

# The making of international legislation

The cross-border transport of hazardous wastes seized the public's attention in the late 1980s. The misadventures of "toxic ships" such as the Karin B (1988) and the Pelicano, sailing from port to port trying to offload their poisonous cargoes, made front-page headlines around the world. These tragic incidents were motivated in good part by tighter environmental regulations in industrialized countries. As a consequence, the costs of waste disposal skyrocketed, and "toxic traders" searching for cheaper solutions started shipping hazardous wastes to Eastern Europe, Africa and other regions.

Recognizing that industrial society must fix this major flaw in the system, governments and many forward-looking companies started exploring solutions as early as the 1970s. The strong activism of civil society organizations and the interest of the media in cases of toxic waste dumping were central in bringing the issue on the international agenda. By the 1980s, the international community launched treaty negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme. In March 1989, they adopted the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal. The treaty entered into force in 1992.

Following its adoption, many countries started discussions to address regional issues in more detail. Various protocols have been added to other conventions, among them to several UNEP Regional Seas Conventions aimed at protecting the marine environment from pollution from land-based sources, dumping of harmful substances and hazardous wastes, and protection from radioactive contamination.

Nongovernmental organizations are often at the root of new multilateral environmental legislation. They stir attention among the public and the media. Once the responsible governmental representatives have caught on, they collaborate with governments to initiate and shape conventions and protocols.

The most important other international conventions which address the production, transport or trade of hazardous materials and wastes are the London Convention, the Rotterdam and the Stockholm Conventions. They all address the same challenge: the most toxic chemical products of our industrial civilization must be carefully managed during their entire life-cycle from production to disposal. (see pages 40–41 for more on international waste treaties)

