IDDRI

BLOG POST March 2nd 2023

Chemicals, waste and pollution: the birth of a new science/policy interface

Auteur

Lucien Chabason

Senior Advisor

Reading time: 5 min

Third dimension of the global environmental crisis, along with climate and biodiversity, pollution by chemicals and waste is to be addressed at the global level by an international platform at the science/policy interface under the aegis of the United Nations. The first meeting of the working group dedicated to the establishment of this platform was held a few weeks ago in Bangkok (Thailand); IDDRI was present and analyzes in this blog post the technical, scientific and (geo)political issues related to the emergence of this "chemical IPCC", a newcomer in international environmental governance.

Objectives and mandate of the future intergovernmental platform

The creation of an international science/policy platform "on chemicals, waste and pollution" was decided in principle at the fifth meeting of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) held in Nairobi in February-March 2022 (the negotiation of an international treaty on plastic pollution was launched at the same time). An Open-Ended

Working Group (OEWG) was established with a clear and detailed mandate on both the negotiation process and the issues to be addressed. The second part of the first meeting of the OEWG was held in Bangkok in late January/early February 2023.

The purpose of establishing this platform is to provide "support for action on chemicals, waste and pollution prevention" by:

- Conducting a forward-looking review to identify issues for policy-making and propose evidence-based solutions;
- Assessing current problems and potential solutions;
- Providing relevant information, identify gaps in scientific knowledge;
- Facilitating the exchange of information between countries and, in particular, with developing countries.

The Working Group must produce proposals on:

- The institutional structure of this panel, which should be "intergovernmental and independent", like the IPCC (climate) and IPBES (biodiversity);
- Its scope of competence;
- Its functions;
- Its relations with, in particular, multilateral agreements, relevant international organizations such as the WHO and the FAO and stakeholders such as industry and NGOs;
- The process of establishing the work program.

Other issues, such as the modalities for appointing experts, the procedures for adopting assessments, the secretariat, the budget and the rules of procedure must also be addressed.

During the Bangkok meeting, the States were able to share their vision of the objectives, the scope of competence and the functions of this new panel and their concerns, in particular with regard to efficient coordination with the existing institutions, which are particularly numerous in the field of chemicals.

The objectives of the future panel have been rewritten, but remain to be ratified. Its scope of competence has also been the subject of an initial examination. The four categories of activities abovementioned have been confirmed. They go somewhat beyond the functions of the IPCC and IPBES (which served as a reference), notably through the introduction of the theme "horizon scanning", which confers a foresight mission to this platform.

Research and capacities: expectations from developing countries

In addition to these activities, the Africa and GRULAC (Latin American and Caribbean countries) groups proposed that the platform contribute to capacity building as a fifth function in addition to those mentioned in the UNEA mandate. While the European Union proposes to limit the capacity-building functions to supporting the Platform's activities, the Africa and GRULAC groups develop a very ambitious vision of the Platform's missions in this area.

The issue of capacities and their unequal distribution is indeed legitimate insofar as there is a considerable gap between countries' resources in the field of scientific research. According to UNESCO, while average expenditure on research and development amounted to 2.63% of world GDP in 2020, it reached 0.27% for LDCs and 0.32% for sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 3.30% for North America. There are considerable differences between, for example, South Korea (4.81%) or Israel (5.44%) and countries like Myanmar (0.15%), Peru (0.17%) and even Russia (1.10%).

The number of researchers per million inhabitants, another indicator, gives an average of 178 for low-income countries compared with 4,689 for the group of high-income countries and 1,341 on average worldwide. It is also noted that, apart from Chinese universities, no university from developing countries is in the top 100 of the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities. The Sustainable Development Goal on research and development is thus certainly not on the way to being achieved.

This situation can only have consequences on developing countries' researchers contribution to the work of the platform for the production of evaluations1 . It is important that this dimension be taken into account in order to respect the criterion of geographical balance, even if it will take time to begin to bring together the scientific potential of one country with another in the scientific fields concerned. This subject can obviously not be the sole responsibility of the science/policy platforms. UNESCO is working on it with the support of funding agencies.

This capacity issue is among the many questions mentioned in the UNEA resolution that have already been addressed and that will be the subject of intersessional work in view of a new meeting planned for late 2023/early 2024.

The development of platforms at the risk of fragmentation

The success of science/policy platforms represents an undeniable step forward in global environmental governance, which, as we can see, remains alive at a time when political, strategic and commercial multilateralism is in trouble. The temptation is to continue along this path with possible platforms on the oceans or on pandemics. As a matter of fact, is it not a fundamental role of the United Nations to provide shared and legitimate information on the major problems of the planet and to contribute, in so doing, to a common approach to the scientific basis of public action?

However, there is a risk of fragmentation that must be carefully assessed. The link between climate and biodiversity and their respective platforms has already been raised with great concern. The need for integrated approaches is mentioned in the UNEA resolution; it has been recalled by many delegations and remains to be conceived, including in terms of governance.

The chemicals, waste and pollution platform touches on a set of complex issues and many questions remain to be answered, such as its precise scope of competence (all waste and pollution, or restrictions to waste and pollution related to chemicals, including plastics?) and its interface with the conventions and other processes dealing with chemicals, it being understood that its internal mode of operation should be similar to that of the IPCC and IPBES.

In any case, it is important to succeed in setting up this new platform that deals with crucial environmental and health issues. The political commitment seems to be there, and the impact of the work of the IPCC and IPBES has created an undeniable momentum that should lead to its implementation in 2024/2025.

1 See Andreas Baldi, Brigitte Palotas (2020). "How to diminish the geographical bias in IPBES and related science", Conservation Letters, November 11, 2020. See also Fatila Arkin (2018). « Peu de femmes dans la rédaction des rapports sur le climat », SciDev.Net, October 17, 2018.

BIODIVERSITÉ | GOUVERNANCE | NÉGOCIATIONS INTERNATIONALES | POLLUTION | PLASTIQUE