



Brief on Global Plastics Treaty

Towards a Global Plastics Treaty:

Perspectives on Key Considerations for Negotiators, Governments, Businesses, and All Stakeholders in the Plastics Ecosystem

Introduction

It is no secret that the world right now is facing plastics crisis. To illustrate this more clearly, here is a startling fact: *“of all the plastic that ever existed: more than half were produced in the last 15 years and 91% has never been recycled”*¹. Plastic pollution has become a global concern, as our planet is drowning in plastic litter and microplastics. While plastic has many valuable uses, societies have become highly dependent on single-use or disposable plastic — with severe environmental consequences. Plastics cause pollution at almost every stage of their lifecycle, starting with the use of fossil fuels for their production.

In this technical brief, the author briefly contextualizes the plastics challenge, the global call for action to tackle the crisis, which is evidenced by the recent resolution of UNEA 5.2. He concludes by highlighting a few key considerations that should engage the minds of different stakeholders as the world negotiates and concludes a global plastics treaty.

The Plastic Challenge in Perspective

Plastic pollution is one of the most pressing challenges of our time. It kills wildlife, it chokes sewages and drainage systems, and

¹ “The Story of Plastics”, as sourced from the Geneve Environment Network

leaks into the oceans and threatens marine life. Plastics are 80 percent carbon and more than 99 percent of plastics use crude oil, fossil gas, or coal as a feedstock, and their creation also involves the burning of fossil fuels leading to the emission of greenhouse gasses².

The plastics industry began in the early 1900s when the first synthetic plastic was created in the United States of America. Since the industry began, annual [global plastic production](#) has exploded from some 1.5 million metric tons in 1950 to 359 million metric tons in 2018 ([Statista, 2020](#)). The [cumulative](#) plastic production surpassed eight billion metric tons worldwide, and it is expected to further increase in the coming decades.

In Ghana, the per-capita plastic consumption is 3.4% per annum³, especially single-use plastics leading to a rise in plastic waste. Additionally, it is estimated that Ghana generates around 0.84 million tonnes of post-consumer plastic waste each year – a total that is growing annually by 5.4%⁴. The generation of waste per-se is not problematic if the management is sound and does not impact environmental integrity. However, this is not the case. The World Bank’s Country Environmental Analysis for 2020 indicates that an estimated of the over 30,000 metric tonnes (MT) of municipal solid waste generated each day in Ghana, only 14% is collected; 38% is dumped in open spaces set aside as informal dumps; 24% is deposited at “community containers”, 9% is dumped indiscriminately; 11% is burned in the open, and 4% is buried. Packaging plastics serves as a primary component of

² Connecting the dots – plastics pollution and the planetary emergency. EIA (2022), sourced from <https://eia-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2022-EIA-Report-Connecting-the-Dots-SPREADS.pdf>

increasing accumulations of improperly disposed wastes⁵.

While plastics have revolutionized production and consumption, especially through packaging, their mismanagement has proven detrimental. It has been established that not only could plastics be harmful to human health, but that it is also a driver of climate change and biodiversity loss and the biodiverse, fragile, and important ecosystems which play a role in regulating climate and mitigating its impacts are most at risk. Like other environmental crises such as climate change and biodiversity loss, the root causes are known – overconsumption of finite resources.

A New Global Plastics Treaty

The calls for a legally binding treaty on plastics were answered when on 2nd March 2022, the 5th UN Environment Assembly concluded in Nairobi with 14 resolutions, including an agreement to establish an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee with the mandate to forge an international legally binding agreement to end plastic pollution. The plastics treaty is expected to address the full lifecycle of plastics, including production, design, and disposal. Already the estimated timeline for reaching a global agreement, which has been indicated as two years shows the seriousness and urgency attached to the issue of plastic pollution as most global treaties take between five (5) to ten (10) years of negotiations.

Ahead of the conclusion of the treaty by the end of 2024, UNEA-5.2, mandated the

³ Ghana NPAP Action Roadmap: Ghana Plastics Action Partnership, 2021. A Roadmap for the Reduction of Plastic Pollution in Ghana

⁴ Ibid

⁵ World Bank (2020); Ghana Country Environmental Analysis

Executive Director of UNEP to convene an ad hoc open-ended working group to prepare for the work of the intergovernmental negotiating committee to end plastic pollution. The first of such meetings took place from 30 May to 1 June 2022 in Dakar, Senegal. The meeting concluded with a proposed approach to the work of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC). The approach includes summary considerations for the meetings, proposed timetable for all four (4) INC meetings which is expected to range from the week of 28 November 2022 to early December 2024, when an international global plastics treaty is expected to be concluded. Indeed, it is instructive to note that documents expected to be shared and deliberated on at the second INC meeting include “overview of existing funding currently available for addressing plastic pollution through international funding arrangements, including from other processes, programmes, multilateral funds, development banks and private sector initiatives” as well as “an overview of stakeholder engagement frameworks under other instruments, and potential approaches for this instrument”. It is important that developing countries including Ghana have adequate preparation, science, and empirically based data and information, based on country experience and context to drive the negotiation for favourable outcomes.

Some Key Considerations for A Global Plastics Treaty especially for Developing Countries

The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities is a universal principle often employed in international treaties of environmental nature. The principle should guide the negotiations, especially for developing countries to the extent that plastic pollution is a universal problem that all countries have an obligation to address,

however, the individual capabilities of each country should guide the extent of such efforts, and this will simultaneously address inequalities.

Therefore, for countries like Ghana, there are a few recommendations that could serve as a guide for the government, the private sector, and development partners. These include the following:

1. The actions that need to be adequately addressed by the treaty should include those related: (i) control of trade and transboundary movement of plastics, (ii) environmentally sound management of plastics, and (iii) prevention and minimization. In terms of the measures geared toward prevention and minimization, there should be substantial actions aimed at plastic design and manufacturing. These actions need to be addressed through science-based decision-making and planning and public awareness. Product design actions should target technical specifications that can be globally enforced for global coherence around technical designs to ensure product design optimization and increase the value of plastic products for recycling.
2. The underlying issues of legal, policy, and institutional mechanism needed for implementation at the country level need to be catered for. Additionally, an effective, and efficient support structure for translating the global commitments into national implementation strategies, action plans, and related capacities for inventories and measurements linked with any performance/results-based payment schemes need to be in place. Through strengthening areas such as technical cooperation, capabilities that are globally available can be unlocked.
3. A system-based approach, looking at the full life cycle of plastics, the hierarchy of waste management, and

employing a whole of society approach should guide the design of the cooperation framework through the promotion of exchange of information.

4. The plastics challenge is complex, and the solution need not be in silos. There is therefore the need for strong engagement by all stakeholders and political will needed for coordinated and coherent implementation of the treaty once promulgated.
5. There is the need to have different vehicles for implementation for developed, versus developing countries including having a dedicated funding pool that can be accessed by developing countries for the implementation of measures to beat plastic pollution. Hinged on the polluter pays principle, which is an international principle for repudiation of costs associated with the manufacturing of plastics, and through instruments such as the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), countries can be financially compensated for plastic management actions. The implementation of the treaty needs to be balanced with harmonized monitoring and reporting.
6. Governments should ensure facilitated discussions with diverse and relevant stakeholders for decision making, with rights-based approaches to ensure just transitions.
7. There is a need to ensure a varied mixture of voluntary and mandatory actions in the treaty. Other principles such as Prior Informed Consent, especially for communities that are hard hit by the impact of plastic pollution through the whole concept of a blue economy need to be enshrined in the treaty and enforced.

UNDP's Global Plastics Offer and Opportunities in-Country for Advancing this Offer

In the context of our strategic plan (2022-2025), which is anchored on the Sustainable Development Goals, UNDP's global plastics offer seeks to work with our partners to ensure 100 countries have improved plastics regulations and implementation; 100 cities and islands have effective plastic waste management plans and use reduction strategies and 100 million people are mobilized to take action on plastic pollution.

With valuable insights and tailored solutions through a network of over 170 country offices and interventions in more than twenty-five thousand (25,000) local communities as well as tools, expertise, and network across different thematic areas examining innovative and integrated approaches to plastics pollution, UNDP has added value to support governments, development partners, the private sector and communities to actualize solutions for beating plastics pollution.

UNDP is a credible convener bringing together governments, businesses, academia, and civil society to develop integrated, inclusive solutions with large-scale impact. In Ghana, leveraging this convening role, and through the Waste Recovery Platform which was co-created with partners in 2018, UNDP is able to bring together over 350 members who span across government MDAs/MMDAs, development partners, civil society organizations, and the private sector to first of all dialogue and provide sound technical inputs for Ghana's contribution during the negotiation for the global plastics treaty and support with the design of locally contextualized solutions anchored on the treaty for implementation.

Due to the diverse reach of the work of UNDP, and especially in the context of the Waste Recovery Platform, it is important that the vulnerable and marginalized, and communities including youth, and women are heard in these negotiations. UNDP can therefore work with partners including the Ghana National Action Partnership (G-NPAP) to broaden discourse with all interested partners and ensure no one is left behind in terms of proposing workable solutions and the implementation framework and tools.



Conclusion

The world needs to act now to end plastic pollution and restore environmental integrity. We cannot lose momentum, we need to keep our eyes on the overarching principle, which is to end plastic pollution. Through the leadership and the required will of government working in partnership with the private sector and citizens, we need to adopt a whole of society and full life cycle approach to identify, and broker the right partnerships powered by technological advancement and innovation to sustainably manage plastic waste and promote circular plastics economy for people and planet.



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