

Look beyond the European Plastic Pact and tackle the producers. Starting with Shell!

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Today, 15 European countries and 66 companies sign the European Plastic Pact that aims to reduce plastic production by at least 20% by 2025. Sounds tough. Just like the ban on plastic straws and cotton swabs. However, it's nothing compared to global plastic production. On the contrary, Big Oil, including Shell, invests billions in new plastic and does not get in the way. And it is precisely these companies that do not sign the pact. This makes the European Pact an initiative with which the European countries and companies can make a nice show, but it does not solve the problem.

The world is dying in plastic. And we now know that it takes centuries before plastic perishes. Microplastics are everywhere: in toothpaste, tea bags, in the ground, in our water, in our body. Plastic can be found even in areas that we thought were still untouched, such as Antarctica, the Himalayas, the bottoms of the deep sea. It is also expected that in the near future much more plastic will be produced: global plastic production is likely to increase by forty percent in ten years' time.

It is therefore a good thing that attention is given to the reduction of plastic. It is in itself hopeful that many companies and governments will sign the European Plastic Pact, even if they do so on a voluntary basis and there will be no sanctions if the targets are not met.

However, the most important players are missing at this party. One of the companies that have not signed the pact and are investing in plastic production is our own Shell. Shell is currently building a huge plastic factory in Pennsylvania in the United States. This factory will cost a sloppy 6 billion euros and will produce more than one and a half billion kilos of polyethylene annually starting this year. This is no less than 6.7 times the total annual amount of plastic packaging material collected from all 17 million Dutch people. This one Shell factory also has a permit to emit as much CO₂ as 480,000 cars a year.

Based on the short-term shareholder interest, it is perfectly logical that Shell is looking for new sales and profit opportunities now that the oil industry is coming under pressure from the rise of the electric car. But from the perspective of future generations, it is too cynical that Shell is seeking salvation in activities that are causing another environmental disaster: plastic production. The production of plastic is closely linked to the extraction of shale gas by means of 'fracking', which also has major ecological consequences. Moreover, the production of this type of cheap plastic stands in the way of investment in sustainable alternatives. In addition, plastic producers do not take any responsibility for the disposal of plastic waste.

Shell itself sees the solution mainly in better recycling. But that doesn't do much good. A few figures: about forty per cent of the plastic we use consists of 'single use' plastic. Worldwide, only nine per cent of the plastic produced so far is reused, the rest "disappears" into landfills or ends up in nature as litter. Recycling does not get off the ground because new plastic is much cheaper and also of much better quality. Packaging is supposed to be

recyclable, but after collection it is largely incinerated or dumped. Western countries knowingly export plastic waste to Asia and Africa, while many of these countries do not have a well-functioning waste disposal system. Much is collected in this way plastic into nature and waterways to eventually join the plastic soup in the oceans.

So far, the Dutch government has not appealed to Shell for its dominant role in this global drama. And is relying on self-regulation to bring about a change in behaviour. That is much and far too weak. Shell is a company governed by Dutch law, which means that the government does bear responsibility for the actions and omissions of these types of major polluters. Even though their footprint falls largely outside the Dutch borders.

We, a group of concerned scientists and experts, are very concerned about Shell's mega-investments in the plastics industry. We call on Shell and the banks, insurers and pension funds investing in Shell to stop their irresponsible investments in plastics, and call on Shell to sign the European Plastic Pact. We call on the Dutch government to formulate (and comply with) policy to prevent investments in the production of new plastic. And we call on Dutch citizens to raise their voices.

As long as companies like Shell are allowed to flood the world with new plastic unhindered and as long as mandatory measures are lacking, the European Plastic Pact, despite its good intentions, is nothing more than a sham.

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