

PLASTICS AT UNEA

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and parties to several international environmental instruments have recognized plastic pollution as a serious and rapidly growing issue of concern that requires an urgent and global response. Since 2017, the UN Environment Program (UNEP) and member states have organized a series of meetings to discuss options for combating marine plastic litter and microplastics. Due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the UNEA5 meeting is being held in two parts - one virtually ("UNEA5.1") in February 2021 and one in person ("UNEA5.2") scheduled for February 2022.

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 member organizations of [#BreakFreeFromPlastic](#) have endorsed the pursuit of a new legally binding global governance structure for plastics. [Our vision is available in all UN languages.](#)

Issues 1 - 13 of [Progress on Plastics](#) are available in English.

PLASTICS TREATY HAS BIG MOMENT EVEN AT LIMITED UNEA5.1

At least 40 countries expressed support for new global agreement on plastic pollution

Supporters of a global solution to the worldwide plastic pollution crisis left this month's UNEA5 virtual sessions encouraged by the strong support for a new global agreement shown by a large and diverse set of Member States. Plastics were a small part of the so-called "UNEA5.1" agenda, which was devoted to governance for the coming year, such as the Medium-Term Strategy, administrative, and budget matters. Among many other pressing environmental issues, [the message from the online conference](#) highlighted only the need for the in-person UNEA5.2 in 2022 to continue the progress made on solutions to marine plastic litter and microplastics.

But a series of forums, side events, and panels adjacent to the conference centered the discussion on plastics, plastic pollution, and related issues like e-waste and chemicals. These events gave many countries and stakeholders the opportunity

to endorse action toward a new global agreement to address the plastics crisis.

President of UNEA5, Sveinung Rotevatn of Norway, said it best during the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) meeting:

"The push for a legally binding agreement has gotten ever stronger over the past year. A lot of countries, including my own, are pushing for a new agreement. There is a lot of momentum, which is a good thing."



H.E. Sveinung Rotevatn, President of UNEA5

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According to the notes of participating [#BreakFreeFromPlastic](#) members, the countries speaking during UNEA5.1 on the need for a new agreement to address plastic pollution included: the European Union on behalf of its 27 member states (plus Montenegro, Serbia, Ukraine) in addition to individual interventions from Portugal, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, and an additional statement from Germany on behalf of itself, Ghana, and Ecuador; Fiji, Kenya; Iceland; Norway; Switzerland; Russia; and the United Kingdom.

Reinforcing the need for action on three ongoing global crises - climate, pollution, and biodiversity - the European Union weighed in during the CPR, joined by Ukraine, Montenegro, and Serbia, to build on the progress made toward a new global agreement on plastics. Reiterating President Putin's statements at the virtual World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting in Davos this year, the Russian delegation spoke during the UNEA5.1 Leadership Dialogue of their support to create an intergovernmental negotiation process to address marine plastic litter and microplastics. "It is important that UNEP devotes sufficient attention to a comprehensive assessment of impact of new technologies throughout the life cycle, including the extraction of necessary resources and the production and disposal of various components," the Russian delegate said.

Throughout the month's events, Kenya emphasized their early and forward leadership on the move toward a new global agreement. Colombia spoke to the need to reduce the use of plastics and standardize circular economy practices worldwide. In all, at least 40 countries

spoke during UNEA5.1, the CPR, and surrounding events about the need for new global governance on plastic pollution, addressing a range of issues along the full life cycle of plastic.

A statement from the Global Major Groups and Stakeholders delivered late in the agenda also reiterated the need for UNEA5.2 to '[build forward better](#),' calling for creating an intergovernmental negotiating committee with a mandate to address the full life cycle of plastics. The Major Groups also affirmed that the Stockholm+50 Conference will be a significant occasion to boost the development of future international instruments, such as the legally binding agreement to tackle plastic pollution. Finally, the statement urged Member States to prioritize an open and inclusive process in these discussions, ensuring all stakeholders are engaged in policy developments. (The full statement is [available here](#).)

Other notable developments:

- A Group of Friends to Combat Marine Plastic Pollution will be launched in Nairobi, to complement the existing Group of Friends based in New York. It will be chaired by Portugal and Kenya.
- Ghana, Ecuador, and Germany are working together to host a dedicated Ministerial Conference on marine litter and plastic pollution in the third quarter of 2021. A panel discussion in the first weeks of March should provide more detail.

Highlights from Key Events



Japheth Micheni Ntiba, Minister, Kenya

NEW TREATY VITAL TO OCEAN HEALTH

Co-hosted by UNEP and the government of Kenya, this side event brought together a wide range of speakers to discuss the harms to ocean sustainability from plastic pollution. Peter Thomson, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean, prepared participants for the "long, hard engagement" that must be fought against the petrochemical industry to confront the plastic plague. "[Imagine this battle could make our drawn-out struggle with the tobacco industry look like a bun fight.](#)"

During this active panel discussion, Kenya, Portugal, and the UK all supported action toward a new global agreement, and even the US indicated a "reinvigoration" of international environmental policy engagement from the country's new president. The US delegate specifically referenced a recently-adopted law that includes provisions for negotiating a new international agreement on marine plastic pollution.

Representatives from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) emphasized the possibilities for a new governance regime on plastics, and stakeholders from WWF

continued their call for a new treaty on plastics, highlighting [the possibilities for business and industry.](#)

REGIONAL ACTION IS NOT ENOUGH

During the events surrounding UNEA5.1, IASS Potsdam took the opportunity to launch and discuss their new report, [Stronger Together: The role of regional instruments in strengthening global governance of marine plastic pollution.](#)

The report takes a look at four main types of regional agreements:

- Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans (e.g., OSPAR, HELCOM, etc.);
- Regional Economic Orgs (like APEC, ASEAN, and the EU);
- Regional Fishing Bodies (like those covering regional fishing management or specific fish species such as ICCAT and WCPFC);
- Large Marine Ecosystem activities (like Strategic Action Programmes)

It also includes a detailed case study on marine litter management in the Mediterranean Sea.

The report concludes that regional instruments are clearly an important part of an integrated approach to curbing marine plastic pollution. But they have serious limitations which a new global agreement could address. Such an agreement would harmonize efforts and provide an overarching strategy to achieve common objectives - including developing minimum standards, shared indicators, sustainable product design, global liability and compensation for pollution by plastic, shared indicators, and global reviews and assessments.

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Pernilla Arhlin, Sweden

During the launch event, Sweden expressed optimism at seeing so much widespread support for a new global agreement. The delegate also strongly called for the new global agreement to address the whole life cycle of plastics.

The [full recording of the panel event](#) is available through the IASS Potsdam website.

PLASTICS ARE A BUSINESS RISK

Included in the packed agenda of the Science-Policy-Business Forum (SPBF) held in the days between the CPR and UNEA5.1 were several sessions focused on plastic pollution.



Tina Ngata, Indigenous & human rights advocate

During the February 19 panel on how the industry can identify and mitigate business risks posed by marine plastic litter, several stakeholders spoke of the need for a new

global agreement as a key solution, among other options.

[Tina Ngata](#) reminded participants of the strategic value of Indigenous leadership in addressing plastic pollution and other environmental crises. Indigenous peoples are commonly left out of discussing and negotiating multilateral environmental agreements - yet they have been managing marine and terrestrial areas well for millennia. So when it comes to negotiating a new global treaty on plastics:

"Centering us is not just a matter of rights; it's a matter of success."

[Melissa Wang](#), a scientist with Greenpeace, emphasized the ways a new global agreement on plastics can - and should - hold polluters accountable. When it comes to plastics, she said, *"rewards are privatized while risks are socialized."* Policy solutions presented in a new treaty can rectify the market failure represented by plastics.



Dr. Melissa Wang, Greenpeace

Further speakers elaborated on the market economics of plastics which just aren't adding up, highlighting the need for new economics and new approaches to how we make, use, and manage plastics.

The [full recording of the panel event](#) is available here.

LCAs DO NOT ADDRESS LITTER IMPACTS

Also launched during the SPBF was a new report on what insights life cycle assessments (LCAs) can provide decision makers in their efforts to address plastic pollution.

The report's authors readily admit that the relevance of LCAs is limited in the current global policy conversation: [LCA databases do not currently include the impacts of litter or microplastics](#). So the conclusions of any life cycle assessments presently employed must be understood to be limited to addressing other problems along the life cycle of materials. The still-emerging science on health impacts related to the manufacture and use of plastics and other single-use materials are also largely excluded from LCA databases.

But the report's conclusions are nevertheless clear: "Addressing single-use plastic products pollution requires systems change." Materials must be used and produced in a different way to reduce plastic pollution and mitigate its harms.

TOXICITY MUST BE ADDRESSED

The Science-Policy-Business Forum also included a much-needed conversation on the toxicity concerns associated with waste, particularly e-waste (much of which contains or is made of plastic). Dr. Olga Speranskaya from IPEN member HEJSupport called for a phase-out and end for materials that are toxic or not possible to recycle, like fiberglass or PVC. As the world moves toward transparency and traceability of waste, chemicals of concern in electronics must be included in those efforts. The products and materials' full life cycles must be considered as part of a truly safe and toxic-free circular economy, she said.



Dr. Olga Speranskaya, HEJ Support

Negotiating Mandate from UNEA5.2?

While much of the world continues to maintain social distance and limit travel, the urgent work to provide a global response to the marine litter and microplastics crisis will continue largely virtually through 2021. In addition to the dedicated meeting expected to be hosted by Ghana, Ecuador, and Germany, several gatherings are expected to include discussion of the building blocks of a possible new agreement on marine plastic pollution.

A successful virtual event series from the Geneva Environment Network - [Geneva Beat Plastic Pollution Dialogues](#) - has looked at the intersection of plastic pollution with trade, health, standards, human rights, and more. This space will continue to explore interlinkages and mobilize the global community after a high level panel scheduled for March 11th, 2021. Additionally, the [Global Plastics Treaty Dialogue](#) series will bring together businesses and civil society to drive conversation and solutions that could be addressed by a new global treaty.

Plastic pollution is a concern not just of marine policy, like SDG14 and its relevant fora, but also of high-level political, economic, biodiversity, and climate fora.

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The World Economic Forum (WEF) is expected to continue in 2021 its dialogue on new governance to address plastic pollution, and the G7 and G20 will likely also take up the issue. Plastics are also expected to be on the agenda for this year's climate-focused gatherings, like the New York Climate Week and the UNFCCC, both tentatively planned for the later half of 2021.

Momentum in support of a new global treaty on plastic pollution has built very quickly through 2020, with a significant majority of UN Member States now calling for it. Heading into UNEA5.2 in 2022, a mandate to create an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to form such an agreement now looks increasingly likely.



Not all highlights were positive

Virtual Environment Has Limits

Throughout February's events surrounding UNEA5.1, States, representatives, and stakeholders praised the efforts by participants to soldier on through 2020 and still make such a gathering possible despite the ongoing public health crisis. While these efforts were truly commendable, the events were not without their challenges.

Many participants were joining important dialogues in the early morning hours for them, and an even greater number of participants had significant connection, microphone, or camera challenges, making interventions impossible. Representatives of civil society and even some Member States certainly felt the strain of the virtual environment, as communication between participants was frequently impossible, raised hands were often not visible, and confusing error messages plagued screens.

These restrictions were felt keenly by civil society and stakeholder representatives, who were not able to actually participate in the formal UNEA5.1 events in the week of February 24th. Major groups and stakeholders representatives were relegated to watching the proceedings via livestream, where the comment functions were not even enabled. Unlike in traditional UNEA settings, Major Groups were not able to be recognized or make statements freely, and they could not see or communicate with State delegates, formally or informally.

"As event organizers plan for further meetings this year, especially for urgent matters such as the plastic pollution crisis, access and transparency in virtual environments for all stakeholders must be prioritized," said David Azoulay, director of the Environmental Health program at the Center for International Environmental Law.

UNEP organizers commented on the lighter carbon footprint enjoyed by the virtual conference, though many participants seemed to find that insufficient consolation in the face of a dropped intervention, a missed effort to request the floor, or even outright exclusion from participation.

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**#break
free
from
plastic**

#breakfreefromplastic is a global movement envisioning a future free from plastic pollution. Since its launch in September 2016, over 1,600 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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