

## PLASTICS AT UNEA

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and parties to several global environmental instruments have taken an interest in plastic pollution, especially marine plastic litter and microplastics, recognising it as a serious and rapidly growing issue of global concern which requires an urgent and global response. Following UNEA3 and UNEA4, the UN Environment Program (UNEP) formed an Ad-Hoc Open-Ended Expert Group (AHOEEG) of member states, industry representatives, and civil society experts to analyze information and present options to combat marine plastic litter and microplastics. Updates have previously been reported from the [1st](#) and [2nd](#) meetings, and the Expert Group met for the 3rd time 18 - 22 November 2019, in Bangkok, Thailand.

Members of the [#breakfreefromplastic](#) movement and broader civil society have been active through UNEAs and the AHOEEG meetings to prioritize the [urgency of the global plastic crisis](#) and its harms across the full supply chain and life cycle. The more than 2,000 member organizations of [#breakfreefromplastic](#) worldwide have endorsed the pursuit of a new legally binding global governance structure for plastics, [based on a four-pillar strategy](#).

Past and Current Issues of [Progress on Plastics](#)

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## EXPERT GROUP LONG ON PROCESS, MAKES GAINS ON SUBSTANCE

*Few States Push for Delay, Resist Global Action to Tackle Plastic Pollution*

Dozens of delegates, scientists, and other experts met last week (Nov 18-22) to plan a process for taking stock of activities underway around the world to curb plastic discharge into the world's oceans and identifying the gaps of coverage in those activities. After five days of discussion, the path forward will be complicated but experts remain optimistic that an aggressive work schedule through 2020 will lead to [global action on this urgent issue](#).

The Group is planning to meet twice in the lead-up to UNEA5 (February 2021), with the

dates and locations still to be decided by the Group's Bureau.

The Bureau includes representatives from New Zealand, Kenya, the Russian Federation, Japan, and Guyana, who also served as Chair (New Zealand) and co-facilitators for this meeting. The Bureau will carry forward decisions on future meetings of the Expert Group and will reflect with UNEP on the agenda for the 4th meeting, a topic of significant discussion during this 3rd meeting. Peru and Rwanda both offered to host a future meeting each,

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showing a commitment across regions to address the plastic pollution crisis.

#### *Mandate for Options & Recommendations*

The primary outcome document of last week's meeting outlines guidance to the UNEP Secretariat staff for several pieces of work to prepare for the 4th meeting, building on previous work and fulfilling on the Group's mandate. Indeed, after much discussion, that mandate was affirmed to include the scope of work as outlined in resolutions from both UNEA3 and UNEA4. Meaning the Expert Group is asked to bring to UNEA5:

- Potential response options at the national, regional and international levels, including approaches for voluntary and/or legally binding governance (UNEP/EA.3/Res.7); and
- A stocktaking of activities and actions to address marine plastic litter and microplastics, analysis of the effectiveness of those activities, and an assessment for supportive technical and financial resources (UNEP/EA.4/Res.6)

The guidance clarifies that the stocktaking exercise should be both voluntary and not exhaustive, intending instead to be an overview survey of existing activities. The Expert Group requested, in a single report, a collection of available and possible financial mechanisms and technical resources. These mechanisms could include principles of polluters pay and extended producer responsibility and should address aspects of the issue across the plastic supply chain, as requested by many members of the Expert Group. Lastly, regarding effectiveness, the UNEP Secretariat has been asked to update significantly the methodology originally

proposed, taking into account other existing bodies and work and inviting the Scientific Advisory Committee to provide advice and feedback.



*Creative reuse: a temple of glass bottles*

#### *Making Progress through Process*

This Expert Group has specifically been tasked with generating: a survey of activities; a list of financial and technical resources available to UN Member States; and an analysis of the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of current activities. During the 3rd meeting, efforts by a minority of governments including the US attempted to prolong and complicate consultations on the parameters for collecting information and accomplishing these tasks.

Yet many countries - including members of the European Union, the Nordic Council, several Small Island Developing States, and others - have demonstrated recognition in this Expert Group of the urgency of the plastic pollution problem. These leaders

encouraged the gathered experts to not get too distracted by the process, but rather to move swiftly to take stock of an overview of existing efforts, noting that too much detail is not necessary or inherently useful. Further, the majority of delegations supported learning from existing analyses and work already done, so countries are able to efficiently and collectively progress toward solutions at the global level.

In the months preceding this meeting, countries and regional groups worldwide have declared an interest in pursuing a new global agreement on plastics, including the [Nordic Council](#), the [Caribbean Community CARICOM](#), and the [European Union](#).

Experts from [#breakfreefromplastic](#) contributed significantly to move the Group's work toward acting with urgency. As one representative noted, during the five days of the meeting, an estimated [4.4 million tonnes of plastics were produced](#), approximately [164,000 tonnes](#) of which were emitted into the marine environment.

#### *Prevention vs. Disposal*

Many governments emphasized the need for action along the full plastic supply chain, even as the stocktaking exercise is kept at a high level. By including upstream solutions, countries see opportunities to prevent the creation of plastic waste before it could become marine pollution.

However, many government delegations, which included a number of waste management experts and authorities rather than upstream or policy experts, insisted on keeping the discussion focused primarily on waste management, and even further deflected responsibility to a small number of Asian countries. Harmful waste

management technologies were repeatedly emphasized, including incineration, pyrolysis, and [chemical recycling](#), in spite of known [health](#) and [climate impacts](#).

#### *Microplastics overlooked*

Despite a mandate that includes both marine plastic litter and microplastics, discussions this week have maintained a strong focus on macroplastic pollution. While the comprehensive [guidelines for monitoring plastic litter](#) prepared for this Expert Group pays extensive attention to microplastics, these guidelines were rarely referenced in discussions.

This focus reveals a lack of recognition of the gravity of marine microplastic pollution and the need to consider options to prevent the release of microplastics throughout production, use, and waste.

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#### *Scientific Advisory Committee Selected*

To support the work of the Expert Group, a Scientific Advisory Committee has been appointed by UNEP, made up of nearly 70 scientists working across the issue, from human health, climate, oceanography, marine biology, waste management, and other disciplines. This body will advise UNEP on the production of an assessment on sources, pathways, and hazards of marine plastic litter and microplastics, across the full life cycle of plastics. The SAC is also expected to advise UNEP on recommendations for policies and action on environmentally sound approaches and the reduction of discharge.

The SAC will also be tapped to review proposed methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness of existing actions.

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### Global Waste Trade

The often-toxic impacts of the global trade in plastic waste have become amply clear since China closed its doors to foreign plastic waste in 2018. Global plastic waste flows have since been diverted towards other countries, creating a new wave of environmental harm. This has triggered [amendments to the Basel Convention](#) to control certain global plastic waste flows, which will come into force in January 2021. Meanwhile, environmental harm continues: recently, environmental network IPEN and its members Arnika, Ecoton, and Nexus 3 found that [plastic waste poisons Indonesia's food chain](#), where chicken eggs were found with dioxin levels 70 times the level allowed by European safety standards, due to the burning of plastic waste.

Recycling alone cannot solve the plastic pollution crisis. Plastics can only be recycled a limited number of times before they must be landfilled or burned - harmful practices in their own right. Waste export in the name of 'recycling' should also never be permitted as a cover for dumping or [waste colonialism](#). Governments globally are increasingly requiring the companies responsible to do their part. Crucially, we must prioritize turning off the plastic tap, particularly in the face of an anticipated [tsunami of plastic production](#).

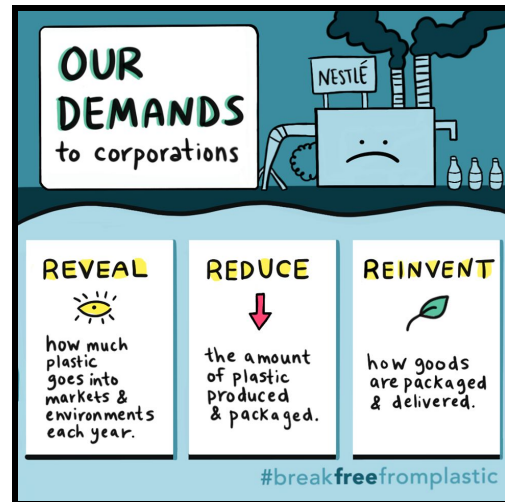
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### Coca-Cola Again Named Top Polluter

In the second volume of an ongoing citizen science and reporting project by [#breakfreefromplastic](#) members around the world, [Coca-Cola was again identified as the world's worst offender for plastic pollution](#). In the waste and brand audit conducted by Greenpeace here in Thailand, Coca-Cola, Nestlé, Ajinomoto,

Mondelēz and Unilever topped the list of international brands locally contributing to the crisis.

A total of 115 community members joined the activities in Thailand to document 6,091 pieces of plastic waste. Coca-Cola alone accounted for 7% of that, with its bottles, cans, cups, labels, packaging, and caps.



The [#breakfreefromplastic](#) movement is collectively calling on corporations, especially those that package food and consumer products to:

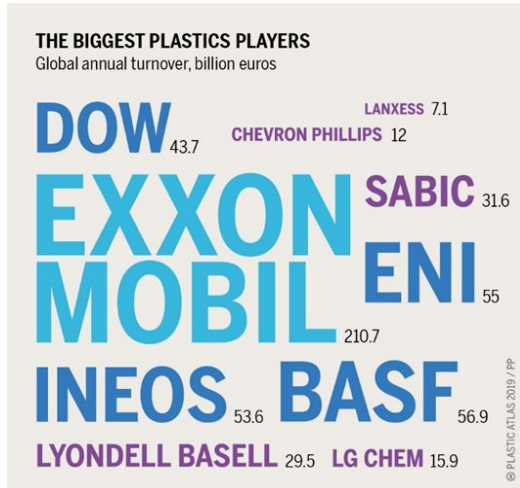
- *Reveal*: Publicly disclose information about the plastics they use and ship;
- *Reduce*: Set annual targets moving toward elimination of single-use;
- *Reinvent*: Invest in reusable and refillable containers in product delivery systems to minimize or even eliminate the need for single-use packaging.

NGOs around the world are calling for [bold corporate leadership](#) to solve the global plastic pollution problem, and governments on every continent are increasingly heeding that call and shifting policy to require it.



## TELLING THE WHOLE STORY: AN ATLAS FOR PLASTICS

*Do You Know all the Pieces of the Plastic Pollution Problem?*



Earlier this month, the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the [#breakfreefromplastic](#) movement published the English-language edition of the Plastic Atlas, a compendium of chapters with dozens of detailed infographics covering the broad range of damages wrought by the plastic pollution crisis along the entire supply chain.

The atlas highlights the scale of the crisis, particularly describing the corporate interests and drivers behind the plastic crisis and the role of plastic for key industrial sectors such as agriculture and tourism. Finally, the atlas presents an overview of key anti-plastic regulations and zero waste

solutions, providing a snapshot of the growing global movement working towards a future free from plastic pollution.

### *Calling for Comprehensive Solutions*

In several coordinated events around the world on November 6, the Heinrich Böll Foundation outlined a clear path forward to address the plastic pollution crisis, without delaying or mincing any words:

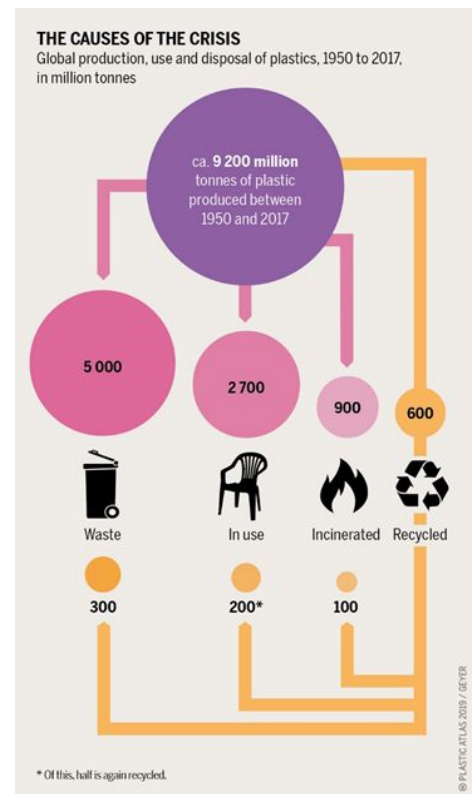
**REDUCE.** Produce less plastic.

**CLOSE THE TAP.** Stop petrochemical expansion in US and Europe

**REUSE AND REFILL.** Create new delivery systems.

**CONSIDER THE LIFE CYCLE.** Including chemicals & microplastics

**CHANGE THE LAW.** A new global convention on plastic should be adopted urgently.



The full Plastic Atlas can be downloaded at: [www.boell.de/en/plasticatlas](http://www.boell.de/en/plasticatlas)

### *Plastics in a New Green Deal?*

During the time this Expert Group has been meeting, urgency has been building worldwide to solve the climate crisis, of which plastics are a significant part. In the Global North, a key emerging theme in proposed policy interventions is a “New Deal”-style set of reforms, reinvestments, and reimaginings, to achieve outcomes of political, economic, and social justice.

Plastics and petrochemicals have a significant place in these proposals. In the EU, the Green Deal is [a hallmark of the new European Commission](#), specifically citing plastics as a priority through the [Single-use Plastics Directive](#). In the US, the specifics of the Green New Deal are being informed by a region severely harmed by plastic pollution: the [Gulf South for a Green New Deal](#) platform specifically calls for a reduction in the production and use of plastics.

As these efforts are centered on justice, they are making significant strides toward ending the export of waste, toxic recycling, and extractive, toxic production to developing countries in the Global South and even to vulnerable areas within the Global North, like the US Gulf South. Throughout the Expert Group meeting and in UNEA discussions, countries have expressed concern about the harms of plastic transferred across borders, especially those locales which receive waste exports or experience an acute burden of plastic pollution through the market-based imposition of single-use packaging.



*NGOs plan expert interventions*

## UPCOMING EVENTS

2 - 5 MAR 2020

Basel Plastic Waste Partnership  
*Seychelles*

Q2 2020

4th Meeting of AHOEEG  
*Location TBD*

2 - 6 JUNE 2020

UN Oceans Conference  
*Lisbon, Portugal*

17 - 18 AUG 2020

Our Oceans Conference  
*Palau*

Q4 2020

5th Meeting of AHOEEG  
*Location TBD*

22 - 26 FEB 2021

[UNEA5](#)  
*Nairobi, Kenya*

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## Partners in Progress on Plastics Update



**#break  
free  
from  
plastic**

[#breakfreefromplastic](https://www.breakfreefromplastic.org) is a global movement envisioning a future free from plastic pollution. Since its launch in September 2016, over 2,000 organisations from across the world have joined the movement to demand massive reductions in single-use plastics and to push for lasting solutions to the plastic pollution crisis. Sign up at [www.breakfreefromplastic.org](https://www.breakfreefromplastic.org).

Editor & contact: Jane Patton, [jpatton@ciel.org](mailto:jpatton@ciel.org)

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