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A new international science-policy platform on chemicals and waste: what for?

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The negotiations on the role and modalities of an international science/policy platform "on chemicals, waste and pollution" started in February 2023 (IDDRI was present in Bangkok, [see related blog post](#)). While there are already several equivalent platforms on major environmental crises (the IPCC on climate change, the IPBES on biodiversity degradation, among others), was it necessary to embark on the creation of a new institution? This blog post highlights several specific questions raised by the interactions between, on the one hand, increasing knowledge on toxicological and eco-toxicological risks related to these pollutions, and, on the other hand, the improvement of the control of these risks and the policies of prevention and reduction at source. These specificities are fundamental to understand the implementation of this new dedicated platform

The choice of an *ad hoc* platform among several options

The decision by the UN General Assembly in February 2022 to establish a new platform follows a report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)¹ that assessed different options for strengthening the interface between scientific advances and improvements in international cooperation to monitor the impacts of chemicals and waste on ecosystems and human health. Of the three options considered (an independent platform; the institutionalization of the existing Global Chemicals Outlook and Global Waste Management Outlook processes; or subsidiary thematic expert groups with specialized task forces), the option of an independent platform along the lines of the IPCC or IPBES was chosen, and its specifications are now up for negotiation. In the UNEP report, this option was considered preferable as the other two options gave less visibility to the issue of chemicals, less ownership of the issues by governments, and less capacity to respond effectively to the demands made on research by policymakers.

This platform will have to provide "support for measures relating to chemicals, waste and pollution prevention", which corresponds to different functions ([see IDDRI's post on the Bangkok negotiations](#)). The first of these, "conducting a forward-looking review", seems essential in a field where the magnitude of what is not known about potential impacts (cocktail effects, long-term effects, for example) seems immense. This distinguishes this platform from other science/policy interfaces for which, although there is a warning function, prospective is not explicitly mentioned as a key function.

New challenges for research

The comparison with the IPCC is also useful to understand the usefulness of this platform regarding the second function: assessing current problems and possible solutions. Its mandate covers not only the establishment of risks and warnings on the impacts of pollution on ecosystems and human health (which is the equivalent of Groups 1 and 2 of the IPCC), and which seems to be the core concern today (chemical risk assessments), but also the question of solutions (which is the equivalent in the IPCC of Group 2 for adaptation and Group 3 for mitigation). The term "solutions" therefore raises difficult questions for scientific research, and it is not certain that they are currently addressed as such in existing publications.

For example, we can think of adaptation solutions, so that our societies and ecosystems can manage to coexist, at least for decades, with the chemical pollution already emitted into the environment, and whose persistence can be very long, as is the case with PFAS or eternal pollutants. Another question to which research has not yet paid much attention is that of the pathways for transforming our economic models and lifestyles to reduce the proliferation of plastics, waste and chemicals at source: what changes in business models in the various sectors concerned (chemicals, but also the various uses of chemicals in the production of goods or in our consumption patterns) would be compatible with falling below the planetary limit² on these "new entities", with a drastic reduction in the number and quantities of these new entities put on the market? What is the economic and social impact of these transition pathways? While decarbonisation pathways have been the subject of numerous scenarios and scientific works, increasingly interdisciplinary between economics and human and social sciences, drawn from the successive assessment reports of the IPCC's Group 3, the transition in terms of chemicals hardly seems to have been considered.

These questions illustrate the interest of such an interface, which will have to make use of its capacity to raise new questions that the scientific communities will be able to take up.

The critical question of public research capacities, especially in the South

Another conceptually important question is: what is it that differentiates the situation of chemical pollution from that of climate change or biodiversity, and which merit a specific design rather than the mere transposition of the operating methods of the IPCC or IPBES? One answer is obvious: the fact that the production of data and information on toxicological and eco-toxicological risks is essentially carried out by private actors in the sector, whereas the IPCC and IPBES rely essentially on public research.

This also resonates strongly with the fourth function envisaged, that of information exchange between countries of the North and the South. It is good news that the question of balancing expertise between scientists from the South and the North has been raised from the outset, as was the case for the design of the IPBES and as it appeared to be a key issue in the IPCC. We could even emphasize, by analogy with IPBES on the place of traditional knowledge, that this platform will have to study the question of the different types of knowledge that could legitimately feed it: those produced by private companies, those produced by civil society, how to guarantee their credibility and their integration into this interface when it is relevant, and under what conditions?

This is also particularly important in a field where research capacities are largely held by large multinational private companies established in Northern or emerging countries, and in the face of which public risk assessment capacities in the specific contexts of Southern countries are in many cases far too weak. Yet a form of symmetry or balance between public and private capacity seems to be a necessary condition for the credibility of the results of expert assessments. Even in the European Union, where public research capacities in toxicology and eco-toxicology are high compared to other regions of the world, the experience of the REACH regulation³ has shown the difficulties encountered in ensuring an assessment of chemical risks that allows for the implementation of sufficient policies and regulations, given the number and diversity of the products concerned.

Anticipating and organizing linkages with other platforms and with the various international agreements concerned

Finally, it will also be necessary to organize the ways in which this platform will link up with other platforms, and in particular with IPBES, with which overlapping competencies could emerge (on the impact of chemicals on biodiversity, for example). More broadly, it will also have to ensure that its assessments are relevant and well received by the various relevant conventions (CBD on biodiversity, and the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm chemical conventions), but also more broadly by bodies such as the WTO. Of course, this interface will never itself define standards that would apply directly in a country or in a forum such as the WTO, with respect to which it has no mandate, but it will necessarily have to act in awareness of the key role of pre-normative work that it will have to play.

¹ UNEP (2020). Assessment of options for strengthening the science policy interface at the international level for the sound management of chemicals and waste.

² <https://ikhapp.org/stories-and-research-brief/defining-the-risk-presented-by-novel-entities-how-plastic-and-chemicals-affect-earth-system-integrity/>

³ <https://echa.europa.eu/regulations/reach/legislation>