



Modern-Day Imperialism in the Global Waste Trade

A Digital Toolkit Exploring The Intersections in Global Waste Trade

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About the Researcher



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introduction

Most people living in developed nations don't stop to think about the full waste stream process-- how many people know what happens to their plastic water bottle after they throw it into a recycling bin?

The global waste trade has severe environmental justice and public health implications for people across the world. The global waste trade is not a trade; Despite its name, it is not even a trade; it is an extractive process with imperial roots.

As an imperial nation, the United States outsources waste management to developing nations across the world to deal with our contaminated plastic recycling waste. Beyond the severe scientific environmental implications of marine life damage, soil degradation, and air pollution, there are also socio-political issues that arise from the global waste trade; these issues disproportionately affect the people, planet, and organisms living in developing nations.



Socio-political issues arise from the global waste trade; these issues disproportionately affect the people, planet, and organisms living in developing nations.

definitions

global waste trade: noun

the international trade of waste (ex: plastic, e-waste), often from developed nations to developing countries

developed nation noun

a country that has typically acted as the imperializer/colonizer or is currently one; a country that is often located in the Global North

developing nation noun

a country that has typically been or is currently being imperialized/colonized; a country that is often located in the Global South

waste imperialism/colonialism noun

the process of developed nations dominated developing nations by exporting their unwanted or toxic waste, leading to waste pollution

Overview of the Waste Process in the U.S.

The waste management process starts with just one consumer; an individual properly sorting their waste could mean the difference between actively contributing to new soil production to releasing methane in a landfill. Recycling waste, which typically includes hard plastics, cans or bottles, and glass, is sustainable when it is made into something new; otherwise, the plastic waste is simply dumped into landfills. Waste is typically collected on a municipal level and then sent to a material recovery facility (MRF) to be sorted. Afterward, the waste is prepared and sent to ports for international shipping, often to East Asia and Southeast Asia. This final stage of the waste process is commonly centered on in environmental justice dialogues -- Not-In-My-Backyard-ism (NIMBYism), wherein “rich countries get rid of their garbage from their backyards, and developing countries get money for treating and discarding this garbage for them” (Sembiring).



Nonrecyclables — mostly plastic bags — are removed at Waste Management’s recycling facility in Northeast Philadelphia, which opened in 2011. A two-alarm fire was reported at the facility on Sunday. Creative Commons License, Photo taken by the Philadelphia Inquirer

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The global plastic trade is built off of an imperialist mindset -- the only way countries in the Global South can develop is through reliance on Western countries.

Monetary reasons and colonial legacy systems of oppression essentially force these countries to accept the waste, despite the environmental and public health consequences.

Benedetta Cotta

from "What Goes around, Comes around? Access and Allocation Problems in Global North-South Waste Trade."

Colonial Legacy engrained in the Global Waste Trade

The global plastic trade is built off of an imperialist mindset -- the only way countries in the Global South can develop is through reliance on Western countries. Most "recyclable" plastic waste is shipped to predominantly East Asian and Southeast Asian countries such as China, Malaysia, and Thailand. Monetary reasons and colonial legacy systems of oppression essentially force these countries to accept the waste, despite the environmental and public health consequences (Cotta). As a whole, the minimal monetary compensation given to the developing countries does little to outweigh the damaging effects of plastic waste on the environment and people. The plastic waste these countries receive from the Global North is often heavily contaminated and can "neither be recovered nor [be] recycled," thus ending "up in landfills or incinerated in an environmentally unsound manner" (Cotta). Developed nations are "bullying" these smaller nations by using them as a dumping ground for unprocessed waste. It is unclear the extent to which this occurs, as many international deals are done behind closed doors, but it would not be surprising if economic and/or military power was used as leverage against the developing nations.



Waste management systems "account for approximately 25% of the plastic pollution that ends up at sea," which includes ocean dumping from freight ships as well as illegal dumping practices (Perez).

Plastic Waste Damaging Effects on Marine Ecosystems

The global waste trade has severe negative effects on marine life and biodiversity. Due to the high levels of contamination, the waste that countries import is full of soft plastics and mixed materials, both of which belong in the landfill. Waste management systems "account for approximately 25% of the plastic pollution that ends up at sea," which includes ocean dumping from freight ships as well as illegal dumping practices (Perez). Plastic waste is hazardous to marine life, such as fish, seabirds, and mammals, due to the lasting health effects it can have on these organisms if ingested.

Many coastal countries depend on marine life for economic growth and cultural reasons, and thus endangerment of marine life harms the livelihoods of the populations living there. Indigenous coastal communities are at the forefront of this damage, as they "consume 15 times more seafood per capita than people in other parts of the world" (Cooper).

Plastic Waste Deteriorating Soil Ecosystems

A large amount of mismanaged plastic waste from the global waste trade harms the soil and surrounding land, which are essential to a country and its people. Dumping of plastic waste can lead to high amounts of liquid and gas contamination in the soil, degrading ecosystems (Verma et al.). This mainly happens due to lower-standard waste management practices in tropical and subtropical countries, including burying or disposing of waste in "open fields, gardens, or landfills," resulting in "significant plastic waste accumulation in soils" (Karbalaeei et al.). Large amounts of plastic contamination in the soil can seep into groundwater and cause a large public health crisis.

This has happened at a municipal solid waste landfill in Mavallipura, Bangalore, India, and resulted in high concentrations of iron, zinc, and heavy metals in surrounding water bodies, making the groundwater "unsuitable for drinking purpose[s]" (Naveen et al.) Soil pollution also affects the agriculture sector, resulting in lower productivity, chemical-infested foods, and negative effects on farmworkers.

Plastic Waste and Increased Air Pollution

In addition to soil and marine pollution, scientific evidence points to severely increased air pollution from plastic waste and recycling centers. High levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and other pollution components are emitted by recycling workshops, “posing an adverse chronic health threat,” including a heightened risk of cancer (He et al). The high amounts of air pollution are more present in developing nations than in developed nations due to the accumulation of plastic waste— causing a worldwide public health crisis. This causes health concerns such as asthma and lung cancer to become more common in developing countries; these countries don’t typically have the existing healthcare infrastructure to take care of and hospitalize people, furthering the public health crises and environmental injustice.

Social Impacts of the Global Waste Trade in Developing Nations

The workers in developing nations are plagued by contaminated water, soil, and air, placing a disproportionately negative impact on the most disadvantaged and marginalized communities who don’t have the economic or political power to avoid close proximity to these waste dumps. In China, this burden falls upon senior citizens the most, who in their old ages, are forced to bend over and sort through waste produced in faraway places (Griffiths). In much of Southeast Asia, the burden falls upon young children, who leave school to earn money and subsequently diminish their social and economic mobility, as well as their overall lifespan (Dursin). The culture and traditions of communities across the world are negatively impacted by the excessive amount of plastic waste that accumulates on their land. As such, this socio-political effect serves as another facet of environmental injustice produced by the global waste trade.



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Waste handling site in Patayas, Manila. Photo by Global Environment Facility on Flickr

National Sword Policy and its Effects on the Global Waste Trade

China passed a policy in 2017 named National Sword that attempted to put a halt to the plastic trade system with the outside world (Center for EcoTechnology). This policy demanded an extremely low contamination rate, 0.5%, for the plastic waste it was receiving, which was a near-impossible rate for nations like the U.S. that had contamination rates magnitudes much higher at around 25% (Pyzyk). As a result, U.S. shipments of plastic recycling were sent back in the same cargo ships in which they were sent, now with a hefty fine attached. As of January 2021, China instituted a ban on importing any solid plastic waste citing the “substantial amounts of dirty waste or even hazardous wastes mixed in the solid waste” which has polluted the country’s environment (Tran et al).

Community Movements and Resistance Efforts

Global South communities have come together to resist the looming pressures of the global waste trade in a number of ways

- In Delhi, India, waste pickers and residents formed the Ghazipur Anti-Incinerator Committee to eliminate waste-to-energy incinerator project proposals and center policies around waste pickers.
- Belém’s informal waste-pickers mobilized and campaigned to successfully stop the reopening of a local waste disposal site.
- The Organization of Municipal Solid Waste Pickers (UCRUS in Spanish) lobbied to replace animal-drawn waste carts with motorcars, easing the job for waste-pickers in Montevideo, Uruguay.
- Cairo’s Zabbaleen (loosely translates to “garbage people”) efficiently and sustainability manages the city’s waste and recycling systems and have been advocating for better working and living conditions for years.

The Global Alliance of Waste Pickers is comprised of thousands of local waste picker organizations and aims to support local and informal waste industries by providing networking opportunities and resources.



All India Kabari Mazdoor Mahasangh (AIKMM) at the protest against the Ghazipur incinerator. Credit: AIKMM

Government and Global Policy Changes

Many of the Global South countries are following China's lead and implementing their own import ban:

- Thailand has temporarily banned plastic waste and is working towards a full ban within the next 5 years. Thailand has also fully banned electronic-waste.
- Malaysia's government announced plans to ban the import of plastic waste and has been regulating illegal processing plants.
- Vietnam plans to prohibit all plastic imports by 2025 and has reduced issuing of new licenses.
- India has just recently (July 2022) banned manufacturing, selling, and importing specific single-use plastic items

The Basel Convention was created by the UNEP in 1989 and is intended to govern the global hazardous and toxic waste trade. In 2021, this was expanded to include plastic (hazardous, mixed, and recycling) and ensured that only countries that had ratified the convention could trade plastic with each other. This dramatically shifted international waste governance by giving countries the responsibility to regulate waste and have a baseline for waste disposal.

[A running list of action on plastic pollution](#)

Conclusion

Developed nations have used the roots of white supremacy and imperial legacies to subjugate other nations to be their garbage dump for plastics, endangering marginalized populations and vital ecosystems. Colonial nations such as the U.S. need to end their domineering dependence on the Global South for waste management. Nevertheless, there are resistance movements thriving across the world, from local community actions to governmental policy changes that are re-centering the global waste trade around people.



E-waste is piled high at a dump site in Samut Prakan province, south of Bangkok.
Photograph: Florian Witulski/The Guardian

There's a lot of pressure to be a perfect environmentalist — to be entirely zero waste or to never use plastic. However, it's important to remember that this pressure often is a result of greenwashing and that corporations are the main polluters and need to be held accountable. Thus, there's no right way to be an environmentalist, every action you take counts.

Live a conscious waste life style:

- Here's a list of environmentally conscious actions you can take. Try challenging yourself to do a couple of them and increase frequency over time.
- If you have the infrastructure, properly sort your waste i.e. compost, recycling, landfill, and e-waste.
- Limit your plastic usage. Try swapping out plastic water bottles or cutlery for reusable ones, buy second-hand or in-bulk to reduce plastic packaging, and say no to unwanted offerings, even if they're free!
- Plan and pack ahead of time. If you know you're going shopping, bring a reusable bag or pack one in your vehicle. If you're going to be out the whole day, try packing a lunch and/or snacks from home instead of take out.
- Educate others about waste and encourage them to be more mindful of their plastic usage and disposal.

Take action in your local community

- Ask your landlord/city officials/building management, etc. to implement recycling and/or compost infrastructure where you live. In some places, it's actually required by law/contract!
- Run for local public office on sustainability platforms (or vote for those who do)!
- Research into how your municipality handles its waste and try to visit the local landfills, Materials Recovery Facilities (MRFs), or composting centers to get behind-the-scenes insight into the waste management process.

Action Steps

Discarded: Communities on the Frontlines of the Global Plastic Crisis

Global Waste Trade

- [The global waste trade has created “sacrifice zones” for health and the environment - the Fifth State](#)
- [Countries Tried to Curb Trade in Plastic Waste. The U.S. Is Shipping More - the New York Times](#)
- [Where does your plastic go? Global investigation reveals America's dirty secret - the Guardian](#)

Case Studies

- [Southeast Asia's Struggle Against the Plastic Waste Trade: A Policy Brief for ASEAN Member States - Greenpeace](#)
- [Toxic waste dumping in the Global South as a form of environmental racism: Evidence from the Gulf of Guinea - African Studies Research Paper](#)

Waste Imperialism

- [Waste Imperialism Article - Institute For Local Self Reliance \(ISRL\)](#)
- ['Waste colonialism': world grapples with west's unwanted plastic - the Guardian](#)
- [Waste colonialism - Discard Studies blog](#)

National Sword

- [Southeast Asia Doesn't Want to Be the World's Dumping Ground. Here's How Some Countries Are Pushing Back - Time](#)
- [The World's Recycling Is in Chaos. Here's What Has to Happen - Wired](#)
- [Piling Up: How China's Ban on Importing Waste Has Stalled Global Recycling - Yale360Environment](#)

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References

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