

PLASTICS AT UNEA

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and parties to several global environmental instruments have taken an interest in plastic pollution, recognising it as a serious and rapidly growing issue of global concern which requires an urgent and global response. In 2017, the UN Environment Program (UNEP) formed an Ad-Hoc Open-Ended Expert Group (AHEG) of member states, industry representatives, and other stakeholder experts to analyze information and report options for combating marine plastic litter and microplastics. Updates have previously been reported from the [1st](#), [2nd](#), and [3rd](#) meetings, and the AHEG met for the 4th time on 9 - 13 November 2020, in a virtual environment.

Members of the [#breakfreefromplastic](#) movement and broader stakeholder groups have been active throughout these meetings to prioritize the [urgency of the global plastic crisis](#) and the harms exacted across the full supply chain and life cycle of plastics. The more than 1,800 worldwide member organizations of [#breakfreefromplastic](#) have endorsed the pursuit of a new legally binding global governance structure for plastics, based on a four-pillar strategy. [Our vision is available in all UN languages.](#)

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

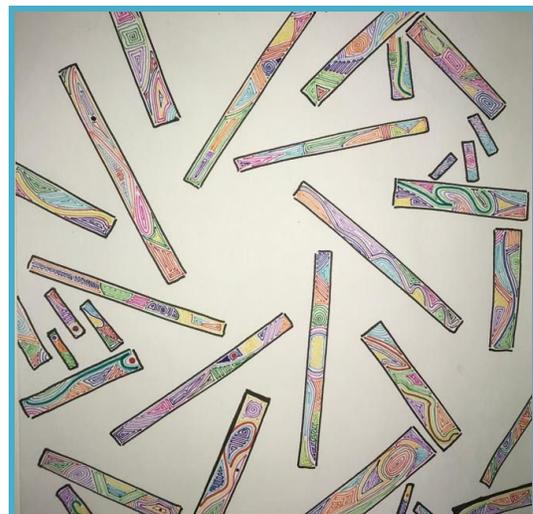
EXPERT GROUP COMPLETES ITS MANDATE, REPORTS BACK

New International Agreement Supported as Key Response Option Among Others to Report back to UNEA5 (now scheduled for February 2022)

Over the five days of this final meeting of the Expert Group - sometimes over the sounds of children in the background of virtually-connected participants - a crescendo of States recognized the need for UNEA5 to create an International Negotiating Committee for a new global agreement on the crisis of plastic pollution.

The AHEG made tremendous progress in two years, documenting the multi-faceted crisis of plastic pollution globally. Since those facets have taken shape, a majority of State and stakeholder experts have converged around the need for a global treaty to address the problem. The AHEG even considered at length possible treaty elements proposed by several experts, which will be detailed in the Chair's

Summary and report for consideration of UNEA5.



Meeting virtually has its challenges, but the doodles have started to get more elaborate

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Neutrality or Reality?

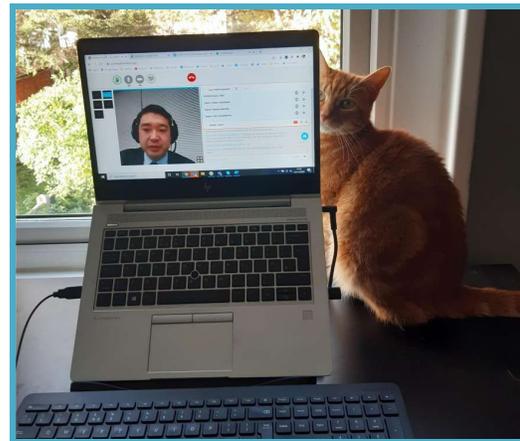
As discussion began on the Chair's Summary of the entire AHEG's work - including all four meetings since 2018 - the majority of participants were notably focused on ensuring the preferred response option of a global agreement is presented to UNEA5 as such. While a small handful of countries, including the United States, Canada, Japan, and Saudi Arabia, made statements focused on national action plans, many countries took the floor to speak on behalf of themselves and sometimes dozens of other countries in their region in support of a global agreement. Even the World Plastics Council and the International Council of Chemical Associations spoke in strong support for a new global framework on plastics.

Yet the written draft of the Chair's Summary, and the verbal summary reflections given throughout the meeting, presented all response options seemingly equally, giving no weight at all to the preponderance of countries supporting one particular option - the global agreement. Additionally, despite consideration of proposals for what elements of such a global agreement could be over the course of several meetings of the AHEG spanning more than a year, the draft of the original Chair's Summary included no mention of these proposals or details.

The occasionally tense discussion on this pattern included discussions of "neutrality" and "objectivity" in the need to highlight all response options discussed by the AHEG. But as several participants pointed out, staying neutral is not contradictory to plainly recognizing that the majority of the room indicated the need to advance towards a new global framework. Quite the

opposite, in fact: Obscuring what was obvious to everyone in the room would be interpreted as its own form of bias.

By the closing day of the meeting, the Chair's Summary had been updated to reflect the depth of discussions on a new global instrument and its possible elements, addressing the concerns up to then of several participants.



Joining from home makes for unusual and adorable meeting participants

Pacific Islands, African States Express Support for a New Global Agreement

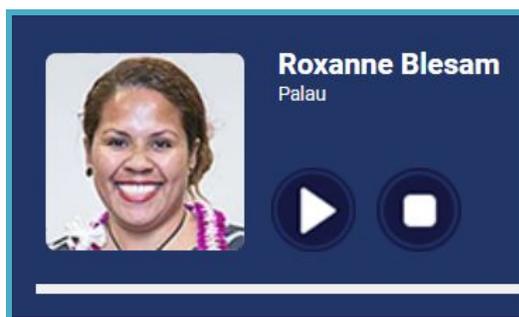
In previous AHEG meetings, some of the countries most adversely affected by the world's plastic pollution problem have been largely absent from the discussion, including notably countries from the Pacific Islands and the African region.

This AHEG meeting has been unique, in that several countries from both of these regions have been present and vocal in their calls for urgent action on plastic pollution, especially marine plastic pollution, despite in some cases very unfortunate timing for the meeting. (One representative from the Pacific Islands pointed out that the entire meeting was

being held in the middle of the night for her.)

Over the last year, members of the African Group have jointly and repeatedly expressed support for a new global agreement to address plastic pollution. In the [2019 AMCEN Durban Declaration](#), the 54 countries of the African Region committed themselves to “engage more effectively on global governance,” including toward “a new global agreement on plastic pollution that takes a comprehensive approach to addressing the full life cycle of plastics.” In February of this year, the decision adopted at the [Bamako Convention COP](#) reinforced this position, calling for “new legally binding global agreement to combat plastic pollution, covering the full life cycle of plastics.”

Representatives from the region brought that support into this week’s meeting. As government experts from Rwanda, Kenya, Gambia, and Guinea took the floor in this 4th AHEG, they repeatedly and collectively showed support for a new international agreement to address plastic pollution.



[Source: IISD/ENB Newsletter](#)

Another previously under-represented constituency which made a strong showing in this virtual meeting, despite the unfortunate timing for much of the region, is the large ocean small island states of the

Pacific. Representatives from the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, and Palau, speaking on behalf of 14 Pacific Islands nations, supported rather poetically by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), made interventions across the five days of the meeting to reinforce the region’s support for the “development of a global legal framework to address marine litter and microplastics,” already declared in the [Pacific Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter](#), published in 2018, which was endorsed by Pacific leaders through the Kainaki II Declaration.

Another large ocean small island State, Trinidad & Tobago, took the floor on the last day of the AHEG meeting to reinforce this call for a new global agreement on plastic pollution, citing the [St. John’s declaration](#) made by the 14 states of the Caribbean Community in 2019, which specifically named the AHEG and identified “global legally binding mechanisms” as their priority in engaging with this group.

Indigenous Peoples Knowledge Missing, Should be Prioritized in UNEA5 Outcome

In reflecting on the findings of the stock-taking exercise, reported during this meeting, several States and Stakeholders took note of the lack of traditional knowledge and Indigenous Peoples engagement. Kiribati called on the AHEG to remember UNEP’s commitments and operating principles, which include involvement of Indigenous Peoples - yet there has been very little participation from Indigenous Peoples so far in these discussions. Indeed, as SPREP representatives pointed out on the last day, this call for Indigenous Peoples expertise

and knowledge was not even included in the Chair's draft Summary of the AHEG.

This glaring lack can and should be remedied as UNEA5 makes decisions following the AHEG's work and report, ideally toward the creation of an International Negotiation Committee to address the issue of plastic pollution. The voices, scientific knowledge, and experience of Indigenous Peoples around the world will be a key driver in the development of a just global treaty on plastics.

Industry Supports Global Framework

In a somewhat surprising turn, representatives from both the World Plastics Council and the International Council of Chemical Associations made interventions during the meeting to echo the call from a majority of AHEG participants for a new global framework to address plastic pollution and marine plastic litter. The plastic and chemicals industries appear to be clearly echoing the collective call from their customers, the recognized consumer brands participating in the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's New Plastics Economy program, who published with WWF [a business case for a new treaty on plastics](#) just last month.



Source: [IISD/ENB Newsletter](#)

Several reports published earlier this year have articulated both the large [financial risks facing companies who rely on single-use packaging](#) in their business models, and the case for how reusable systems can mitigate those risks and [dramatically reduce plastic pollution from non-recyclable packaging](#). Even as the world is scrambling to keep people safe and healthy in the time of COVID, [reusable and refillable systems are the preferred and profitable alternative](#) to single-use packaging.

Climate, Health, Microplastics Missing

As was the case in the [3rd AHEG meeting in Thailand in 2019](#), discussions this week were very light on specific concerns regarding the unique and global crisis of microplastics, despite its prominence in the mandate for the creation of this AHEG.

This has had the effect of concentrating some countries' interventions on waste management and National Action Plans, neither of which are appropriate to address the preponderance of both microplastics and nanoplastics in the marine and terrestrial environments worldwide. While it is true that addressing macroplastic can in some ways reduce the microplastics fragment from larger plastics, primary microplastics are eminently transboundary and cannot possibly be addressed by catchment systems or waste management alone.

Despite [growing evidence](#) of the [human health crisis caused by plastic](#) manufacture, packaging, and the resultant plastic pollution in the environment, this week's conversation contained precious few references to human or environmental health, even with regard to marine plastic litter. (Note: The first sentence of this

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paragraph includes four different studies published this year on this worsening crisis.)



The flora is a little more familiar this year.

A pattern was clear among States who did mention human health concerns over plastics, including Trinidad & Tobago, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Philippines, and Costa Rica - states heavily dependent on marine food sources. Additionally, the Secretariat of the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) spoke of the ways that that entity can support the eventual response options chosen by UNEA5. As the Secretariat noted, plastics contain chemicals considered to be harmful to the environment and to human health, which is SAICM's primary concern.

While these States, organizations, and individuals, along with civil society, continue to sound the alarm about the human health crisis underlying our conversation on plastic pollution and marine plastic litter, the formal discussions at UNEA5 should also take up this concern, as it will be essential to addressing the full life cycle impacts of plastics in any new global agreement.

UNEP ED Addresses AHEG

At the start of Friday's sessions, the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, Inger Andersen, addressed the AHEG to thank it for its work and reinforce the urgency of coordinated responses to the plastic pollution problem.



UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen

Ms. Andersen, who had just published an [opinion in the Bangkok Post](#) on the international trade of plastic waste, reinforced that the strategies and work plans for UNEP in the coming years will remain focused on climate, nature and biodiversity, and pollution and waste. She further reinforced that the entire life cycle of plastics must be addressed and that the issue cannot be approached from only one side. "Expectations are very high for UNEP and UNEA," she said, "and for action [on plastics] at UNEA5."

When considering the path forward toward UNEA5 in this unusual period, Ms. Andersen reminded the AHEG that UNEA5 will take place in two pieces, one virtual and largely procedural in February 2021 and another more substantive session planned for February 2022.

Ms. Andersen encouraged work on addressing plastic pollution to continue in

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that time, in order to maintain the momentum coming out of this at times high-energy meeting. Indeed, the Executive Director even offered space to hold informal meetings on the topic in advance of February 2022, something reinforced in the Chair's Summary of the meeting and in his closing statements.

The details of these meetings remain undefined, but there appears to be energy from AHEG participants to pursue this work as urgently as possible.



The pups also weren't loving the time zone

UN SR on Toxics Supports Treaty

A passionate appeal to the centrality of both human health and a rights-based approach to solving the plastic pollution crisis came from a strong intervention from [Dr. Marcos Orellana, the Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights](#), delivered on the last day of the meeting.

Dr. Orellana emphasized the criticality of a rights-based approach along the entire life cycle of plastics to future discussions of policy solutions. Referring to the "silent assault" from plastics across the life cycle

on the rights of children, fishing communities, workers, users, and other countless individuals worldwide, he stated:

"Given the global risks posed by the life cycle of plastics, the elaboration of a single, global instrument is best placed to tackle the problem in a coherent and effective manner."

Breaking News: Permits Suspended

As the AHEG meeting was progressing, two local communities on either side of the Atlantic Ocean were celebrating the suspension of permits previously issued for plastics-producing mega-plants.

In Louisiana, United States, local challenges to the proposed Formosa Plastics Group polyethylene and polypropylene facility [resulted in the suspension of the facility's permit to destroy wetlands](#). Construction is currently stopped while the permit is under review. In Antwerp, Belgium, fourteen civil society associations also successfully challenged the issuance of a deforestation permit for INEOS' 'Project One,' set to also produce polyethylene and polypropylene from fracked natural gas imported from the US. The Flemish government [announced the suspension of the permit just today](#) (November 13), citing an inadequate assessment of the global environmental effects of the project.

As the need to limit and more heavily restrict plastic production was mentioned by several experts throughout the two-year span of the AHEG, it is notable that these planned projects to increase plastic production are facing successful resistance on environmental and human health grounds from local communities.

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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 1,900 non-governmental organizations and individuals 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. These organizations share the common values of environmental protection and social justice, which guide their work at the community level and represent a global, unified vision. Learn more at www.breakfreefromplastic.org.

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