



BASEL CONVENTION

SUCCESS STORY #5

BASEL CONVENTION UNDERPINNED BY INTERNATIONAL CUSTOMS COOPERATION

Innovative techniques demonstrate need for maintaining vigilance over movement of illegal waste

It is in the nature of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm (BRS) Conventions that much of their success might be invisible to the naked eye. As with virtually all of the work of the United Nations, the Conventions offer a point of agreement, a coalescence, between different States and others about how to best work together on certain, specific issues. Much time – perhaps even years – goes into bringing Parties together, and it can be even longer for benefits to transpire in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

But transpire they do. One such example is the Demeter V operation, led by the World Customs Organization, but underpinned by the Basel Convention, which seeks the “Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal.” Demeter V – and indeed, its four preceding iterations – is a practical application of the Basel Convention

and a manifestation of the will of States to ensure that the planet becomes healthy enough to sustain generations to come.

Implemented in 2019, Demeter V undertook to ascertain the global levels of illegal shipments of hazardous waste, including plastic waste, as well as ozone depleting substances, covered under another international treaty, the Montreal Protocol. The operation demonstrated the role of customs in the enforcement of the Basel Convention, and how they fight illegal traffic.

The project itself was split into three distinct phases: preparatory, the operation itself in September 2019 and a debriefing period following the cessation of the operational phase. The BRS team was closely involved in a hands-on capacity building, especially in the third phase, informing and training participants – mainly customs’ officers – of the details of the Basel Convention.

But we also work closely with customs' on longer term endeavours, for instance on harmonized systems (HS) codes, which lists thousands of different codes for different products that are shipped across the world. It is vital to have items properly coded as this makes it much easier for customs to identify suspicious shipments. Recently, e-waste and acid batteries have been added to the list, a move that will come into effect in 2022 and make it much easier for these illegal shipments to be detected.

During the operation, Customs' collected data which led directly to the seizure of illegal shipments. There were 83 customs administrations participating in the operation and for the month of September 2019, the customs' officers at the national level undertook inspections to identify suspicious shipments. They deployed a specially-designed communications tool which allowed them to collect and send along information, via electronic alerts, to other customs' authorities. In all, there were 232 seizures, including 201 waste-related ones amounting to 4,584 tons and constituting 59,983 pieces. The remainder related to ozone depleting substances. Waste of electric and electronic equipment, plastic waste, metal scraps, waste vehicle parts and municipal waste dominated in terms of both number of cases and quantity.

The data demonstrates that there have been significant changes over the years. In the 1990s most waste illegally trafficked was hazardous metal, but that has now significantly decreased; e-waste, on the other hand, has gone the other way, seeing a marked increase, both in terms of the number of cases and absolute quantities. The seizure action of e-waste has tripled, whilst the number of plastic waste interventions increased by two-fold. However the actual quantity of plastic waste seized decreased to near one-seventh of that seized during the previous operation, under the auspices of Demeter IV in 2018.

This in turn mirrors another change: a vast improvement in enforcement and awareness. Customs' authorities have been more vigilant and paid much attention to intercepting illegal shipments of waste. Identifying hazardous waste is only part of the work that customs' undertake: they are more commonly dealing with arms and drugs smuggling, for instance. But these improved and more robust methods made it much more likely for them to spot illegal shipments. And with a corresponding increase in inspection rates, there was a much higher chance of illegal shipments being apprehended.

Countries are working very hard to combat these illegal shipments, but there is an undeniable trend for greater quantities of waste. There is more demand for the highest quality IT equipment, which in part explains the increase in the e-waste we generate. But the changes to enforcement methods that Demeter V so vividly illustrates demonstrate both the need and adaptability for these techniques. They will be further required now that an amendment to the Basel Convention, the so-called Ban Amendment, has come into force on 6th December 2019, another milestone towards minimising risks from the adverse effects of transboundary movements of hazardous waste from developed to developing countries.

As the world changes, so will the inspection methods and techniques for preventing and combating illegal shipments of hazardous wastes. And all will be guided by the Basel Convention, without which, all such vital work would not take place. The activities led by the BRS Secretariat in the enforcement of the Basel Convention and related issues such as the illegal traffic of hazardous and other waste, are generously supported by funds from the Governments of Norway and France, and the European Union.



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