

A large percentage of European plastic sent to Vietnam ends up in nature, finds study

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About half of Europe's plastic waste is exported to several countries in the Global South, including Vietnam. A Utrecht University research team ventured to Minh Khai Craft Village, the largest recycling hub in Vietnam, to follow the recycling path. Here a woman is pictured walking through the village's streets. Credit: Kaustubh Thapa

Despite strict EU regulations on plastic recycling, there is little oversight on plastic waste shipped from the EU to Vietnam. A large percentage of the exported European plastic cannot be recycled and gets dumped in nature. This is the finding of new research led by Utrecht University's Kaustubh Thapa. and [published](#) in *Circular Economy and Sustainability*.

About half of Europe's plastic waste is exported to a number of countries in the Global South, including Vietnam. A Dutch and Vietnamese research team ventured to Minh Khai Craft Village, the largest recycling hub in Vietnam, to follow the recycling path of European plastic.

"We observed people cooking, eating and living within the recycling facility, surrounded by the noxious fumes of melting plastic. Children play in this suffocating environment," Thapa, the lead researcher, recounts. According to the research, 7 million liters of toxic wastewater are dumped into the waterways of the village daily.

"Although such waste trade is profitable for some, shifting producer responsibility of waste management to villages like these causes harm to people, communities and the environment," says Thapa.

Currently, UN negotiations for an international plastics treaty are ongoing. Thapa's new research shows the striking contrast between Vietnamese and European policies and the realities in recycling hubs in the Global South. "European consumers make an effort to separate recycling, yet we can clearly see that their efforts are, for a considerable percentage, in vain," says Thapa.

He adds, "Focusing on increasing recycling rates in the EU without systematically tackling the associated human and environmental harm throughout the entire value chain is neither ethical, circular or sustainable."

The researchers are not without hope: They believe that outsourcing [plastic waste](#) for recycling is possible in a sustainable way. "The European Green New Deal, its Circular Economy Actions Plan and the ongoing UN talks around a legally binding Global Plastics Treaty cannot ignore our findings. As we consume more and more, and thus generate more waste, waste trade for [recycling](#) must be tackled on a systematic level," Thapa concludes.

More information: Kaustubh Thapa et al, Towards a Just Circular Economy Transition: the Case of European Plastic Waste Trade to Vietnam for Recycling, *Circular Economy and Sustainability* (2024). DOI: [10.1007/s43615-023-00330-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s43615-023-00330-w)

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