

Plastics: A Rights-Based Approach

explained

A [new report](#) from the UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights, Marcos Orellana, makes it clear that the entire life cycle of plastics from extraction to production through transport, use, and disposal poses a threat to the enjoyment of human rights. Whether it's toxic additives, incineration, or waste dumping, **plastics affect health, the environment, and the climate in ways that are often dangerous to human health and safety.**

“One of the greatest constraints to plastics joining the chemical-free circular economy is the toxic chemical additives they contain.”

Some people are especially vulnerable to the harms from plastics: Industrial workers and waste-pickers, children and future generations, women, persons of African descent, Indigenous Peoples, coastal communities, and those living in poverty are hurt first and worst by plastics. **Protecting their ability to enjoy human rights is essential.**

WHAT HUMAN RIGHTS ARE THREATENED BY PLASTICS?

- The right to life,
- The right to the highest attainable standard of health,
- The right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment,
- The right to housing,
- The right to water and sanitation,
- The right to adequate food,
- The right to equality and non-discrimination,
- The right to information,
- The right to participation, and
- The right to effective remedy.

Given the wide-ranging impacts, it is essential to understand and counteract misleading information about the plastics crisis and false solutions.

WHAT WOULD A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO SOLVING THE PLASTICS CRISIS LOOK LIKE?

- **Access to Information:** All people need to know what's in the plastics products they use daily and how the chemicals and additives that plastics contain will affect their health.
- **Participation in decision-making on policy:** When policies on plastics are discussed and implemented, affected people – especially Indigenous Peoples – must be part of that process.
- **Access to remedy:** If any part of the plastic life cycle harms anyone, companies must be made to repair those harms.
- **Prevention & precaution:** Plastics have to be redesigned to reduce known or unknown risks and harms. Potential solutions also should be assessed to make sure they uphold human rights.
- **Polluter pays:** If companies are causing harm through pollution, they should have to repair it. But risks and harms should first be prevented, so no rights are infringed to begin with.

WHAT CAN GOVERNMENTS DO?

Governments can:

- Recognize the threats to human rights from plastics.
- Adopt a rights-based approach to plastics policy,
- Reduce plastics production and consumption,
- End subsidies to plastics producers,
- Ban non-essential plastics, and
- Quickly negotiate a new global legally binding treaty on plastics.

WHAT CAN BUSINESSES DO?

Businesses can:

- Fully disclose the additives in plastic products,
- Eliminate all toxic additives,
- Stop generating hazardous emissions,
- Develop safe and circular delivery methods,
- When possible prioritize reuse systems, and
- Pay for the harms already done.

[Read more in the report](#)

For a detailed case study examining the human rights impacts of the fourth-largest plastics and petrochemicals producer, read CIEL's report: ["Formosa Plastics Group: A Serial Offender of Environmental and Human Rights"](#)