

BRIEFING: TOWARDS AN IMPACTFUL GLOBAL PLASTICS TREATY

BACKGROUND

Plastic is **polluting throughout its entire lifecycle**, from the second its raw materials are **extracted to its disposal** and beyond. Microplastics have been found in the air we breathe¹ and the food we eat². Increasing evidence shows the prevalence of plastic in the human body- in our blood³ and even in breastmilk⁴. In 2017, the UN declared plastic pollution a global crisis. Half a decade later, the crisis is only worsening, with plastic entering aquatic ecosystems projected to triple by 2040⁵.

Plastic pollution is irreversible, drives biodiversity loss and has devastating impacts on the livelihoods of those who depend on the health and integrity of marine ecosystems. Scientific evidence supports the claim that the safe operating space for the 'chemical pollution and novel entities' planetary boundary (including plastic pollution) is already exceeded. Due to the transboundary nature of the problem, Greenpeace calls for immediate and decisive action at the global level to cap and dramatically reduce plastic production and use, regulate and facilitate the shift to reuse at societal scales, and for a treaty that centres a justice based approach through all aspects.

Because over 99% of plastic is made from fossil fuels, with production only increasing, it is a significant driver of climate change. Predicted expansion of plastic production, numbering into the hundreds of billions of dollars in new infrastructure investment, means that by 2060 annual greenhouse gas emissions from the plastics lifecycle are projected to more than double, to 4.3 Gt CO₂e.⁶

The damage from across the plastic life cycle is disproportionately borne by people in the Global South, socio-economically challenged communities, and people of colour. Reports of such disproportionate impacts include upstream impacts such as carcinogenic air pollution at production and petrochemical sites,^{7,8} to downstream impacts such as wealthy countries illegally dumping waste that is often toxic and non-recyclable on countries without capacity to manage it, putting local communities at risk of long-term health impacts.^{9,10}

Without dramatically reducing plastic production and use, it will be impossible to end plastic pollution. There is already an enormous discrepancy between the amount of plastic produced and the amount recycled — only nine percent of all plastic produced had ever been recycled¹¹. Because of degradation in the recycling process, plastic is also only functionally recyclable a limited number of times, often as little as

once, meaning recycling will not solve the plastic pollution crisis.¹² **The treaty must follow the zero-waste hierarchy¹³ — prioritising reduction and reuse over downstream interventions like recycling.**

The Break Free From Plastic (BFFP) global movement, consisting of more than 11,000 organisations including Greenpeace, has been working to “bring systemic change through a holistic approach tackling plastic pollution across the whole plastics value chain, focusing on prevention rather than cure, and providing effective solutions.”¹⁴ Millions of people around the world want bolder action in favour of a plastic-free future. 11 million people around the world are demanding a plastic free future, an ambitious global plastics treaty is a guaranteed way to achieve the future our planet deserves. Greenpeace urges countries around the world to show leadership on this issue and match the urgency of the crisis by championing an ambitious plastics treaty.

PRIORITIES

The Global Plastics Treaty **must reduce plastic production and use**. It must be a binding global instrument guided by the **precautionary principle** and the **zero waste hierarchy**, and that **centres justice**.

The treaty must **prioritise protecting biodiversity, the climate and human wellbeing, drive a just transition to reuse-centred systems**, and put the **needs of the most vulnerable communities before the industries** that are responsible for creating this crisis.

Greenpeace is calling on global governments to ensure the treaty covers the following priority action areas:

1. Reduce plastic production and use

- **Cap plastic production, with a time table for rapid reduction**
- **Phase out single-use plastic**, starting with formats and applications known to be highly problematic and unnecessary, such as flexible plastics and complex multi layered packaging (eg. sachets). Greenpeace expects the treaty to move towards a goal of eliminating all single-use applications, and to drive the minimization of plastic in other applications and sectors including but not limited to agricultural, fishing, aquaculture, other marine industries, textiles and construction.
- **Immediately eliminate known highly problematic polymers and chemicals**. These include, but are not limited to, polyvinyl chloride (PVC), polystyrene (PS), polyurethane (PUR), polycarbonate (PC), polyfluorinated alkyl substances (PFAs)

2. Regulate and facilitate the shift to reuse at societal scales

- **Set legally binding reuse and refill targets across sectors.**
- **Leapfrog recycling** by enshrining the zero-waste hierarchy as a core principle of the treaty and providing the policies and finance to support the transition to reuse, rather than locking in expensive and ineffective recycling infrastructure. Reuse has been shown to be less carbon intensive¹⁵ and reduces system costs at a greater rate than other interventions.¹⁶
- **Ensure global cooperation on reuse standards**, to create the best market conditions for the transition to reuse.
- **No false solutions** like chemical recycling, waste-to-energy, refuse-derived fuel, co-processing or plastic credits. These approaches do not deliver on their promises^{17,18} and risk serious public health and ecological consequences for the communities where the facilities using these technologies are located.¹⁹

3. Centre justice in treaty proceedings and outcomes

- **Support a just transition** to more sustainable livelihoods for workers across the plastics supply chain, prioritising the informal waste sector and in otherwise affected communities in low- and middle-income countries.
- **Support a rights-based approach that centres Indigenous Peoples**²⁰, and ensure affected workers and impacted communities are involved in the negotiation process and solutions.
- **Establish a new dedicated multilateral fund** to ensure countries with the most resources and infrastructure support those with less.
- **End open dumping and burning and waste colonialism.**

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR INC1

At the first round of negotiations Parties should take steps to ensure that the treaty:

- Ensures **fair and equitable representation** throughout the negotiation process from frontline communities, Indigenous Peoples, informal and formal waste sector workers, and other underrepresented groups
- Considers the full-life cycle of plastic **from extraction to disposal**
- Is modelled on the **Montreal protocol**, setting globally binding controls on plastic, rather than relying on voluntary commitments

- Establishes **harmonised definitions** of ‘reduction’, ‘prevention’, ‘reuse’ and ‘circularity’ that provide clarity for industry and facilitate the best possible environmental outcome
- Has **overarching objectives** that ensure the harm across the plastic life-cycle is addressed in terms that **align with the zero-waste hierarchy** i.e. prevention at source, including in allocation of negotiation time
- Takes a **start-and-strengthen approach** that allows for controls on plastic production to be adopted without additional ratification
- Establishes a framework for **reporting and full transparency** on all plastics produced, used and/or consumed, imported and exported
- Includes **human health impacts, toxic chemicals, and climate impacts** in its scope

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Governments must listen to the calls from scientists, Indigenous and local communities, and young people across the world; recognise the scale and urgency of the challenge and act accordingly going beyond paper-thin commitments. We need political leadership and diplomatic outreach at the highest levels to **deliver the most ambitious treaty possible.**

Greenpeace contends that the **plastic life cycle begins at extraction** because that is where the raw materials (mostly fossil fuels and fossil fuel derivatives) come from before they are turned into polymers to be then turned into plastic.

- Several international treaties, conventions, protocols, etc. have used a similar mechanism that we seek to institute with the Global Plastics Treaty. Namely, the Basel Convention and the Montreal Protocol.
- **Extraction has been included in the life cycle approach in other resolutions adopted by UNEA.** For example, UNEA 5/12 resolution states, *“Environmental aspects of minerals and metals management” Acknowledging that minerals and metals considered under the present resolution exclude mineral fuels, and that the scope of the present resolution includes the full life cycle of minerals and metals, including extraction, on-site and off-site processing, refining, management of mining waste and tailings, rehabilitation of sites and closed or abandoned mines, manufacturing, and recycling”.*
- Neither the UNFCCC or Paris Agreement specifically mention curbing the extraction of fossil carbon in their convention/protocol text, but rather leave it to countries to decide if to take it up in their NDC portfolio. That’s

why the extractable but unburnable fossil carbon can flow freely and unchecked via for example plastics and petrochemicals. **Therefore, including extraction in the plastic treaty could and should close this major backdoor** and could be done without edging into the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement area of work as suggested by some stakeholders.

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20. In the first instance this means dedicated resources to ensure Indigenous communities are able to participate in negotiations, including translation, direct engagement and consideration of Indigenous and traditional knowledge systems