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Why dangerous hormone-disrupting chemicals are still everywhere

...and why we need to reform comitology

More than 800 chemicals on the market are endocrine disruptors

In your shampoo, in your sports bottle, in your bathroom air freshener, in your cleaning products, in your food and its packaging, in the pesticides the local farmer uses near your children's school, even in nappies... endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs) are everywhere, omnipresent, like a monster from a horror movie. And a failing EU decision process is letting them slip through and continue to poison us.

Endocrine disruptors are still on the market 7 years after being declared a global threat

Although several scientists had already raised the alarm on EDCs, it was a WHO report of 2012 that definitively acknowledged the scale of the problem. These chemicals can massively damage the hormonal balance, can cause infertility, diabetes and hormone-related cancers and can lead to learning and behavioural disorders in children. Worse, **it is not the dose that is decisive, but the time of contact**. Foetuses, babies, toddlers and teenagers are particularly at risk.

So, naturally, the EU authorities immediately banned them, and everybody lived happily ever after... the end. Right?

Well, no, that's not what happened. More than 800 chemicals were identified as EDCs by the WHO report. But removing them from the market would have a huge economic impact on the chemical industries, making the European Commission wary of any extensive ban. Of course, this is a very short-term way of thinking, given that the health of EU citizens is on the line, and the socio-economic burden of EDC-related health effects is estimated at between 46 and 288 billion euros per year.

Today, well into 2019, endocrine disruptors are still omnipresent, so much so that the European Parliament recently addressed a plea to the European Commission to finally propose a horizontal regulation dealing with EDCs by 2020. In the absence of such a regulation, the banning of EDCs will continue to be managed sector by sector, and this approach is definitely not going in the right direction.

A failing decision-making process, and "an abuse of power"

Two EU regulations, one on pesticides from 2009 and the other on biocides from 2012, demanded a definition of EDCs to be developed and implemented, so that products containing such chemicals could be withdrawn from the market. These two regulations were adopted by the European Parliament and the Council, but, as usual in these cases, the "technical details" were left for the European Commission to decide, through a process called "comitology". One of these "details" was the **definition** of EDCs - without it, the ban decided by the EU representatives is effectively toothless.

After its delaying tactics were condemned by the European Court of Justice in late 2015, the Commission finally proposed an initial definition of EDCs in 2016. But, at the request of the chemical industry in particular, the definition deliberately left out those pesticides that work precisely by modifying the endocrine system of the target animals, **therefore exempting the vast majority of endocrine disruptors from the ban**.

Fortunately, in this case (a "Regulatory procedure with scrutiny" or RPS [1]), the European Parliament had the possibility to veto the EU Commission's proposal - which is exactly what the MEPs did in September 2017, calling the proposed exemption "an abuse of power". However, RPS procedures are not the norm, and often the Parliament has no power over such "technical issues" which are left to the care of the Commission. Plus, since the EP vetoed the bill in 2017, the Commission has still not returned with any new definition of EDCs for these two regulations. Poisons continue to spread in the environment, as the Commission indulges in a childish tug of war with the elected representatives of the EU citizens.

We need to give the power back to the elected representatives of the people

This unacceptable situation persists, not only because of the ridiculous imbalance of power between the European Parliament and the other EU institutions, but also because the "comitology" process allows for dealing with "technical" matters as if they had no political stakes - even when they clearly have a massive impact on people and planet. According to a new report by lawyer Cécile Robert (summary here), this opaque and technocratic decision-making process is undermining the EU democratic system and the trust of the EU citizens, and gives way more weight to lobbyists.

In recent years, the Commission has made but a feeble attempt to reform the comitology process, and this has been buried by the Member States, who seem happy to hide behind the cover of so-called "technical issues" - especially if it means the European Parliament has less power.

To avoid further repeats of this scenario, we need a complete overhaul of the "comitology" process. This what the Greens/EFA will support in the coming years.

[1] Regulatory procedures with scrutiny: drafted by the Commission, voted by the member states by a qualified majority. The European Parliament has the possibility to reject it if they reach a qualified majority of MEPs.

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