

To save our climate and biodiversity, we first need to tackle global chemicals pollution



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Climate change and biodiversity loss are rightly identified as two of the planet's greatest challenges. But solving them is entirely dependent on fixing chemical pollution. It's like a stool with two legs: it's never going to work without extra, equal support. The third leg is international chemicals management.

Two intergovernmental panels – on climate change (IPCC) and on biodiversity (IPBES) – have both failed to hit their targets in 2020. Why? The missing third leg. They are both dependent on achieving effective chemicals management, which doesn't have the same global coordination. I, and the Royal Society of Chemistry, say it should.

The WHO estimates a quarter of deaths globally are from known, avoidable environmental risks like chemical pollution. And a UN report last year says chemical production will double by 2030, while countries miss targets to minimise adverse impacts of chemicals and waste.

Scientists in both academia and industry need to get to grips with the reality that we need to operate at the science-policy interface if we're going to make our maximum contribution to solving global challenges.

The UK is home to world-leading science. As scientists, we need to amplify our voices and influence at home and on the global stage.

Now is the time to influence the future of chemical pollution management – in the UK and on a global scale. Scientists from the UK and beyond need to contribute to the upcoming UN Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (UN SAICM). The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has recognised that there has been no effective science-policy interface in the past 10 years – and it's time to change this.

UNEP produced a report with options for a new science-policy interface. We say in our policy position that chemicals and waste should be on a par with climate change and biodiversity – so we need a new intergovernmental panel. It would be independent of politics and have the authority and credibility to focus efforts towards solving environmental pollution issues, and so truly enable the IPCC and IPBES to achieve their targets and goals.

We have participated as a voice of the scientific community in the UN SAICM Virtual Working Group 2 and fed our policy position into the UN process for determining the next phase of SAICM Beyond 2020. In early 2021 I will be leading the UK chemistry community's contributions to these next stages, and later that year I hope we will see a concrete commitment from the UN.

Industry is slow to commit and slower to act. There are some bright spots – GSK announced net-zero by 2030 recently – but we must see a concerted effort from all sectors to reduce the global harm of chemical pollution, if we are ever to tackle the problems of climate change and loss of biodiversity. Big chemical companies cannot

credibly say that sustainability is important without supporting UN SAICM – they hold the power to change the world for the better through visible and impactful international collaboration.

The UK is home to world-leading science. As scientists, we need to amplify our voices and influence at home and on the global stage, spearheading the calls for

- a UK-wide, independent Chemicals Standards Agency
- an Intergovernmental Panel on Chemicals & Waste Management
- global harmonisation of standards, to protect the citizens of the world.

