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The fight against plastic pollution has only just begun

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When on holiday on the beaches of Italy, Spain, or Sweden, we often encounter a number of plastic items in the sand or in the water. Within the European Union, up to half a million ton of plastic waste ends up in the oceans every year. That corresponds to 66,000 garbage trucks dumping their plastic waste in the oceans every year, rather than at the recycling stations. EU countries are now fighting to end this.

On December 19th 2018, the EU Parliament and Council reached a provisional agreement on the Single Use Plastic Directive. The aim is to fight plastic pollution in the oceans and on our beaches.

The Directive seeks to limit the production and use of the ten single-use plastic items that are most often found on European beaches and shores, such as cups, cutlery, cotton bud sticks, plates, and straws. Together these categories of single use items are estimated to account for 43% of marine litter. In addition, the Directive also includes provisions on fishing gear, which accounts for another 27% of marine litter.

In the cases where there are readily available alternatives the single use plastic items will be banned. In other cases, the focus will be on reducing the use of the items, improving their design and labelling schemes, and improving waste management.

There are two things which characterize the legislative process leading up to this Directive: speed and support. It was only during the past three to four years that marine plastic litter became a subject of strong public interest in the EU. The Directive was proposed by the European Commission in May 2018, and thus debated and approved in just over six months – a process that can normally take several years. When it comes to support, there has been an almost unprecedented level of consensus between the Commission, Parliament and Council positions on the Directive. Moreover, significant public pressure on the topic has also helped speed things up.

Of course, there have also been conflicts. In particular the provisions on Extended Producer Responsibility, which make producers partially responsible for plastic waste collection and management schemes, have been subject to resistance from parts of the industry. Several multinational soft drink companies have lobbied against the proposal that bottle caps must be attached to the bottle to limit the number of lost bottle caps. The conflict around the Directive will likely increase as it reaches the implementation stage in the member states, and some provisions risk being watered down.

The Directive is the first large regulatory package to be approved following the Plastic Strategy that was announced by the European Commission in January 2018. The Danish government also recently published a national plastic strategy.

The European Plastic Strategy does not have regulatory powers in itself, but is intended as a communication that explains the Commission's views on the plastic challenges and solutions. The strategy contains four overarching goals:

- Improving the economics and quality of plastics recycling.
- Curbing plastic waste and littering.
- Driving innovation and investment towards circular solutions.
- Harnessing global action.

The Single Use Directive is thus closely connected to the second goal on reducing plastic littering, in particular marine plastic pollution.

If we consider the plastic system in its entirety, the Single Use Directive does not offer radical change or a completely new vision. European policy-makers are picking low-hanging fruits to achieve fast results and score political points. Single use plastic items represent a limited quantity of the overall plastic production. The Directive will undoubtedly improve the situation in European marine environments, but on a global level, European marine plastic pollution accounts for only ca. 1% of the total problem.

However, European companies do produce a significant number of the plastic products that end up as marine plastic pollution in other parts of the world. One could hope that the Directive could force changes to the design of items such as bottle caps, cigarette buds, or cotton buds that would have ramifications outside the EU. It is however doubtful.

It is therefore not within the text of the new Directive that we get the blueprints for a future sustainable plastic industry. It is a start, but it will take much more comprehensive transition efforts than banning balloon sticks. However, the Directive does provide clear evidence that the fight against plastic pollution receives significant support from public authorities, decision makers, and parts of the industry.

The world's plastic production is increasing at a rampant speed with significant investments already made to expand plastic production from fossil feedstocks. Global plastic production is expected to double within the next 20 years. At the same time CO₂ emissions and plastic pollution needs to be substantially reduced. It is difficult to see how these two facts can be reconciled. Many countries do not have waste management systems and even the best systems will have a hard time keeping up if we do not make comprehensive changes to the plastic sector – not least to our (over)-consumption and use of fossil feedstocks.

The European Union and the Danish government have taken the first steps, but there is a long way to go if we are to win the fight against plastic pollution and create a more sustainable plastic system.

This fight has only just begun.