

There's a Lot Riding on the Global Plastics Treaty

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By Jonathon Porritt

On Friday 2nd June, in Paris, 170 nations signed up to an agreement to draft a Global Plastics Treaty by the end of 2024. This is a positive step on our journey to tackle plastic pollution.

But don't hold your breath. The meaningful nature of the treaty is under threat. The fossil fuel and petrochemical industries were all over the conference in Paris, doing everything they could to slow things down and talk up the benefits of doing things voluntarily. At least we are forewarned this time round, given how well that playbook has worked for them in undermining 30 years of climate negotiations. And forewarned is forearmed.

Part of what this industry is pushing for is simply more recycling. The fact that something is theoretically 'recyclable' though does not mean it gets recycled. In fact, less than 9% of plastic waste globally has been recycled. And when it is, that can cause even more problems as it can increase the toxicity of plastic, on account of the thousands of chemicals being used in plastic manufacturing today.

Then there is mechanical recycling (when plastic waste is chopped up into tiny pieces to be reconstituted into new plastic products) where at least 10% of the volume is released as microplastics. Microplastics and nanoplastics get literally everywhere. Not only have they been found in ice-cores in the

Arctic and Antarctic, on top of the highest mountains and at the bottom of the deepest oceans, recent studies have found them in our blood, our brains, our lungs, in mothers' milk and even passing to unborn children through the placenta.

Recycling also can perpetuate the core problem – namely, the excessive and unnecessary use of plastics in society, particularly in packaging. We don't however need to demonise all plastics in society – or indeed all plastic recycling. As City to Sea, the organisation behind World Refill Day points out, we need to approach things very differently: firstly, by setting an absolute cap and reduction mechanism on virgin plastic production and then by scaling up reusable packaging.

According to the [Ellen MacArthur Foundation](#), reusable packaging models enable brands to build customer loyalty, optimise business operations, allow for product customisation, and still cut costs. It's estimated that at least 20% of plastic packaging could be replaced by reusable systems and this represents a massive \$10 billion business opportunity. Despite this, reusable packaging represents less than 2% of packaging on the market.

These alternatives work for business and most importantly for the planet. But they're a nightmare for the fossil fuel and chemical companies that make such vast profits out of promoting single-use plastics. As demand for oil begins to contract, and with an accelerating transition to Electric Vehicles and renewable energy, their dependence on plastics becomes ever more important to them. But they can now no longer deny the horrendous impact of their products on the environment and on the human body.

We must expect the Predatory Delayers' Playbook – to be more and more in evidence over the next 18 months: seeking to slow the process down; massively exaggerating the costs and complexity of a shift to reusables; and using their political and financial firepower to focus on the false solutions rather

than the system-transforming solutions now so urgently needed.

And this in turn will be a real test for the Fast Moving Consumer Goods companies like Coca-Cola, Nestle and Mars that have benefited hugely from the undoubted convenience and low cost of plastic packaging. They too will need to position themselves unambiguously on the right side of history as citizens the world over become more and more vocal, and effective, through action days like World Refill Day – in holding them to account.