

PLASTICS AT UNEA4

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and 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. An Ad-Hoc Open-Ended Expert Group (AHOEEG) was created and met twice in 2018, [reporting back options for continued work](#) that included calls for a full life-cycle approach to the problem of plastic pollution and solutions for both the prevention and elimination of marine litter. Many aspects of how to strengthen coordination and governance were also discussed, with many countries across all regions calling for a legally binding agreement on marine litter and microplastics.

Representatives from members of the [#BreakFreeFromPlastic](#) movement and broader civil society have been active through UNEA3, the AHOEEG, and now UNEA4 to start conversations about a possible structure for a [new convention on plastics](#). More than 90 organizations worldwide have endorsed this proposed four-pillar strategy, which focuses on: coordination and cooperation of existing mechanisms; binding measures to reduce plastic pollution and harmonize legislation; financial support for implementing activities, in particular for developing countries; and technical support to ensure informed, science-based decision-making and avoid false solutions to the plastic pollution crisis.

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

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4 - 8 MAR: COMMITTEE OF PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVES

Negotiating Resolutions for Global Solutions to Environmental Crisis



Even the monkeys are working hard this week.

Member state representatives, civil society, industry representatives, and UN affiliates gathered this week in Nairobi for the Open-Ended Committee of the Permanent Representatives to UNEP, to discuss a full agenda of proposed resolutions in the lead-up to UNEA4. Members of the [#breakfreefromplastic](#) movement are mainly tracking progress on four resolutions grouped together in one "cluster" so member states can manage the agenda.

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Marine Plastic Litter and Microplastics

After five days of intense discussion, dissection, and consolidation of several proposals into one, the resolution co-authored by Norway, Japan, and Sri Lanka is still in limbo on its outcomes, as member states have not yet reached an agreement on which outcomes should move forward out of UNEA4.

The [#breakfreefromplastic](#) members on the ground in Nairobi have been supporting and advising several state delegations on the key issues surrounding plastic and microplastics, and why they require a global binding treaty to resolve.

As outlined in the preparation documents for UNEA3, there are major gaps in the existing legal frameworks surrounding marine plastic litter which have allowed for the growing crisis. In the time it could take a Working Group to begin framing and discussing a new global governance architecture, countries and industries could begin innovating in earnest on preventative solutions to curb the current flow of plastics into oceans and even into landfills. Recent history has proven that while strictly voluntary measures will not be effective at meaningfully stopping plastic pollution or marine litter in the long-term, the process of framing and negotiating a governance architecture could be an important catalyst for national and international action.

Many small island states and allies from the Global North have heeded the call for urgency and action broadcast by NGOs, marine scientists, and frontline communities for decades, and have been supporting the creation of a Working Group by UNEA4 that will explore options for governance

and make recommendations to UNEA5. Several prominent opponents remain, however, as doubt remains strong among some countries as to the extent of the problem and whether to include full life cycle impacts of plastic in solutions.

No paragraphs of this resolution have been fully accepted by member states, and negotiation will continue through the weekend.

“Creer que el problema de la contaminación por plásticos se soluciona gestionando mejor los desechos ha sido el paradigma que ha predominado en los últimos 60 años,” said Alberto Quesada Rojas, advocacy advisor for Marviva Foundation Costa Rica. “El resultado son océanos, suelos y aires contaminados, así como afectación a la salud pública. A nivel global urge que la ANUMA-4 decida caminar hacia una nueva estructura de gobernanza con un enfoque de ciclo de vida que ayude a prevenir la contaminación por plásticos en todas sus formas. El mejor residuo, es el que no se genera.”

[“Believing that the problem of plastic pollution is solved by better waste management has been the dominant paradigm for 60 years,” said Alberto Quesada Rojas, advisor advocate for Marviva Foundation Costa Rica. “The result is ocean, soil, and air pollution, as well as harms to public health. At a global level, it is urgent that UNEA4 decides to move toward a new governance structure with a life cycle approach that helps prevent contamination by plastics in all its forms. The best waste is the kind that is not generated in the first place.”]



Not quite the real thing...

Innovative Solutions for Waste Management

Originally proposed by the League of Arab States in partnership with Chile, Sri Lanka, and Turkey, this resolution called for preventative measures as part of sound waste management, including Zero Waste programs and bans on free single-use bags. There were certainly areas for improvement, as outlined in [comments submitted by BFFP member GAIA](#).

As the resolution has gone through its first few readings, progress has been made and some language has been stepped back. Reference to Zero Waste projects has remained, though the paragraph is not fully agreed to. Language on eliminating subsidies that keep prices low and disincentivize recycling has been added, only to be vehemently opposed by some states. Calls for national bans on the free giveaway of single-use products has been suggested for deletion.

While several paragraphs of this resolution have been fully accepted by member states, negotiation will continue through the weekend.

Phasing Out Single-Use Plastics Products

India's resolution to phase-out single-use plastics by 2025 was originally considered for consolidation with other proposed resolutions, in light of how many overlaps it seemed to have with the Marine Plastic Litter and Microplastics and Innovative Solutions for Waste Management resolutions. Yet the resolution has been given full consideration by member states, though some countries made their position clear from the start that they thought the resolution was misguided and unneeded, standing by the assertion that the only plastic pollution problem is waste management and that single-use plastics have benefits (which remain unclear).

The negotiated text so far has weaker language on the harms caused to the environment by plastic, especially single-use plastic, and recognition of the health impacts of plastics has been removed. It no longer proposes strong global action with a fixed timeline but still encourages member states to take some national action, though the urgency is muted from the original text.

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Sound Management of Chemicals & Waste

This resolution, proposed by the EU, also includes provisions calling for a reduction in single-use packaging, in addition to an ambitious call for improving the framework for future coordination on chemicals policy and strengthening the Strategic Approach

to International Chemicals Management (SAICM).

In just its first two readings, some countries have suggested removing references to the need for a new ambitious framework or increased coordination. However, the references that call for “minimisation of

packaging materials and the discouragement of planned obsolescence of products” have been agreed to.

While many paragraphs of this resolution have been fully accepted by member states, negotiation will continue through the weekend.

PLASTICS ARE A GROWING GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS

A [groundbreaking and comprehensive report](#) on the harmful health impacts of plastic through the entire supply chain was recently released by the Center for International Environmental Law, revealing the direct and environmental exposure of humans to toxic chemicals and microplastics in our daily lives. Nearly every person on Earth is exposed to the toxicity of plastic almost daily, and few places in the environment have so far been untouched by the resulting visible pollution.

This report makes it clear: the conversation on plastic pollution must now extend beyond waste management to include the toxic impacts of those very waste management practices, and consider the toxicity of plastic at other stages

throughout its life cycle: extraction, manufacture, consumer use, and then environmental exposure.

One of the most striking details in the report is the impacts on human and environmental health from microplastics, released throughout the plastic supply chain. Microplastics are so pervasive and difficult to clean or contain that the most feasible solution for them is a phaseout of primary microplastics and serious preventative measures for secondary microplastics - like a reduction in production and use of plastics overall.

Read [the report's conclusions here](#). You can tweet at, email, or even write a letter to your government representatives to make sure they've read it, too.



7 - 8 MAR: GLOBAL MAJOR GROUPS & STAKEHOLDER FORUM

NGOs maintain right to speak, full life cycle of plastic, feasibility of phase-out

In the days leading up to UNEA4, civil society, women, indigenous peoples, private sector representatives, and some member state participants gathered to discuss their concerns and coordinate positions leading into the formal assembly next week. Through the Major Groups system at the UN, civil society and other interests have the ability to engage member states in their proposed resolutions and influence the outcomes that will matter to those most affected by the issues at hand.

Major Groups have a guaranteed observer status in plenary sessions of UNEA and can occasionally be given the floor to speak, but their presence in the contact groups and informal discussions is entirely up to the discretion of member states, and they are very limited in their ability to take the floor. This UNEA has more registrants than any before it, and many Major Groups representatives are attending for the first time and are still learning the procedures.

In the days leading up to the Forum, there was a small crisis when Major Groups representatives were asked to leave one of the cluster groups discussing significant resolutions and were told they'd be kept out of other cluster groups, too. New Major Groups representatives and overzealous note-takers from the Secretariat led to Member States feeling like the representatives had overstepped. In what felt like a coordinated resistance from member states intent on avoiding the input of civil society, the Member Groups were hastily demanded to leave that room and

another room at the same time. Thanks to some expert negotiating from a co-chair of the Women's Major Group, the presence of Member Groups in contact groups was restored, but the representatives were cautioned severely against participating too much in the process or even in gathering for meetings, photos, or demonstrations around the UN campus without prior permission.

Stakeholders Uphold right to Speak

The morning panel on the [first day of the Forum](#) addressed the progress and obstacles to progress since UNEA3. Panelists also discussed ways to engage with member States to hold them accountable to their commitments and the linkages between the UNEA4 theme of innovation and the proposed resolutions.

In response to the first question, Neth Dano with the ETC Group called us all into a future where the concerns of people fighting for their lives and their communities are not dismissed out of hand. New technologies, she reminded us, often have severely detrimental environmental impacts in the long and short-term, and decisions to even experiment with them should not be made despite calls for caution from impact communities or their allies. "More and more technologies are impinging on environmental [human] rights."

When Giulia Carlini from the Center for International Environmental Law took the

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floor, she expounded on the need for meaningful participation of civil society and stakeholders at UNEA. She noted the Rio+20 outcome document "The Future We Want", in which member states committed to ensure active participation of all relevant stakeholders and explored new mechanisms to promote transparency and effective engagement of civil society. "This commitment should not be just ticking a box and inviting us to UNEA," Giulia said. "It should be having us in the room and part of the discussion where decisions are made."



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But some Major Groups appear to be over-represented and over-valued at UNEA and in its resolutions. Giulia presented an analysis of recent UNEA resolutions, finding that the private sector and industry were mentioned in nearly 65% of resolutions, while civil society and other stakeholders were mentioned in roughly half. While industry is not allowed to engage directly with the UNEA process, they are represented here by the Business & Industry Major Group, made up of trade groups that work directly for and on behalf of business interests across the world. That

influence appears to play out in the way resolutions are negotiated, in the clearly friendly relationship enjoyed between member state delegates and industry representatives, and in the way industry interests are often consistently embedded in resolutions while the interests and concerns of communities are often ignored.

As the discussion got more into the specifics of solutions to plastic pollution, part of the theme of last year's UNEA3, panelists reinforced the challenges in consistent, measurable action. "We can try to hammer a nail with a screwdriver, and we've all tried it in a pinch. Sometimes that helps us get by, but what we really need is the right tool for the right job," said Christopher Chin from the Center for Oceanic Awareness, Research, and Education. "That's exactly what it's like with plastic pollution; several regional and global instruments exist that address plastic pollution in one form or another, but even if these are revised and strengthened (and they should be), they still won't do the job. What we need to add to our toolbox is a new legally binding global treaty."



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Presenting the Full Life Cycle

In the afternoon, several NGO representatives presented on life cycle approaches to resource efficiency. Delphine Lévi Alvarès, the European coordinator of [#breakfreefromplastic](#), wowed the audience with a presentation on the full life cycle of plastic. Key to Delphine's presentation is the call that [#breakfreefromplastic](#) makes for corporate responsibility for the plastic pollution crisis, and the work companies will need to do change their business models of product and food delivery to eliminate single-use plastic and packaging.



"But we're also working on pushing the good alternatives to mainstream new circular business models," Delphine said. She gave examples of companies using reusable containers for takeaway food and systems of takeaway reusable cups - systems being adopted by an increasing number of restaurants. Cities also have incredible opportunity to prevent the creation of waste. Her presentation highlighted the Zero Waste Cities Master Plan and the models built and implemented by communities in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and other places.

The presentation showed that phase out of single-use plastics is indeed feasible, achieved through refillable delivery systems

for food and consumer goods and community participation in waste collection and separation. Cities and communities across the globe, including leading areas of the Global South, are adopting local programs to curb the accumulation of plastic locally.

However, Delphine noted, the plastics industry is still planning a 30% increase in production capacity over the next five years. In order to meaningfully address plastic pollution, that planned development must be stopped, across all countries. The most expedient way to achieve this is a global convention that sets measurable goals for production reduction.

Chemicals & Waste

In the [afternoon of the second day](#), Griffins Ochieng from BFFP member CEJAD Kenya facilitated a discussion on chemicals and waste. Focusing on the resolutions detailed above, the conversation was on the need for UNEA to have a mandate to build toward a treaty for hazardous chemicals. When considering the full life cycle of plastics, health and other impacts must be considered, and even in conversations about waste management, a just transition of wastepickers must be considered in our efforts to develop new processes.



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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY AT UNEA4

March 8 marks International Women's Day. UN Environment is taking steps to try to bring the participation in UNEA to parity in terms of numbers, including posting to the app statistics on the gender representation of past UNEAs. The facts are stark: at the current rate of gender balance change, UNEA will not reach male-female gender parity until 2037.

The Women's Major Group is a leading voice on issues of both representational and power parity at the UN and UNEA. "Gender-responsive, ecosystem-based, community-driven and holistic approaches to environment and sustainability that are essential for women's livelihoods and for the planet must be at the core of all solutions," said WMG co-chair Priscilla Achakpa in a statement to commemorate the day.



Feminists call for a healthy environment.

Like many forms of pollution, plastic pollution has an [imbalanced harmful impact on women](#). Not only do women do much of the household shopping and cleaning around the world, but women also have the burden of disproportionate exposure to the endocrine-disrupting chemicals from plastics in their use of cosmetics and personal care products. One of the major campaigns for women this year has been "Plastic Free Menstrual Hygiene", an oft-avoided but crucial health and safety issue for women around the world.

When it comes to waste management, where much of the UNEA conversation on plastic pollution has focused, women disproportionately earn their livelihoods from informal waste picking sectors, often collecting lower value plastics than men in the profession. These conclusions are clear despite the dearth of gender-differentiated data to drive analytical discussions.

UNEA4 is the first with a gender-specific resolution, focused on Women and the Environment and sponsored by Costa Rica. But, the WMG strongly attests, participation in the UNEA process is about much more than words in a resolution or the number of female-identifying registrants. It's about the impacts of the decisions made at UNEA on the rights and lives of actual women and femmes, and the value for women's voices in the process by which those decisions are made.

HOLDING CORPORATIONS ACCOUNTABLE

Philippines Waste Audits: Nestle, Unilever Biggest Polluters

Earlier this week, [#breakfreefromplastic](#) member GAIA released [Plastics Exposed](#), a snapshot on the global plastic pollution problem with a focus on waste and brand audits on households in the Philippines. The report identifies the types of waste, including those from particular brands, that the average Filipino uses in a year - a phenomenon largely driven by the consumer goods and food products available to them.



*Froilan Grate of Mother Earth Foundation
from [Greenpeace](#) photo essay*

These audits reveal striking figures: The average Filipino person uses 591 sachets (or multi-layered packets) every year, among other staggering amounts of packaging waste, in order to meet essential needs. Though the exact amount of plastic pushed into these markets is not clear, the two top polluters found in the Philippines audits are multinational companies Nestle and Unilever.

The conclusions are clear: corporations are pushing much more waste in the form of

single-use plastic and packaging onto Filipino communities than could possibly be handled by local infrastructure. As GAIA clearly states: "The problem is the huge amount of single-use plastics being produced, not the way the waste is managed."

"They've created a monster!"

[#breakfreefromplastic](#) member Greenpeace is at again: they're bringing the full-force of their [recognizable ships to bring visibility to the plastic pollution](#) crisis.

And they're asking you to be part of it! You can take action on your own social media to show corporations how scary their plastic is.

Here's how it works: Collect a piece of plastic pollution and put a face on it, or get your friends together to make a giant plastic monster. Put those photos on social media, tag the brands on that plastic pollution, and tag [#PlasticMonster](#) in your posts.



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Upcoming Events

11-15 MAR 2019

[UNEA4](#)

Nairobi, Kenya

12 MAR 2019

Side Event: [Gender, Oceans, and Plastic Expo Hub](#)

14 MAR 2019

Side Event: [The NextWave of Innovation Expo Hub](#)

[Green Tent Programming](#)

Nairobi, Kenya

[Clean Seas Tent Programming](#)

Nairobi, Kenya

[Full Side Event Programming](#)

Nairobi, Kenya

18-21 MAR 2019

[BRS COP Regional Prep Meeting](#)

Nairobi, Kenya

2-4 APR 2019

[4th SAICM OEWG Meeting](#)

Montevideo, Uruguay

29 APR - 10 MAY 2019

[BRS COP](#)

Geneva, Switzerland

Partners in Progress on Plastics Update



**#break
free
from
plastic**

#breakfreefromplastic 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.

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