

# Global plastics treaty: What now?

United Nations Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution.

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## More time needed to create first-ever plastics framework

Following a United Nations summit in South Korea, the future of what was intended to be the 'Paris Agreement for Plastics' remains in the balance. Over 3,300 representatives from over 170 countries and observers from more than 440 organizations gathered in Busan, South Korea, to discuss a first-ever international treaty on reducing the harmful effects of plastic pollution and waste.

At the conclusion of the fifth, and what was hoped to be the final, session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC-5), many observers shared their disappointment that a global agreement remains elusive...at least for now.

However, looking towards where the negotiations go from here, the foundations have been laid by what was agreed, an interim 'Chair's text', which holds promise that an eventual treaty will be signed in 2025.

If and when such a framework is in place, the knock-on impact for companies will be significant. A legally-binding and enforceable regulatory framework will impact companies across the plastics value chain. At present, less than a quarter of companies are aware of the risks associated with their plastic-related activities. An even higher number, 70% of companies, are yet to map out their plastic-related impacts on the environment.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> According to a survey of 3,000 companies by CDP, 2023.



**The clock is now ticking for governments to make a decisive choice at the next negotiating session in 2025”**

Ellen MacArthur Foundation

## Disagreement over financing mechanism and cuts to plastic production

So, acknowledging the scale of the challenge, what were countries looking to achieve? Among other goals, these included limits to plastic production, increase in plastic re-use and recycling through a more enhanced circular economy, national targets on plastics, and also an adequate “price on plastics” by agreeing an international financing mechanism.

The two main areas of contention were introducing limits to the production of plastics as well as agreeing to a financial support package for developing countries to implement the treaty.

Unsurprisingly, these discussions became very political quite quickly, with countries taking sides on various issues. We saw like-minded countries grouping together on particular parts of the negotiations, for example, advanced economies like the UK and EU partnered with developing nations such as Rwanda and Panama as part of the “High Ambition Coalition” which advocated for ambitious and robust goals. A group of other countries, whose GDP relies heavily on petrochemicals, took up positions which were not so ambitious.

Plastic waste generation could **increase by**

**70%**

**between 2020 and 2040,  
from 360 Megatonnes (Mt)  
to 617 Megatonnes (Mt)**

Source: OECD, 2024.

### **Interim agreement provides a 'half-way house' for now**

Although there were hopes that all countries would agree unanimously on a single treaty text, the conference concluded without complete support on all the of the major negotiating points.

Despite not being able to reach a unanimous final agreement, countries did agree on a holding statement, 'Chair's text', that will serve as the starting point for negotiations at a resumed conference in 2025. This is being seen as a stepping stone to then achieve a more ambitious and legally-binding global agreement.

Among other points, the interim agreement includes:

- Each country should adopt good plastic waste management practices, including the cross-border movement of plastic waste;
- Each country to develop and submit National Plans which incorporate the goals of the treaty;
- The just transition should be considered by countries when developing and implementing their objectives to reduce the harmful impacts of plastics;
- Establishing a UN-convened Conference of the Parties (COP) for the plastics treaty where countries will be required to report progress and update their goals.

### **Plastic production and waste leaves a lasting impact**

Plastics, as a material, has a significant environmental footprint all across its life-cycle. This starts right from the very beginning of the production process. The raw material is crude oil itself, and the manufacturing of plastics accounts for an estimated 5% of all global greenhouse gas emissions. Under a conservative growth scenario, emissions from plastic production could more than double by 2050.

Even after it's been produced and used, it continues to leave a lasting impact with about 400 million tonnes of plastic waste being left behind every year, the vast majority of this ending up in landfills all over the world, and not being recycled. In fact, of all the plastic waste ever generated, less than 10% has been recycled. According to the OECD, plastic waste generation could increase by 70% by 2040, thereby further exacerbating the problem.



### **Supportive business engagement is a positive takeaway**

The Business Coalition for a Global Plastics Treaty, a group of 250 organizations, described the negotiations as “a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address plastic pollution at a global level”. Signatories include the likes of Unilever, Danone, H&M Group, LEGO, Walmart and other household names.

The business coalition was convened by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and the WWF. In October, Brunswick hosted a webinar with Rob Opsomer, Executive Lead for Plastics & Finance at the Ellen MacArthur Foundation who spoke on expectations leading up to the Busan meeting. Following the outcome of the discussions, he urged countries to “hold on to their ambition and agree to an impactful treaty that sets the global rules that business needs to unlock solutions at scale to end plastic pollution”.

The relatively positive engagement by the business community indicates the importance for companies to get involved in global policy discussions from the beginning, a trend likely to continue over the coming years.

### Media headlines mask tangible early achievements

Many news outlets have picked up on the fact that we’ll have to wait a while longer for an eventual agreement to be reached. However, headlines such as “UN plastics treaty talks fail” do not capture the success that has already been achieved.

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Considering that the discussions began for the first time only in 2022, the fact that countries, NGOs and companies have worked together successfully to design the blueprint for what could become an historic agreement is remarkable. To draw a parallel, the Paris Agreement on climate change took multiple years of stalled negotiations before consensus was reached in 2015.

### All eyes on next year to get a final treaty

The failure for an agreement to be reached in Busan should certainly not be seen as a death knell and does not mean an end to the talks. The UN has already expressed its plans to hold another follow-up conference in 2025 to reach a legally-binding global treaty on plastics.

Two-thirds of all plastic waste comes from single-use and short-lived plastic products. Less than

**10%**

**of plastic waste has ever been recycled**

The Business Coalition for a Global Plastics Treaty, a group of

**250+**

**organizations, have called for ambitious targets**

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