Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME)

Position Paper on the Problem of the Marine Plastics

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1. Introduction

Plastic wastes and microplastics in the marine environment have been a growing problem globally and in the ROPME Sea Area, as well. Available information and figures about this problem in the region are alarming. In Dubai for example, waste generation ratio per visitor varied between 250 g and 1.08 kg. Dubai city generates alone about 8,200 tonnes of municipal solid waste per day i.e 15% above the global average, according to a study released in 2016. Large part of these wastes are eventually delivered or ending up to the coasts and the sea.

Dumping of plastics also represents a sensitive issue in the whole region, with the capacity to cause social unrest, as in the case of Lebanon where a mountain of unrecycled plastic washed ashore last year added to its festering crisis over uncollected rubbish.

Efforts to combat this problem in the region mostly rely on implementation of ROPME protocols by Member States and independent initiatives from environmental groups and NGOs. With the exception of Sultanate of Oman, there is no any other country in the region that has joined UNEP's international campaign namely, "CleanSeas".

In view of this, ROPME started to act and taken some steps towards coordination of relevant regional efforts and adoption of a reliable action plan for combating the problem of marine litter and plastic wastes.

2. Major barriers to combatting marine litter and microplastics

These can be listed as follows:

- Localization and discoordination of clean-up efforts
- Lack of assessment studies & research on the extent of the problem in the region
- High rate of consumption of plastics per individual and increased usage of single-use plastics
- Lack of recycling concept and reprocessing of plastic wastes into useful products
- Lack of standardization of the plastic products and other requirements of recycling.

3. Potential national, regional and international response options and associated environmental, social and economic cost

- Organizing beach and underwater clean-up campaigns
- Investment in waste management and recycling technologies
- Issuing necessary bylaws that limit or decrease of single use plastics
- Creating incentives for multiple use of plastic products and encouraging consumers to cut down on single-use plastics.
- Increasing efforts aiming to raise awareness about the problem of marine plastics and the importance of keeping the seas clean of waste.
- Issuing guidelines and providing necessary facilities for segregation of recyclable plastic products and other debris and standardization of packing in order to make its recycling feasible.
- Expand the use of biodegradable alternatives or non-plastic material

4. Feasibility and effectiveness of above-mentioned different response options

An ideal response option would be through replication of the past situation of the globe whereby there was no plastic was being ending up to rivers and oceans.

However, since it is impossible to return to this situation, it is still possible to limit and decrease the use of plastics to the minimum. This target can be achieved through raising awareness about the problem of the marine plastics and their negative impacts on the coastal environment and marine creatures. It is also quite important to apply a nominal charge for the use of plastic bags in shops and taking necessary actions to cut-off use of single-use plastic. Several countries have implemented such a charge and effectively reduced the consumption of plastics. The UK experienced an 85% reduction in the number of plastic bags used when a 5p charge was introduced in October 2015.

Investing in recycling and reprocessing of plastic products would be very effective for reduction of marine plastics. According to a recent assessment study, only 8% of plastic wastes are currently being recycled regionally with the rest ending up either in landfill or the Sea. This percentage can be boosted through supporting recycling industry and encouraging regulators to standardize manufacturing of plastics and packing in order to ease their recycling.

5. Role of ROPME:

Information on the extent and consequences of marine plastics problem in the ROPME Sea Area is limited and sparse, but the available local studies and observations indicate that the marine litter generally and marine plastic debris in particular specifically represent an alarming problem and emerging issue in the region.

The magnitude of this problem and the ever-increasing attention to its environmental, social, and economic impacts have motivated ROPME to initiate necessary actions towards its combating. As a regional, intergovernmental organization, ROPME provides a good platform for Member States and concerned parties to work together towards finding common solutions for the problem of the marine litter.

In this respect, a regional workshop on marine plastics and marine litter, in general is planned to be organized in cooperation with UNEP's Global Programme of Action (GAP) for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities in September 2018. The main aim of this workshop is to identify priority actions to

address marine litter and microplastics in the region and to facilitate cooperation between stakeholders in order to stimulate the development of regional action plans and a special strategy for marine litters and plastics.

ROPME has also played a key role in the following Protocols in which all types of wastes including plastics are fully addressed:

- Protocol concerning Marine Pollution resulting from Exploration and Exploitation of the Continental Shelf (1989),
- Protocol for the Protection of the Marine Environment against Pollution from Land-Based Sources (1990),
- Protocol on the Control of Marine Trans-boundary Movements and Disposal of Hazardous Wastes and Other Wastes (1998)

Other relevant efforts include increase of public awareness about the marine debris and support of research studies aiming to scientifically address the extent of this problem in the region.