GLOBAL PLASTIC TREATY: ENVIRONENT

Plastic pollution treaty fails as countries remain divided

Global negotiations for a legally binding plastics treaty have stalled, primarily due to a divide between nations demanding production caps and those prioritizing waste management. India advocates for a differentiated approach based on developmental needs, as the crisis worsens with threats from microplastics and challenges in implementing effective waste management.

Global Plastics Treaty Negotiations Stall Amidst Deep Divisions

The United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) sixth attempt since 2022 to forge a legally binding global plastics treaty has failed to produce a final agreement. Held in Geneva, the negotiations stalled as countries remained deeply divided on fundamental issues including production limits, responsibility, fairness, enforcement mechanisms, and the regulation of single-use plastics.

The Global Plastics Treaty Negotiations: A Status Report

UNEA Initiative (2022)

In a landmark decision in March 2022, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) passed Resolution 5/14, initiating a process to develop an international, legally binding treaty on plastic pollution by the end of 2024.

Deadlock in Final Round

The fifth and final scheduled round of discussions on this treaty ended in a deadlock, failing to meet the initial deadline.

Key Outcomes of the Recent Negotiations (INC-6, Busan)

The Sixth Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC-6) session, held under the UNEP in August 2025 at Busan, South Korea, marked a critical milestone in the ongoing effort to draft the Global Plastic Pollution Treaty.

Lifecycle Approach

There is a broad consensus among nations on the need to tackle plastic pollution across its entire lifecycle—from the extraction of raw materials and production to consumption, disposal, and recycling.

Support for the Global South

A clear recognition emerged that financial and technical assistance is crucial to help developing nations meet their treaty obligations and transition to a circular economy.

Accountability Systems

Member states agreed on the need to strengthen reporting, monitoring, and compliance mechanisms to ensure transparency and effectiveness.

Major Points of Contention

Production Caps vs. Waste Management

A primary divide exists between developed countries, which are pushing for binding caps on virgin plastic production, and many developing and oil-producing nations, which prefer to focus on improving waste management and recycling infrastructure.

The "Common but Differentiated Responsibilities" (CBDR) Debate

Developing nations strongly advocate for the CBDR principle, arguing for flexibility and substantial support based on their different capabilities and historical contributions to the problem. In contrast, developed nations are pressing for more uniform, universal obligations for all countries.

Role of the Private Sector

A contentious debate continues over how to regulate the corporate world. Some nations favor voluntary commitments, while others insist that legally binding rules must be imposed on plastic producers and consumer goods companies.

Divisions Among Countries

The Like-Minded Group

A coalition of oil-producing and petrochemical-exporting nations, including the US, has consistently blocked more ambitious proposals, particularly those aimed at capping plastic production at its source.

The High-Ambition Coalition

This group, which includes the European Union and many Small Island Developing States (SIDS), is demanding stringent measures, most notably legally binding caps on the production of new (virgin) plastic.

Outcome of INC-6

Although no final treaty text was adopted, INC-6 succeeded in narrowing the options and streamlining the draft text for the next round, INC-7, scheduled for early 2026. The ambition of finalizing a treaty by the end of 2026 remains alive, with a much sharper clarity on the key areas of agreement and conflict that need to be resolved.

India's Position at the Negotiations

India has taken a firm and clear stance, prioritizing its developmental needs and national circumstances.

Emphasis on Equity and CBDR

India has strongly emphasized the principles of equity and Common but Differentiated Responsibilities. It highlights that plastic use in developing countries is intrinsically linked to developmental needs, securing livelihoods, and ensuring affordability for its vast population.

Opposition to Blanket Caps

Consequently, India opposes blanket, top-down production caps, arguing instead for context-specific national action plans that allow countries to set their own targets and pathways.

Key Demands from India

Technology transfer and the establishment of a climate finance-like mechanism to fund the development and adoption of plastic alternatives. Formal recognition and integration of the informal recycling sector, which plays a critical role in waste management in India. A phased approach to reducing single-use plastics, which balances sustainability goals with the economic realities of a developing nation.

Understanding the Plastic Pollution Crisis

Plastic Pollution refers to the accumulation of plastic waste in the environment, where it harms ecosystems, wildlife, and human health. This includes single-use items, discarded fishing gear, and non-biodegradable materials that persist for centuries, breaking down into smaller, more hazardous particles.

Types of Plastic Waste

Microplastics (< 5 mm)

Description: Tiny plastic particles less than 5 mm in size.

Sources:

Primary - Intentionally manufactured small plastics like microbeads in cosmetics, industrial scrubbers, synthetic microfibers from textiles, and virgin resin pellets.

Secondary -Result from the breakdown of larger plastic items due to sunlight, abrasion, or other environmental forces.

Concern -They are invisible but highly hazardous, entering soil, water systems, and the human food chain.

Macroplastics (> 5 mm)

Description -Large plastic debris visible to the naked eye.

Examples- Plastic bottles, fishing nets, food containers, packaging materials.

Concern- They cause entanglement and ingestion hazards for animals and break down into microplastics over time.

Single-Use Plastics (SUPs)

Description: Disposable plastics designed for one-time use before being discarded or recycled.

Examples: Plastic bags, straws, cutlery, water bottles, and most food packaging.

The Staggering Scale of Global Plastic Pollution

Annual Production

The world produces over 430 million tonnes (MT) of plastic annually. This volume is projected to double by 2060 on the current trajectory.

Short-Lived Products

About two-thirds of this production consists of short-lived products, primarily packaging, which become waste almost immediately.

Mismanagement

Nearly 46% of plastic waste ends up in landfills, while 22% is mismanaged, leading to environmental leakage.

Link to Fossil Fuels

Plastics are primarily derived from fossilized crude oil and natural gas, making the plastics industry a key component of the fossil fuel economy.

Climate Change Impact

In 2019, the plastics lifecycle generated 1.8 billion metric tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions (3.4% of the global total). By 2040, plastics are expected to account for nearly 20% of global oil consumption.

Marine Pollution

An estimated 11 million tonnes of plastic enters the oceans annually.

India's Plastic Footprint

Top Polluter Status

A recent study published in *Nature* identified India as the world's largest plastic polluter, followed by Nigeria, Indonesia, and China.

Waste Generation

India generates around 3.4 million tonnes (MT) of plastic waste annually.

Low Recycling Rate

Only about 30% of this waste is recycled, with the vast majority being landfilled, burnt, or mismanaged.

Rapidly Rising Consumption

India's plastic consumption is growing at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 9.7%, increasing from 14 MT in 2016–17 to over 20 MT in 2019–20.

The Multi-dimensional Impacts of Plastic Pollution

Environmental Impacts

Marine Ecosystem

Plastic ingestion and entanglement threaten over 800 species. It is projected that plastics may outweigh fish in the oceans by 2050.

Terrestrial Ecosystems

Microplastics degrade soil fertility and cause harm to livestock and wildlife.

Climate Change

As fossil-fuel derivatives, the production and incineration of plastics release significant greenhouse gases.

Human Health Impacts

Chemical Leaching

Plastics release harmful chemicals like Bisphenol-A (BPA) and phthalates, which are linked to hormonal disruption, cancer, and developmental disorders.

Microplastic Ingestion

Recent studies have found microplastics in human blood, placenta, and lungs, with unknown long-term consequences.

Economic Impacts

Marine Economy Losses

The annual economic damage from marine plastic pollution is estimated to be in the billions of dollars, impacting fisheries, coastal tourism, and shipping.

Waste Management Burden

Countries face mounting costs for waste collection and disposal, while valuable resources worth billions are lost.

Key Challenges in Plastic Waste Management

Omnipresence

Plastic has been found everywhere, from Arctic snow to the Mariana Trench, highlighting its transboundary nature.

Lifecycle Emissions

Greenhouse gas emissions occur across the entire plastic lifecycle, not just at disposal.

Mismanaged Waste

Open dumping leads to the formation of massive garbage patches, like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

Spurious Biodegradable Plastics

The lack of robust certification allows fake "biodegradable" plastics to flood the market.

E-Commerce and Food Delivery

The boom in online retail has led to a spike in single-use plastic packaging waste.

Microplastics Crisis

These tiny particles are almost impossible to filter and can travel long distances, even through the atmosphere.

Weak Implementation

Despite regulations like the Plastic Waste Management (PWM) Rules, enforcement and segregation at the local level remain poor.

Role of the Informal Sector

Nearly 70% of India's plastic recycling is handled by the informal sector, often in hazardous conditions, posing challenges for livelihood and safety.

India's Initiatives to Curb Plastic Pollution

India has implemented a multi-pronged strategy involving regulation, innovation, and public participation.

Regulatory Foundations

2009–2018

A series of Plastic Waste Management (PWM) Rules and amendments were introduced, progressively strengthening Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), mandating segregation, and restricting certain plastics.

2014 – Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)

Provided a major push for waste segregation at source and structured collection systems.

2021 – India Plastics Pact

A corporate commitment led by CII and WWF to achieve 100% recyclable/compostable packaging by 2030.

Ban on Single-Use Plastics (SUPs)

2022

A nationwide ban was imposed on specific SUP items, including cutlery, straws, earbuds with plastic sticks, and polystyrene.

Technology and R&D

2022–23

CSIR and Technology Development Board (TDB) projects are focusing on converting plastic to fuel, tiles, and hydrogen.

2022 – Plastic Parks Scheme

10 arks were approved to create an ecosystem for the plastic processing industry.

Ground-Level Innovations and Awareness

Plastic Roads

Over 33,700 km of roads have been constructed using a plastic-bitumen mix.

Community-Driven Recycling

Local solutions like Dharavi's plastic weaving and Pune's ecobricks are gaining traction.

Creative Awareness

Projects like the "Single-Use Plastic Deathbed" in Rishikesh and the "Marine Cemetery" in Kozhikode have raised public consciousness.

Recent Initiatives (2024–25)

Mission LiFE Campaigns

A national mission to end plastic pollution.

City-Level Innovations

Cities like Vadodara (cloth bag vending machines) and Madurai (AI-powered waste monitoring) are pioneering new solutions.

National Portal & Dashboard (June 2025)

A new portal to strengthen EPR transparency and tracking.

Global Initiatives to Tackle Plastic Pollution

Early Environmental Governance

1989/2001

The Basel and Stockholm Conventions addressed hazardous waste movement and persistent organic pollutants, some of which are related to plastics.

Marine Litter Focus

2012–2019

Several UN-led initiatives, including the Global Partnership on Marine Litter and amendments to the Basel Convention, brought global attention to marine plastic pollution.

Regional Responses

EU Single-Use Plastics Directive (2021)

Banned key SUP items and set high recycling targets.

ASEAN Regional Action Plan (2021–25)

Aims to reduce marine plastic debris by 75% by 2025.

Recent UN-Led Actions

2022– UNEA Resolution 5/14

The historic resolution that mandated the negotiation of a global plastic treaty.

New Plastics Economy Global Commitment

An initiative by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and UNEP to engage corporations in cutting virgin plastic use.

The Way Forward

A multi-level, integrated approach is required to effectively tackle the plastic crisis.

Global Scale

Ambitious Treaty

Negotiations must be revived with a focus on production caps, regulating hazardous chemicals, and establishing a dedicated fund for developing nations.

Bridging the North-South Divide

Diplomacy must prioritize technology transfer, financial support, and equitable developmental pathways.

Strengthening Alliances

Platforms like the High Ambition Coalition must be reinforced to deliver a legally binding treaty by 2026.

National Strategy (India)

Scaling Proven Models

Successful initiatives like Recykal (tech-enabled recycling) and plastic-modified roads should be expanded nationwide.

Upgrading Infrastructure

Waste management systems need significant investment in segregation, Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs), and reverse logistics.

Integrating the Informal Sector

India's 1.5 million waste pickers must be integrated into the formal system with social security and fair wages.

Strict EPR Enforcement

Extended Producer Responsibility must be rigorously enforced with penalties and incentives.

Policy and Community Integration

Strengthening Compliance

The ban on SUPs must be backed by strict monitoring and penalties.

Fostering Green Entrepreneurship

Waste-to-wealth start-ups should be supported through credit access and incubation.

Mobilizing Youth and Communities

Nationwide plastic literacy campaigns and school-level drives are crucial for long-term behavioral change.

A Renewed Focus on the 3Rs

Reduce

The first and most critical step is to cut consumption of single-use plastics through taxes, restrictions, and promoting alternatives. Project REPLAN by KVIC is a great example.

Reuse

Promoting the reuse of plastic products, from containers to industrial materials (e.g., in roads), reduces the demand for virgin plastics.

Recycle

Efficiently recycling plastic waste creates economic value, generates employment, conserves fossil fuels, and reduces the burden on landfills. Digital platforms like Recykal are enhancing this value chain.

Conclusion

Effectively managing plastic waste is not just an environmental imperative but a constitutional one that upholds the principles of intergenerational equity. It is critical for strengthening India's commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production) and SDG 14 (Life Below Water), ensuring long-term ecological and economic resilience for all.

Source: https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/plastic-pollution-treaty-fails-as-countries-remain-divided/#:~:text=The%20latest%20talks%20%E2%80%93%20the%20sixth,mechanisms%20to%20implement%20the%20treaty.