

CHAPTER 3 : OUTCOMES OF THE WORKSHOP « PLASTIC BAGS » ORGANISED BY BRUSSELS ENVIRONMENT (IBGE) AND ACR+MED

This workshop was organized in Brussels on the 25th of March 2013 and gathered representatives from more than 10 different countries from the southern Mediterranean area, the Balkan and Turkey. Its objective was to discuss what instruments exist to tackle and reduce the negative impact of plastic bags, to share experiences regarding plastic bags management and to formulate recommendations for the proper management of this waste stream.

The red line during the workshop was the conviction that plastic bags are a good case to implement the ACR+MED approach on “Integrated and Sustainable Management of Resources, Products and Waste”. This approach is based on the opinion that:

- actions need to be developed in conformity with the waste hierarchy (reduction at source, preparing for reuse, material recycling and composting, energy recovery and finally waste disposal);
- a mix of policy instruments is probably the most appropriate way to tackle the problem generated by the massive use of plastic bags;
- the specific local, regional or national socio-economic and cultural context needs to be taken into consideration;
- and that the issue needs to be studied taking into account all stakeholders involved.

In that respect, the first presentation, given by Bernard Merckx, representing Waste Free Oceans (WFO), an industry-led initiative with the aim of reducing floating marine debris on coastlines by 2020, was interesting. The plastics industry is starting up some actions for cleaning up floating marine debris and bring it back to land for recycling and sorting. To tackle the problem in the long term, they defend the idea that litter can be solved by adding value to end of life products and by increasing plastic packaging waste recycling.

In the next session, experiences from several countries from the South were presented :

- In Tunisia, the strategy developed at national level focuses on a voluntary agreement with the retail sector. In parallel, a technical and environmental study on alternatives to one-way plastic bags is conducted and an awareness action is organized (“national day without plastic bags”).
- In Catalonia (Spain), the urban waste management program 2007-2012 (PROGREMIC) sets prevention objectives, including for single-use plastic bags for which a consumption reduction target of 50% needs to be reached in 2012 (compared to 2007 values). This target should be achieved through the establishment of voluntary agreements, including measures such as consumer awareness-raising and environmental guidance campaigns to encourage the reuse and recycling of bags or commercial policies promoting environmentally-friendly behavior among consumers, such as charging the consumer the cost of the bag if used or discounting the cost of the bag if the consumer does not use it.
- In Malta, an Eco-tax on plastic bags was introduced in March 2009 in order to reduce the waste produced. The tax is only perceived on plastic bags with handles and unfortunately led to a shift to the use of bags without handles and paper carrier bags.
- Representatives from Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon also presented the situation in their countries, heavily suffering from the negative environmental impacts of plastic bags due to poor waste management and illegal landfill practices.

In the last session, Barbara Dewulf from Brussels Environment gave an overview of the different instruments that exist to tackle the use of plastic bags and classified them into 4 categories: education and information instruments, economic instruments and voluntary approaches, command and control instruments and management and planning instruments.

After these introductory presentations, participants debated during the afternoon workshops 2 specific items in relation with the issue of plastic bags : one group discussed what are successful awareness and clean-up campaigns and one other group studied what a successful text model (for legislation, for voluntary agreements, ...) should include.

NEXT STEPS for the work of the ACR+MED thematic working group:

- ACR+MED will publish the report “plastic bags – inventory of political instruments” on the website and will publish as a minimum once a year an update of the chapters regarding the southern Mediterranean area, the Balkan and Turkey.
- ACR+MED will put some examples of texts (legislation, voluntary agreements, ...) on its website.
- Members of ACR+MED will provide each other through the website with relevant information on awareness raising campaigns, on LCA-studies or other relevant information regarding the topic of plastic bags.
- ACR+MED will conduct an active surveillance of funding opportunities (for instance EU-funded calls for non-state actors, for CIUDAD bis, ...) for a project proposal enabling ACR+MED to work on a roadmap and a toolkit for local and regional authorities wanting to implement an action plan for tackling plastic bags. This project could include the participation of 3 to 4 local or regional authorities willing to implement this roadmap.
- The ACR+MED working group on priority waste streams will continue to put its main focus during the next coming months on the issue of plastic bags.
- ACR+MED will draft a response to the Public consultation on the Green Paper on Plastic Waste (deadline for response: 07.06.2013) based on the following recommendations:

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ACR+MED recommendations to local and regional authorities for solutions to tackle the use and the negative impacts of plastic bags:

1. ACR+MED recommends all actors involved to develop actions in respect with the waste hierarchy at minimum 5 levels : the highest priority is to develop actions for the reduction at source, next preparing for reuse, material recycling and composting, energy recovery and only as a last resort waste disposal ;
2. At short term, ACR+MED considers the voluntary approach the most feasible instrument at local/regional level. Such a voluntary agreement with the industry should as a minimum contain actions led by industry on the “3R” – reduce, reuse, recycle and should also contain concrete proposals for giving support to local and regional authorities for instance for organizing awareness campaigns ;
3. In the long run and in order to be able to decrease drastically the production and consumption of plastic bags and their improper end-of-life disposal , ACR+MED encourages local and regional authorities to foster a debate with their national authorities on the introduction of bans or taxes, as such mechanisms can only be implemented at a national

level. ACR+MED recommends national authorities to include representatives of local and regional authorities in any reflection on the introduction of such bans or taxes, as local and regional authorities are the first to bear the negative environmental impacts of plastic bags.

4. ACR+MED recommends that any introduction of a tax on plastic bags should be based on an assessment of the true environmental costs (including for local authorities) due to the production, distribution, disposal and littering of plastic bags and a recommendation on how to integrate these environmental costs into the price of plastic bags;
5. ACR+MED insists on the need for a transparent debate with all stakeholders on the proliferation and (ab-)use of biodegradability claims and truly believes that the issue of biodegradable plastics and bio-plastics needs much further investigation in order to secure resource conservation, to inform consumer correctly and to ensure their proper waste management;
6. ACR+MED adheres to the WFO recommendations to tackle littering and believes that local and regional authorities can be an important actor in the accomplishment of these recommendations:
 1. Improve and adapt plastics waste management facilities in urban/coastal areas and public/private beaches in order to avoid litter entering our waters
 2. Support beach clean ups, educational programmes and engage in Active and Passive “Fishing for Litter” programmes and support clean-up operations in currently polluted waters (rivers, seas and oceans)
 3. Improve waste water treatment and promote best practices to prevent micro and macro plastics and other sewage related debris entering our waters
 4. Increase harmonisation of freight reception facilities for waste in ports and develop innovative cleaning tools with a view to recovery and recycling
 5. Increase enforcement of environmental legislation and deploy appropriate economic instruments
 6. Promote resource efficiency through educational programmes and instigate collaboration between schools and universities on this issue
 7. Promote schemes which maximize the efficiency of waste collection and recycling
 8. Support public-private partnerships to create value out of the plastics waste streams
 9. Support appropriate legislative marine litter reduction targets to keep the movement going and ban plastic waste from landfills in Europe
 10. Raise awareness on marine litter by working together with all stakeholders, public and private partnerships
7. ACR+MED believes that it is important to recognize the high added value of the work done by networks of local and regional authorities in sharing experiences and good practices on the reduction and proper management of plastic bags and invites the European Commission to maintain financing opportunities for such networking activities through its decentralized cooperation programs.