

## **CIGARETTE BUTTS AND THE PLASTICS TREATY: EXPERTS DEBATE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS, PUBLIC HEALTH, AND INDUSTRY RESPONSIBILITIES**

By **Luis Guilherme Hasselmann**, journalist at (Cetab/Fiocruz/ENSP)

The international webinar “*Toxic Butts: What the Plastic Treaty's Negotiating Text Means for Health and Liability*”, held on the morning of Tuesday, July 22, brought together experts from several countries to discuss the environmental impacts of cigarette butts, the risks to public health, and the need to hold the tobacco industry accountable. The event was co-organized by a coalition of international institutions, including the WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub for Articles 17 and 18, hosted at Fiocruz and operated by the CETAB/ENSP/Fiocruz. Also part of the organization were the Stop Tobacco Pollution Alliance, Action on Smoking and Health, Break Free From Plastic, Center for International Environmental Law, Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, the Ministries of Health and Environment of Panama, and other GGTC partners.

Broadcast online, the meeting discussed how the United Nations (UN) Global Plastics Treaty negotiations could address cigarette filters — responsible for millions of tons of microplastics and toxic substances released into the environment each year — and how to confront the influence of the tobacco industry in these discussions.

The debate brought together representatives from health and environmental institutions from different regions of the world, such as ASH (Finland), the University of Minnesota and San Diego State University (United States), the Korean Center for Tobacco Control, Research and Education (South Korea), the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Health (Panama), the WHO FCTC Implementation Committee and Secretariat, the Center for International Environmental Law, the Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control, and the global campaign #BreakFreeFromPlastic.

### **What was discussed**

At the opening of the event, mention was made of the environmental impacts caused by cigarette butts, which represent a serious problem, with about 4.5 trillion discarded annually — equivalent to 1.7 billion kilos of toxic plastic per year. During the COP10 meeting in Panama, in 2024, these impacts were highlighted in the *Panama Declaration*, which reaffirmed that public health must prevail over the commercial interests of the tobacco industry.

Professor **Irina Stepanov**, from the University of Minnesota, explained that cigarette filters, made of cellulose acetate, accumulate thousands of chemical substances — many of them carcinogenic — that remain in the environment for decades. She noted that although the unfiltered cigarette tip is also polluting, filters are even more dangerous because they trap toxic particles and degrade very slowly.

**Thomas Novotny**, from San Diego State University, stressed that filters do not protect the smoker's health — in fact, they are a misleading marketing strategy. He drew attention to

the alarming amount of microplastics generated by filters each year, estimated at over 32,000 tons, and to the dangers posed by new products such as electronic cigarettes and heated tobacco devices, which also use filters and generate electronic and chemical waste.

**Dharmesh Shah**, from the Center for International Environmental Law, pointed out that the current draft of the Plastics Treaty fails to explicitly recognize health as a central principle, treating pollution merely as an environmental issue and neglecting its direct and indirect impacts on human health. He advocated that health be at the heart of the treaty and warned of industry attempts to promote “green filters” and deceptive solutions that divert attention from truly effective measures, such as banning filters and reducing plastic production.

**Deborah Sy**, from the Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control, emphasized that if not carefully aligned with the FCTC, the Plastics Treaty could undermine the achievements of tobacco control, creating loopholes for undue industry participation in public policies and for the marketing of supposedly “greener” filters — which remain toxic.

### National experiences and recommendations

Participants also shared experiences from their countries. **Sungkyu Lee**, from the Korean Center for Tobacco Control, Research and Education, explained that in South Korea, attempts to recycle butts into plastic or fertilizer resulted in carcinogenic products, leading the government to abandon such initiatives. In his view, the real solution is to ban filters.

**Pekka Puska**, from Action on Smoking and Health (ASH), reported how pressure from civil society prevented the tobacco industry from taking control of butt collection in Finland, ensuring that its responsibility was limited to covering the costs, without any direct involvement in waste management.

Several experts advocated that butts and electronic devices be classified as hazardous waste, due to the chemical substances they contain, and that their elimination be treated as a priority in public policies. The need to prevent tobacco industry participation in decision-making forums was also strongly reinforced.

### Perspectives for the future

The panelists were unanimous in stating that the Plastics Treaty must clearly include cigarette filters as plastics to be eliminated and acknowledge their public health impacts. They further argued that solutions such as bioplastics or extended producer responsibility (EPR) programs do not replace the need to reduce production and ban filters, as they perpetuate pollution and falsely legitimize the industry.

For **CETAB/ENSP/Fiocruz**, which co-organized the event as part of its work as the WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub, it is essential that international negotiations incorporate the public health perspective and protect environmental policies from tobacco industry interference — following the principle already enshrined in the FCTC that the industry cannot participate in policy formulation.

## Challenges and paths forward

The “*Toxic Butts*” webinar made it clear that cigarette filters are both a public health and environmental problem. To address it, it is necessary to align the Plastics Treaty negotiations with the commitments already made under the FCTC and ensure that the industry is held accountable without having a voice in the solutions. As highlighted by **Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva**, representing the WHO FCTC Implementation Committee (Conicq) and participant in the meeting, it is about “protecting public health and the environment from the harm of a product that should have been banned long ago.”

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