November 2023

Policy Brief

Input to the second session of the Open Ended Working Group for the development of the Science-Policy Panel to contribute further to the sound management of chemicals and waste and to prevent pollution, December 11-15, 2023.

Conflicts of Interest in the Assessment of Chemicals, Waste and Pollution

– Addressing the chemical industry's role in the forthcoming Science-Policy Panel

When developing the structure and scope for the new Science-Policy Panel it is of utmost importance to address the issue of Conflict of Interest. Specifically, experts with a *Conflict of Interest* participating in the decision-making process and the core work of the Panel would come with a high risk of conflicting and/or incompatible outcomes or delayed implementation of solutions.

Right now the Open Ended Working Group of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) is developing plans for the structure and scope of the new Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution Prevention. A *Conflict of Interest* policy to govern this new panel must be decided. Failure to manage *Conflicts of Interests* in the Science-Policy Panel may result in:

- conflicting and/or incompatible outcomes,
- delayed implementation or promotion of inappropriate solutions,
- eroding trust in science and scientists.

What is *Conflict of interest*?

Conflict of Interest refers to financial or other related interests which could significantly impair an individual's objectivity or create an unfair advantage for any person or organization.

It is unavoidable that every expert holds a particular point of view or perspective that could be seen as biased, but a *Conflict of Interest* only arises when an individual, while pursuing the scientific question at hand, could have a direct and material gain from a certain outcome of this scientific work so that this gain is in conflict with the impartial investigation of the scientific question.

What are the tactics for manufacturing doubt?

According to a new scientific publication conducted by experts representing 36 institutions, more than two dozen strategies and tactics have been used to counter scientific evidence or to promote narratives favourable to specific industry sectors.

Examples include:

1. Criticizing study designs or overemphasizing the shortcomings of scientific studies.
2. Discrediting, intimidating or threatening scientists.
3. Publishing misinformation, e.g. through scientists employed by consulting companies that specialize in supporting private interests.
4. Hiding or obscuring the sources of funding for research.
5. Cherry-picking data, designing studies to fail or come to a desired conclusion, or conducting meta-analyses that dilute scientific evidence.
6. Extensive lobbying towards regulators and policymakers so that the voice of the vested interest is often the main or even the only one heard in public consultations.

For a compilation of documented examples, please see section 4 in the below-mentioned scientific publication.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SCIENCE-POLICY PANEL

- **Define and strictly enforce rigorous *Conflict of Interest* provisions. Experts with a *Conflict of Interest* should not be allowed to participate in the decision-making process and the core work of the Science-Policy Panel, but may still participate and contribute as observers.**
- **Implement independent audits to a) review compliance with the *Conflict of Interest* provisions, and, if needed, recommend corrective measures to the governing body, and b) ensure that the Science-Policy Panel's outputs are transparent, impartial, credible and scientifically robust, as mandated by the UNEA Resolution 5/8.**
- **Include as many elements of transparency as possible. Among others, the Science-Policy Panel should become a vigorous proponent of FAIR and CARE principles for scientific data management and stewardship.**

This work was facilitated by IPCP, the International Panel on Chemical Pollution, www.ipcp.ch.

For detailed background information, please refer to our publication: Schaeffer et al. 2023. Conflicts of Interest in the Assessment of Chemicals, Waste and Pollution. Environmental Science & Technology, http://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.3c04213

CONTACT

Andreas Schaeffer, RWTH Aachen University, andreas.schaeffer@bio5.rwth-aachen.de

Martin Scheringer, ETH Zürich, scheringer@chem.ethz.ch

Miriam Diamond, University of Toronto, miriam.diamond@utoronto.ca

Penny Vlahos, University of Connecticut, penny.vlahos@uconn.edu