

The blame falls on the consumer, but who controls plastic production?



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Resumo: The "Stop the Plastic Tsunami" campaign supports Bill 2524/2022, which proposes regulations on plastic production in Brazil. Scientific evidence indicates that plastic is omnipresent in the environment and is being incorporated into the human body, with potential health risks. Given the growing global production and socioenvironmental impact of plastics, the campaign emphasizes the importance of mobilizing society and the need for leadership among public authorities in establishing consistent legislation to mitigate plastic pollution and promote sustainable alternatives.

What if we were able, today, to tackle the serious crisis of plastic pollution and build a cleaner country, with a healthy future for our own and upcoming generations? This is the commitment pledged by the "Stop the Plastic Tsunami" campaign, a collective effort of over 80 civil society organizations. The initiative seeks to engage Brazil in supporting Bill 2524/2022, which proposes measures for the implementation of a Circular Economy for Plastics¹. Over 84 thousand citizens have already signed the petition in defense of the Bill that is now being processed by the Brazilian Senate's Economic Affairs Committee.

This collective brings together organizations from all over the country, with diverse backgrounds – from ocean protection to public health, from artisanal fishing movements to recyclable waste pickers, from environmental NGOs to scout associations, from urban organizations to surfing groups. This diversity reflects what plastic pollution has become: a problem without borders. In the 1970s, the first studies identified it as a disturbance in the marine environment. Today, five decades later, science confirms its ubiquitous nature, even in places that were previously unimaginable.

1. We invite our readers to learn more about the campaign on its official website: www.pareotsu-namideplastico.org

A warning of concern, based on scientific investigations into the presence of plastic in our bodies, is that we, humans, are already flooded by plastic particles. Several recent studies have confirmed the presence of this material in vital organs, such as the heart, lungs, liver, and placenta, among others. In 2024, a study led by Brazilian scientists revealed a shocking fact: not even the brain – the most protected organ in our body – is immune to the presence of microplastics (Amato-Lourenço et al., 2024). Therefore, plastic pollution is no longer solely an environmental problem, it has also become a public health issue.

It is urgent that some form of effective solution be taken to reverse this situation. For decades, that responsibility for this pollution was placed on the consumer. Thus, there is a well-established shared idea that the solution to the problem relies on every citizen correctly sorting their own waste, which would then go on to be recycled. It would be great if this were true, but unfortunately this is far from reality. Between 1950 and 2017, only 9% of all plastic produced globally was recycled. In turn, production continues at an accelerated pace and is projected to triple by 2050.

Since the 2000s, the global production of single-use plastics has doubled. These products are designed for quick use and immediate disposal, with a very short working life and little to no viability for reuse or recycling. Brazil currently produces 500 billion single-use plastic items every year – including bags, cups, cutlery, and packaging in general (Iwanick; Zamboni, 2020). As a result, our country is the eight largest global plastics polluter, impacting our oceans annually with nearly 1.3 million tons of plastic waste (Magno, 2024), which represents 8% of the global volume of plastics that reaches the sea worldwide.

We have become a society immersed in plastic. We drink from plastic bottles, with plastic caps, and plastic straws. We carry the plastic-wrapped things we buy inside other plastic bags. Our hygiene and cleaning products are also packaged in plastic and even wooden toothpicks are now often individually packaged in plastic.

Behind this are the choices made within a production model that favors plastic: large investments are still made on items that are quickly used and immediately discarded, many of which are not even recyclable. Bill 2524/2022, supported by the “Stop the Plastic Tsunami” campaign, reinforces that we need and can make smarter choices in the production of plastic items, ensuring that everything produced in the country is in fact recyclable, suitable for reuse or demonstrably compostable. The first step proposed by this initiative is to “turn off the tap” on the production of these problematic disposable items and establish a deadline for the industry to adapt for discontinuing production.

This type of regulation is already a reality in several countries – which are quite different in terms of social and economic standpoints – such as Chile, Canada, Gana, Nigeria, and member states of the European Union, to name just a few. The text of the Bill also proposed the inclusion of recyclable waste pickers in a Payment for Environmental

Services Program, in recognition of the environmental service they provide to society. This underscores recycling as an important part of the solution and a relevant economic activity in our country – but, on its own, cannot turn the tide on this growing pollution.

In addition to plastic production itself, it is important to remember that part of this equation is represented by the major users of plastics – and, consequently, major polluters. The Break Free from Plastic movement, which audits the most polluting corporations based on waste found in the ocean, continues to reveal the same international companies at the top of the ranking. Coca-Cola, which in the last ranking, released for the year 2023, led this audit for the sixth consecutive year, has recently abandoned its sustainability goals and global commitments to reduce plastic use and increase reuse (Oceana, 2024).

Pollution is also a problem that worsens the vulnerability of some populations. The report *Neglected – Environmental Justice Impacts of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*, published in 2021 by the United Nations (UN), analyzed a series of case studies worldwide highlighting some of these serious problems. This included deforestation, forced removal of communities for oil extraction, contamination of drinking water by fracking fluids, health issues in communities near refineries, and occupational hazards among recyclable waste pickers. The report emphasizes the importance of giving visibility to the people affected and including them in decision-making processes to find solutions to plastic pollution.

But if there is no lack of scientific evidence to attest to the seriousness of the problem, also considered by the UN as the second greatest environmental threat to the planet, and if we already have enough information to make smarter choices, what is still needed to solve the problem?

The measures currently in place in Brazil to deal with plastic pollution still address the problem in a tangential and distant way, always focused on its symptoms, placing waste management as the central element, and not targeting the root of the matter: the production model. And this is exactly where the action of the government is lacking.

It is not surprising that the plastics industry continues to shy away from their responsibility, outsourcing the solution to the consumer and recycling – but the lack of attention from the government demands our attention. As it is oil-reliant, this industry acts in a very similar way regarding the climate emergency, resisting changing their forms of production and even discussing solutions, maintaining a model that produces more and more plastic that quickly becomes waste and causes immense socioenvironmental problems. Given this lack of any reliable commitment from this sector to the pillars of sustainability, it is up to the government to fulfill its role and guarantee collective well-being and public health.

In just over fifty years, since disposable items became a constant presence in our lives, the planet has been flooded with plastic. It is up to current generations to use all their creative potential, their civic actions, and responsibility not only in sorting their waste, but also to take a stand and call on the government to fulfill its obligation to lead the country towards a future in which this pollution is no longer an established and omnipresent catastrophe. This is the invitation that the “Stop the Plastic Tsunami” campaign extends to all of society: to demand that Brazil adopt stricter and more effective regulations to contain this crisis. The future depends on the choices we make today – and change starts now.

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