria that prevent deforestation or competition with food.
- Ensure such products are only commercialised in markets with the appropriate waste-management infrastructure to deal with them.

Consistency across markets

- Ensure commitments are enacted consistently across all markets in which the company (and its subsidiaries) operates; that is, ensure there is no contradiction between how a company acts on the issue of plastic pollution in one market compared to how it acts in another.

Robust voluntary commitments

- Ensure any voluntary initiative the company is part of adheres to the guidelines in Box 2.2 (Chapter 2) on what a good voluntary initiative looks like.

For consumers

It is not easy to solve this problem as a consumer. Because companies keep control over their packaging, they make it incredibly difficult to opt for plastic-free solutions or business models. An important step towards identifying where true accountability lies is recognising that, to a certain extent, we can only act as sustainably as the system allows us to. We firmly believe reducing plastics shouldn’t be solely the consumer’s responsibility, but rather part of a systemic change that is led by legislators and implemented by corporations. For this reason, we encourage individuals to be vocal in calling for legislation, holding corporations accountable, and amplifying the voices of those pushing for change.

We hope this report will help people to call out corporate hypocrisy where they see it, and to recognise when companies are trying to delay, distract and derail progress to remedy the crisis. Individual actions do help to send a signal – to both corporations and governments – that there is an appetite and an urgent need for change. So, if you do want to make changes as an individual, here are some recommendations on how to reduce your plastic footprint: <https://www.breakfreefromplastic.org/campaigns/goingforzerowaste/>

| Refill at the ‘Harm Less Store’ in Hornsey, UK
| Credit: David Mirzoeff



