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Ground-breaking report reveals hypocrisy of world's biggest plastic polluters

'Talking Trash' exposes how Big Plastic has obstructed and undermined proven legislative solutions to the crisis for decades

- A new investigative report has exposed Big Plastic as a well-organised network of organisations that fight against proven solutions to the plastic pollution crisis through similar tactics across the world.
- *Talking Trash* analysed voluntary commitments and group initiatives from the ten biggest plastic polluters and found that they are used to distract consumers and governments, enabling polluters to continue with business as usual.
- Report also reveals how corporations work behind the scenes to delay and derail legislation and ensure they can continue flooding the world with cheap, disposable plastic packaging.
- Plastic producers have even co-opted the Covid-19 pandemic and capitalised on people's fear to call for regulatory rollbacks and delays on environmental legislation.

A ground-breaking new report from The Changing Markets Foundation has revealed how, behind a veil of nice-sounding initiatives and commitments to address the plastics crisis – the plastics industry, consumer brands and retailers have obstructed and undermined proven legislative solutions to the crisis for decades.

Based on research and investigations in over 15 countries¹ across five continents, *Talking Trash: The Corporate Playbook of False Solutions* exposes how tactics to undermine legislation in individual countries are in fact part of a global approach by Big Plastic to ensure that the corporations most responsible for the plastic crisis evade true accountability for their pollution.

The failure of voluntary commitments

Talking Trash critically analysed voluntary commitments from the ten biggest plastic polluters (Coca-Cola, Colgate-Palmolive, Danone, Mars Incorporated, Mondelēz International, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Perfetti Van Melle, Procter & Gamble, and Unilever), who have a joint plastic footprint of almost 10 million tonnes per year – the equivalent of 30 times the weight of the Empire State Building.

It also investigated the most prominent group initiatives, such as the Alliance to End Plastic Waste and the New Plastics Economy Global Commitment by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, that these companies have signed up to.

It reveals how companies use these commitments to appear to be part of the solution, while at the same time using trade associations, producer responsibility organisations and even fake environmental groups to aggressively oppose and lobby to delay progressive legislation to tackle the plastics crisis.

¹ The main case studies analysed in the report focus on the United States, European Union, Scotland, France, Austria, Spain, Czech Republic, Japan, China, Kenya, Uruguay and Bolivia, while the report also briefly looks at the situation in the UK, Portugal and The Netherlands.

The problem with voluntary commitments and group initiatives is also a lack of ambition and a focus on end-of-pipe solutions, such as clean-ups, products' recyclability or biodegradability. Companies also tend to rely on problematic solutions, such as bio-based plastics or chemical recycling, which fail to address the root cause of the problem and may scale up other environmental problems in their wake.

Real solutions, such as mandatory collection of packaging, policies to increase reuse and phase out certain problematic plastic types or products, rarely feature in the voluntary approach and are fiercely fought against, if proposed by policy-makers.

Nusa Urbancic, Campaigns Director at the Changing Markets Foundation, said: *“This report exposes the two-faced hypocrisy of plastic polluters, which claim to be committed to solutions, but at the same time use a host of dirty tricks to ensure that they can continue pumping out cheap, disposable plastic, polluting the planet at a devastating rate.*

“Plastic is now pouring into the natural world at a rate of one garbage truck a minute, creating a crisis for wildlife, the climate and public health. The responsibility for this disaster lies with Big Plastic – including major household brands – which have lobbied against progressive legislation for decades, greenwashed their environmental credentials and blamed the public for littering, rather than assuming responsibility for their own actions.”

Case study: Coca-Cola

The Coca-Cola Company is the biggest plastic polluter in the world, with a plastic footprint of 2.9 million tonnes per year.

Among the initiatives analysed, The *Talking Trash* report found that the company is committed to 10 voluntary initiatives to solve plastic waste while at the same time is also a member of at least 7 trade associations that lobbied against deposit return systems or other legislation to regulate single-use plastic.

While, on the surface, Coca-Cola has committed to a 'World Without Waste', [the report shows](#) that over the last 30 years, it has continuously broken, delayed or shifted the goalposts on most of its impressive-sounding targets. In 1990, for example, the company committed to having 25% recycled content in their bottles, but 30 years later they are only at 10%.

At the same time, the company has fiercely opposed progressive legislation that would help them to achieve these commitments, from deposit return systems (DRS) to redesign obligations.

Only in 2017, following the leak of internal documents, did Coca-Cola finally make a U-turn in its opposition to DRS in Scotland. Nevertheless, this report finds that it is still lobbying against similar legislation in Kenya, the Chinese province of Hainan, and the US state of Georgia.

The report finds that other leading brands, including Nestlé, PepsiCo and P&G, have also failed to meet their voluntary commitments or shifted the goalposts. However, even if these commitments were to be realised, they would still not be ambitious enough to make a dent in the plastic crisis.

Big Plastic lobbying exposed

The report reveals that Big Plastic is a well-organised and interconnected global network of organisations that lobby at every level to fight against proven solutions to solve the plastics

crisis, which would require them to fully step up their responsibility and take on the true costs of plastic pollution.

Instead, they use distraction tactics which are designed to make people think real change is happening or that responsibility for the problem lies elsewhere.

One of the key tactics has been to saddle 'litterbug' consumers with most of the blame – and public authorities with most of the cost – for a waste problem created by these corporations.

Another major tactic has also been focusing on recycling, funding education campaigns for consumers, while the industry keeps producing plastic that is very difficult, if not impossible to recycle, and opposes other legislative solutions, such as deposit return systems that would drive mandatory collection of packaging.

Capitalising on the COVID-19 crisis

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 and argue the case for single-use plastic. In many cases they have succeeded. For example, many US states have suspended plastic bag bans and many companies have opted for single-use plastic bags and cutlery, banning or restricting reusables.

Natalie Fee, Founder of City to Sea, which is supporting the campaign said: *"This report is a damning exposé of the tactics employed by the plastics industry and shines a welcome light on the shadowy world of corporate lobbying.*

"For too long the true cost of plastic production has been externalised, meaning plastic producers continue to get away with ecocide while waste management companies, consumers and marginalised communities around the world are left to deal with millions of tonnes of toxic plastic waste.

"This report gives us further evidence that the real battle lies not just in changing the public's attitude towards single-use plastic, but in highlighting the truth behind vested corporate interests and how the industry actively undermines attempts to tackle the ecological crisis we face."

A tidal wave of plastic

The plastic pollution crisis is a deeply interconnected climate crisis, a biodiversity crisis and a public health crisis all combined. Plastic is pouring out into the natural world at a rate of 8 million tonnes a year, or one garbage truck per minute, and production has skyrocketed, with half of all plastics ever made having been produced since 2005. Production is expected to double again in the next 10 –15 years.

Plastic saturates almost every surface of the planet – from the deepest abysses to the highest mountains and remotest islands – causing an unprecedented crisis for wildlife. Images of animals choked by plastic and mountains of plastic waste are published daily. Just as insidious are the plastic particles we cannot see that are entering our food chain and our bodies with yet-unknown health consequences.

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. Disposal of plastics through incineration and backyard burning also contributes to climate change and creates a toxic fallout undermining human and planetary health.

Recommendations

Plastic pollution is unprecedentedly problematic and its instigators have evaded real accountability for decades. This report shows we need urgent and drastic legislative action to bring this crisis under control:

- Introduce legislation mandating at least 90% separate collection of plastic waste and acknowledge that mandatory deposit return systems are the only proven and effective way to achieve high levels of collection and litter reduction.
- Introduce reuse targets and other supportive policy mechanisms to encourage greater rates of reuse and refill.
- Implement minimum recycled-content targets, as this creates a market for effective plastic recycling, and maintains plastic in a closed loop without downcycling the material.

Nusa Urbancic, Campaigns Director at the Changing Markets Foundation, continued:

“The voluntary initiatives and commitments by the industry have failed. Policymakers should look past the industry smokescreen and adopt proven, progressive legislation globally to create the systemic change that this crisis so urgently needs.”

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Notes to Editors

About Changing Markets Foundation

The Changing Markets Foundation partners with NGOs on market-focused campaigns. Its mission is to expose irresponsible corporate practices and drive change towards a more sustainable economy.

www.changingmarkets.org

www.talking-trash.com