

Plastic in European waters: a better water framework for EU sustainable development



Michela GIUFFRIDA

MEP (S&D Group) Vice-Chair of Intergroup on Social Issues

Water resources management is a key factor for the sustainable development of European society. When asked to list the five main environmental issues that Europeans are worried about, averaged results for the EU25 show that nearly half of the respondents are worried about water pollution (47%). The European Union is showing his ambition to make the transition towards a circular economy that could be able to deal with this issue. A crucial part of this fight consist of the societal and environmental challenges and practical issues relating to plastics.

Over 80% of marine pollution comes from land-based activities. From plastic bags to pesticides - most of the waste we produce on land eventually reaches the oceans, either through deliberate dumping or from run-off through drains and rivers. Every year 6.4 million tonnes of plastic, with all the toxins they contain, pose a threat to sea life and ecosystems. At the same time, the fishing industry accounts for 10% of marine debris. This has an economic and environmental cost. On a European scale, according to a study commissioned to Arcadis from the EU, the marine field costs 476.8 million euros a year (the total estimated cost for cleaning all EU beaches is €411.75 million).

In many parts of the world, sewage flows untreated, or under-treated, into the ocean - 80% of urban sewage discharged into the Mediterranean Sea is untreated. Coming from and

representing citizens of an island in the middle of the Mediterranean where economies relies upon marine resources, Sicily, I pay as much attention as possible to the outcome of this misconducts and bad practices. And current practices to tackle this challenge are focusing too much on end-of-pipe solutions (collection, sorting, processing).

Recently plastic litter has been reported not only in maritime environments, but also in fresh water including rivers and lakes. This is a clear indication that plastic waste is distributed in nature through many different mechanisms, many of which are not thoroughly understood.

Then it is clear that, while the SUP Directive is most welcomed, a more holistic approach as envisaged in the EU Plastic Strategy and in the EU Circular Economy Strategy is necessary in the long term to promote the needed fundamental changes. That is the reason why I wanted to add in the Committee on Agriculture's opinion, as shadow rapporteur, that certain single-use plastic products end up in the environment as a result of inappropriate disposal through sewers or other inappropriate release into the environment.

Following this perspective while tackling the issue, it is easily understandable that the problem should be addressed at source and should be solved by reducing non-degradable plastic waste entering the economy.

The starting point of this process lies in the information campaigns, voluntary actions and labelling for consumers that could increase general awareness and thus influence consumer behaviour.

Then there should be changes in product design and a switch to more sustainable plastics and substitutes for plastics. We should think of supporting measures for more than 50 000 SMEs in the plastics sector to develop alternative products to non-degradable disposable plastics, while facilitating the market entry of new alternative materials and alternative product designs through innovation programmes and investment support for process modification.

At the same time we should support the implementation of the polluter-pays principle, including for fishing gear. This goes hand-in-hand with the need to work on new solutions for environmentally safe plastic and fishing gear, including affordable biodegradable alternatives. Given the differences between Member States and organisation of their waste management, we need more flexibility on the most suitable methods for handling all non-recyclable plastics, while developing waste collection system that accepts any plastic waste produced during commercial activities at sea or collected in the maritime environment in order to prevent waste dumping offshore.

I wanted to focus on this peculiar feature of water resources sustainability because it is having a strong impact on the public debate, but we could easily mention other similar ongoing debates in the EU. For instance the Commission's proposals in response to the European Citizens' Initiative 'Right to Water' which aim at ensuring universal access to clean and healthy drinking water as an essential public service; or the Water Framework Directive, where it is essential the cooperation between local and regional authorities and water supply companies; or again the effective protection and restoration of carbon-rich soils as a key contribution to meeting the Paris goals through wetland restoration and wet agriculture, which should be systematically supported and promoted under CAP.

As legislators and key players in this water management, we need to act now with an holistic and consistent approach on a European scale.