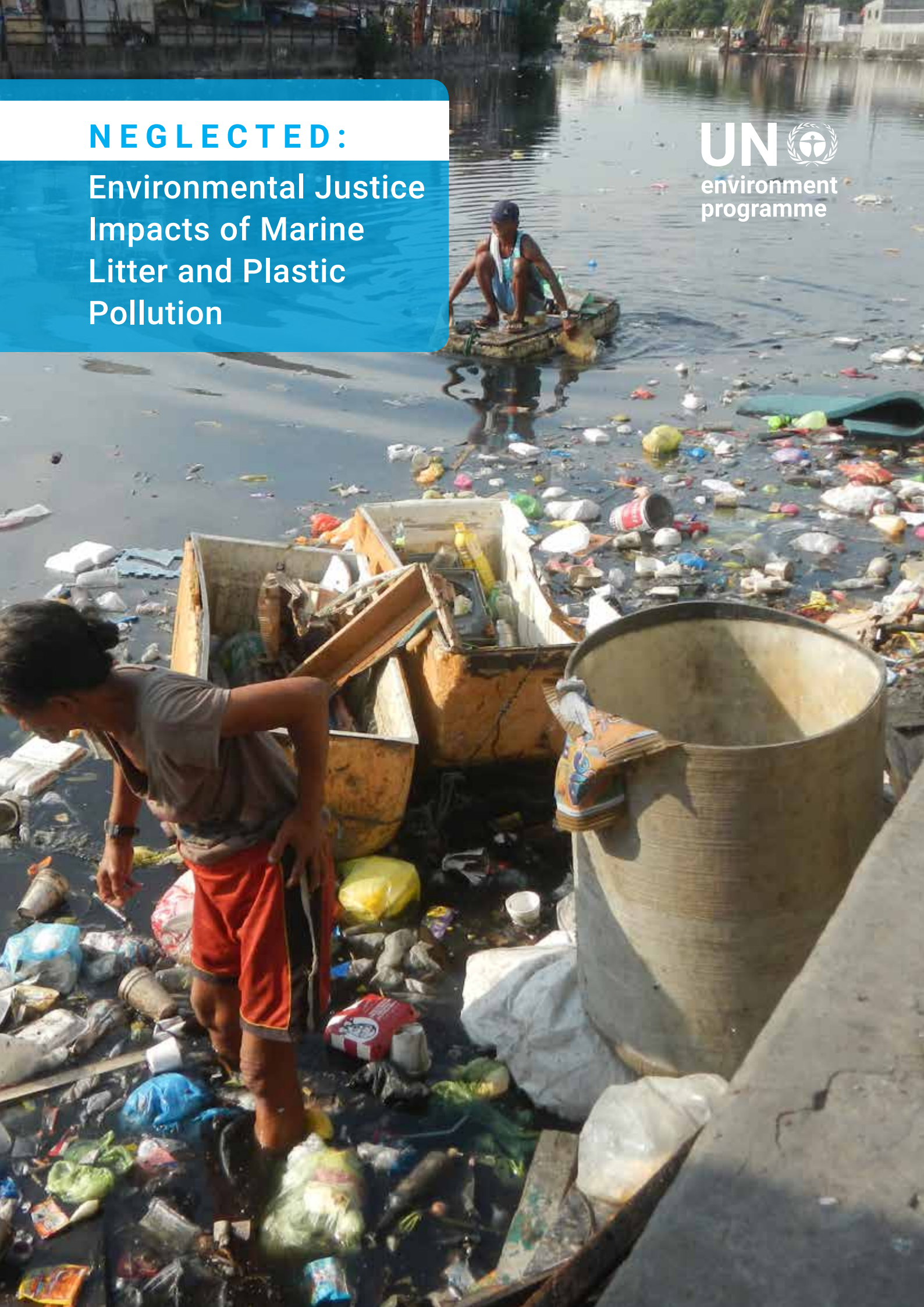


NEGLECTED:

Environmental Justice
Impacts of Marine
Litter and Plastic
Pollution

UN 
environment
programme



N E G L E C T E D :

Environmental Justice Impacts of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution

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Authors

Juliano Calil (Ph.D.), Senior Fellow at the Center for the Blue Economy, Adjunct Faculty at the

Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, Virtual Planet Technologies, LLC

Marce Gutiérrez-Graudiņš, Executive Director, Azul

Steffanie Munguía, Florida International University

Christopher Chin, Executive Director, The Center for Oceanic Awareness, Research, and Education (COARE)

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Law Division,
United Nations Environment Programme
P.O. BOX 30552, Nairobi, Kenya Tel: +254 20 7623365
Email: unep-law-director@un.org
www.unep.org

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COVID-19 AND PLASTIC

This report was completed a few months before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that brought massive economic disruptions around the globe with sharp declines in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and global trade.¹ This section of the report is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of the relationship between COVID-19 and plastic. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the authors of this report acknowledge that more recent literature has since been released. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the authors of this report stand in solidarity with millions of healthcare professionals keeping us safe, and partners both within and outside the UN system that are working around the clock to tackle the global pandemic. As the United Nations Secretary-General has noted, COVID-19 is more than a health crisis. It is a human crisis that is attacking societies at their core. The poor and marginalized are among those worst impacted by both COVID-19 and environmental harms, such as marine litter and plastic pollution, that directly and indirectly threaten the full and effective enjoyment of all human rights including the rights to life, water and sanitation, food, health, housing, culture, and development. Environmental harms disproportionately impact persons, groups and peoples already living in vulnerable situations – including women, children, the poor, migrants and internally displaced people, indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities. In addition, environmental harms impact environmental human rights defenders – “individuals and groups who, in their personal or professional capacity and in a peaceful manner, strive to protect and promote human rights relating to the environment, including water, air, land, flora and fauna.”² Crises such as COVID-19 add another layer of risk, through impacts on access to food and land, water and sanitation, livelihoods and the right to decent work, healthcare, and other basic necessities.

Recent publications related to COVID-19 include the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions’

guidance document on Environmentally Sound Management of Medical Waste, and the UN Special Rapporteur’s report “on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes,” presented to the Human Rights Council.^{3,4} This section of the report was completed in October 2020 when, at the time, not many peer-reviewed studies had been published on the impacts of the pandemic on plastics consumption, but the limited research conducted points to an increase in consumption and disposal of plastic and medical materials, and severe disruptions of already faulty recycling processes. These issues have been further accentuated by historically low oil prices that made virgin resins cheaper than recycled ones.⁵

Plastic Demand and Waste Increase During the Pandemic

There is great concern that the pandemic may reverse any progress on reducing consumption of single-use plastic. The pandemic resulted in a staggering increase in the use of disposable plastic products such as masks and face shields, gloves, hand sanitizer bottles, protective medical suits, test kits, food take out containers, delivery packaging, and many other products that have become commonplace.⁶ One study estimated that if the global population were to use the same number of masks and gloves used in Italy in the spring of 2020, 129 billion face masks and 65 billion gloves would be consumed monthly worldwide.⁷

Moreover, the pandemic has been viewed as an opportunity to drive consumption of single-use plastics. For instance, during the early weeks of the pandemic in March 2020, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services received a letter from the Plastics Industry Association requesting a public announcement from the Department praising promoting the health and safety benefits of single-use plastics and speaking out against bans

- 1 UNCTAD, ‘Post - COVID-19: Investment Promotion Agencies and the ‘New Normal’ (2020), https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/diaepcbinf2020d5_en.pdf, accessed 18 November 2020.
- 2 UN Human Rights Council, ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders’ (United Nations General Assembly 2016)
- 3 BRS Conventions, ‘COVID-19 Factsheet on Environmentally Sound Management of Medical Waste’ (2020).
- 4 Human Rights Council, ‘Duty to prevent exposure to the COVID-19 virus’ (United Nations General Assembly 2020)
- 5 Dunn K, “Black April:” IEA Warns of “Staggering” Demand Drop in Global Oil Markets’ (Fortune, 15 April 2020) <https://fortune.com/2020/04/15/black-april-oil-production-iea/>, accessed 18 November 2020.
- 6 Bengali S, ‘The COVID-19 Pandemic Is Unleashing a Tidal Wave of Plastic Waste’ (Los Angeles Times, 13 June 2020) <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-06-13/coronavirus-pandemic-plastic-waste-recycling>, accessed 18 November 2020.
- 7 Prata JC and others, ‘COVID-19 Pandemic Repercussions on the Use and Management of Plastics’ (2020) 54 Environmental Science & Technology 7760

of single-use plastic materials.⁸ The letter was sent a week after a peer-reviewed study was published demonstrating that the novel COVID-19 virus could survive on plastic surfaces for up to 72 hours, compared to up to 24 hours on cardboard surfaces,⁹ and in spite of the fact that health experts stated that disposable products present similar COVID-19-related health concerns as reusable ones.¹⁰

An increase in plastic waste, as well as in medical waste, is being observed worldwide.¹¹ Global sales of disposable facemasks may reach an estimated US\$166 billion in 2020, a 200-fold increase from 2019 numbers of US\$800 million.¹² In Singapore, during an eight-week lockdown, an additional 1,470 tons of plastic waste was generated from takeout packaging alone.¹³ In Wuhan, China, medical waste increased six-fold to 240 tons per day during the pandemic, overloading the city's incineration capacity of 49 tons per day.¹⁴ A single hospital in Jordan produced ten times more medical waste per day, with only 95 COVID-19 patients, than it normally produces.¹⁵ In Tehran, Iran, medical waste from hospitals increased between 17.6% and 61.9% during the early months of the pandemic (from 52-74 tons per day to 80-110 tons per day).¹⁶ Such increases of medical waste are resulting in a collapse of waste management chains globally. As of April 2020, 46% of recycling facilities in the UK had reduced or stopped their recycling services.¹⁷

Some analysts suggest that the reduction in use of some plastic materials may offset the increase in disposable plastic products,¹⁸ but there is not much publicly available evidence supporting such suggestions. Knock-on effects on human health, livelihood, and rights, which are likely to hit those poorest and marginalized without access to waste management or sanitation infrastructure, must be avoided. Effective and inclusive waste management, including medical, household, and other hazardous waste, is critical to minimize possible secondary impacts on health and the environment caused by the COVID-19 response.

Oil Prices at Historical Lows

The lockdowns have drastically reduced demand for oil, pushing its prices to historical lows.¹⁹ As a result, the cost to produce virgin plastics can be lower than recycled materials.²⁰ The lower cost of virgin plastics has a double negative effect, as it increases production of new plastic materials, and could make recycling facilities no longer economically viable.²¹ A recycling facility in Portugal has seen revenues drop up to 40% since the pandemic began. The facility produces recycled polyethylene, which is used to manufacture plastic bags and bottles.²²

These same effects are also felt in California, U.S. In an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19

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- 8 Schlegel I, 'How the Plastic Industry Is Exploiting Anxiety about COVID-19' (Greenpeace USA, 26 March 2020) <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/how-the-plastic-industry-is-exploiting-anxiety-about-covid-19/>, accessed 18 November 2020.
- 9 van Doremalen N and others, 'Aerosol and Surface Stability of SARS-CoV-2 as Compared with SARS-CoV-1' (2020) 382 New England Journal of Medicine 1564.
- 10 'Health Expert Statement Addressing Safety of Reusables and COVID-19' (Greenpeace, 22 June 2020) https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Health-Expert-Statement_Final.pdf, accessed 18 November 2020.
- 11 'Growing Plastic Pollution in Wake of COVID-19: How Trade Policy Can Help' (UNCTAD, 27 July 2020) <https://unctad.org/news/growing-plastic-pollution-wake-covid-19-how-trade-policy-can-help>, accessed 18 November 2020.
- 12 Bengali S, 'The COVID-19 Pandemic Is Unleashing a Tidal Wave of Plastic Waste' (Los Angeles Times, 13 June 2020) <https://www.latimes.com/>

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