



Brussels, 24 April 2020

**OPEN LETTER**

To the European Commission:  
President, Ms. Ursula von der Leyen  
Executive Vice President, Mr. Frans Timmermans  
Internal Market Commissioner, Mr. Thierry Breton  
Health & Food Safety Commissioner, Ms. Stella Kyriakides  
Environment Commissioner, Mr. Virginijus Sinkevičius

To the President of the European Council, Mr. Charles Michel

To the Heads of State and Government

To the President of the European Parliament, Mr. David Sassoli

**Subject: A post COVID-19 world - Enabling lasting solutions to the plastic pollution crisis for a more resilient economy**

Dear Ms. von der Leyen,  
Dear Mr. Timmermans  
Dear Mr. Breton, Dear Ms. Kyriakides, Dear Mr. Sinkevičius,  
Dear Mr. Michel,  
Dear Mr. Sassoli,  
Dear Heads of State and Government,

With over half of the world population on lockdown to bring the coronavirus pandemic under control, leaders have taken drastic measures in order to save lives. Will they also take bold steps to shape the post COVID-19 world and ensure the resilience of the planet and the promotion of essential economic activity that protects life?

**Capitalizing on fears arising from the pandemic, big industry is ruthlessly pushing false health messages to decision makers and to the public.** In the United States, the industry led initiative [Bag the Ban](#) is aggressively pushing back on bans of plastic bags across the country, while in Brussels, European plastic converters have been so bold as to [call on decision makers](#) to recast or postpone the single-use plastics Directive, both claiming that plastic is the go-to hygienic material.

These claims are scientifically unfounded. In fact, recently published studies<sup>1</sup> show that the virus can persist on plastic surfaces for up to four days, the longest among all tested materials. Plastic packaging, that is presented

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. van Doremalen, Mr. Bushmaker, and Mr. Morris, Aerosol and surface stability of SARS-CoV-2 as compared with SARS-CoV-1. *N Engl J Med.* 2020; (published online March 17.) [DOI:10.1056/NEJMc2004973](#)  
Alex W H Chin, Julie T S Chu, Mahen R A Perera, Kenrie P Y Hui, Hui-Ling Yen, Michael C W Chan, Malik Peiris, \*Leo L M Poon, Stability of SARS-CoV-2 in different environmental conditions. *The Lancet.* 2020; (published April 2, 2020) [DOI: 10.1016/S2666-5247\(20\)30003-3](#)

by the industry as safe and hygienic, contains many hazardous chemicals that migrate into the food and drinks they contain<sup>2</sup>, and ultimately end up in our bodies. Many of those chemicals are known to be endocrine disruptors by scientists, and can have adverse effects on health and lead to illnesses, making our immune system more fragile<sup>3</sup>.

**Single-use plastic and the disposable lifestyle, backed by the petrochemicals industry, is at the core of social injustices that COVID-19 is bringing to light.** The pandemic is thriving on our social and environmental fault lines. Where petrochemical plants are in operation, inhabitants suffer from disease and higher mortality rates, due to air, earth and water pollution. In Louisiana for example, [air quality is getting worse](#) - and where people suffer from the effects of pollution, they become more susceptible to the threats of infectious diseases like COVID-19. In highly industrialized places, like the Wuhan region in China, or in the northern parts of Italy, communities have borne the consequences of pollution and overconsumption with disease and the loss of loved ones. Yet petrochemicals companies, who are causing this dire situation for communities, are shamelessly using the pandemic to greenwash their image. Ineos, the leading producer of plastic in Europe, is loudly communicating about its production of hand sanitiser and getting a [media makeover](#) in the process.

In the Global South, where the Break Free From Plastic movement takes its roots, COVID-19 shines the spotlight on yet another form of injustice perpetuated by multinational companies, who are flooding markets with increasing amounts of disposable and throwaway plastic. Individuals and families on the frontlines of waste management now face the very high risk of exposure to the virus, with very little protection and support, as they go about performing the vital function of collecting and helping to manage the increasing amounts of waste generated in their cities. By continuing to churn out disposable plastics, industry is able to shift the burden of dealing with their polluting products to waste workers and local communities. This cannot be allowed to continue.

**COVID-19 is a mirror and magnifier of our existing problems. We must not give in to the demands of the plastic industry and have communities suffer around the globe. This isolation period is a moment to rethink and reshape our ways of living and consuming, in order to implement systemic change for the good of communities and the environment.**

For example, Farm to Fork initiatives can enable short supply chains for more robust ecosystems and resilient food production and distribution. The food supply chain has been stretched so much that food is flown from one corner of the earth to the other, with a huge carbon footprint, lots of over-packaging, and use of chemicals at every step. Locally produced goods on the other hand, have a lower carbon footprint, can more easily be part of reuse and repair systems, thereby encouraging a circular economy and new networks of specialized SMEs.

The EU and member states must encourage investment in businesses that are [redesigning products and systems](#), and building a more resilient economy and environment. New zero waste business models will create new local jobs, while resolving the single-use plastic issue. There is a yet untapped market for new services related to reuse and refill, from food and drinks to home cleaning products and care products.

For waste prevention to prevail, reuse systems which are safe for both customers and workers, must become the norm. The EU and member states must invest in the development and scaling up of the required infrastructure and systems, such as [Deposit Return Schemes](#). Tiffin boxes, for example, first began to be used in Mumbai, India, with 200,000 meals delivered daily in reusable stainless steel tiffin tins. The model has recently made its way to [Belgium](#) and the UK. Over 1.5 tonnes of food packaging waste are saved each year. Similarly, the reusable cup system, [Recup](#), which counts more than 4000 selling points in Germany is continuously growing and expanding to neighbouring countries. Governments must continue to push legislation that will incentivize change, including adopting ambitious regulation to drastically reduce single-use plastics and support sustainable toxic-free products and reuse systems.

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<sup>2</sup> Muncke, J., Andersson, A., Backhaus, T. et al. Impacts of food contact chemicals on human health: a consensus statement. Environ Health 19, 25 (2020) <https://ehjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12940-020-0572-5>

<sup>3</sup> How toxic chemicals contribute to COVID-19 deaths, Frederick vom Saal, Aly Cohen, Environmental Health News (2020) <https://www.ehn.org/toxic-chemicals-coronavirus-2645713170.html>

Several capital-intensive industries, such as the petrochemical and plastic industry - which already had grim profitability projections - are now calling for [post-COVID-19 support](#) from governments in the forms of bailouts, debt relief or erosion of existing environmental regulations. Policy makers have a responsibility to make sure that stimulus packages will benefit the social entrepreneurs who will enable the shift to a local, toxic-free circular economy, and not keep on subsidizing systems that cannot function sustainably on their own or can only self-sustain by damaging our health and our environment. If hard-earned taxpayer money is to be used to bail out companies, priority should be given to businesses that will be economically, environmentally and socially viable in the medium and long term.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown us how interconnected we all are and that with strong political will leaders can take serious and effective measures in a very short amount of time to protect human lives. Europe has led the way in enacting legislation to resolve and tackle the problem of plastic pollution moving forward. Now is the time to make the historic choice of preserving and defending this legacy against attempts by industry to weaken or water it down. Furthermore, we call on EU institutions and EU Heads of States and Government to put in place the required measures and funding to spur the collective building of a more humane, just and resilient society, with the wellbeing of the people and the planet at its core.

Yours Sincerely,

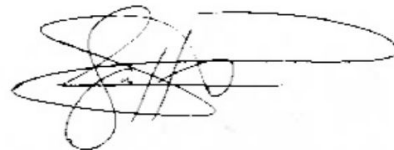
**Delphine Levi Alvares**  
*European coordinator*  
Break Free From Plastic

Signature



**Von Hernandez**  
*Global coordinator*  
Break Free From Plastic

Signature



*#BreakFreeFromPlastic is a global movement envisioning a future free from plastic pollution. Since its launch in September 2016, nearly 1,900 organizations from across the world have joined the movement to demand massive reductions in single-use plastics and to push for lasting solutions to the plastic pollution crisis. In Europe alone, 90 core organizations are active in more than 30 countries. These organizations share the common values of environmental protection and social justice, which guide their work at the community level and represent a global, unified vision. Sign up at [www.breakfreefromplastic.org](http://www.breakfreefromplastic.org).*

**#BreakFreeFromPlastic Member Signatures:**

[Aotearoa Plastic Pollution Alliance](#)  
[Asian Center for Environmental Health](#)  
[Asociación Retorna](#)  
[Carbon Market Watch](#)  
[CESTA FOE El Salvador](#)  
[CIEL](#)  
[City To Sea](#)  
[Common Seas](#)  
[Društvo Ekologi brez meja](#)  
[Ecological Waste Coalition of the Philippines \(Ecowaste Coalition\)](#)  
[ECOS](#)  
[Environmental association Za Zemlata](#)  
[European Environmental Bureau](#)  
[Friends of the Baltic](#)  
[Friends of the Earth Cyprus](#)  
[Friends of the Earth Scotland](#)  
[GAIA](#)  
[GAIA Africa](#)  
[Gallifrey Foundation](#)  
[GLOBAL 2000](#)  
[Greenpeace](#)  
[GroundWork](#)  
[Health and Environment Alliance \(HEAL\)](#)  
[Health and Environment Justice Support \(HEJSupport\)](#)  
[Heirs To Our Oceans](#)  
[Health Care Without Harm \(Europe\)](#)  
[Humusz Waste Prevention Alliance](#)  
[Massey University Political Ecology Research Centre](#)  
[Microplastic Research Group](#)  
[Nipe Fagio](#)  
[O.ZERO](#)  
[OceanCare](#)  
[Peak Plastic Foundation](#)  
[Plastic Change](#)  
[Plastic Free Seas](#)  
[Plastic Soup Surfer](#)  
[Plastic Soup Foundation](#)  
[Polish Zero Waste Association](#)  
[Recycling Network Benelux](#)  
[Retorna](#)  
[Sciaena](#)  
[SEAS AT RISK](#)  
[Society for Earth \(TNZ\)](#)  
[Surfrider Foundation Europe](#)  
[Taller Ecologista](#)  
[Tearfund](#)  
[Voice Ireland/Sick Of Plastic](#)  
[VOICE of Irish Concern for the Environment](#)  
[Vsi "Ziedine ekonomika"](#)  
[WECF International](#)  
[Zelena akcija / FoE Croatia](#)  
[ZERO - Association for the Sustainability of the Earth System](#)  
[Zero Waste Alliance Ukraine](#)  
[Zero Waste Europe](#)  
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