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Bringing Policy to Life: The End of Plastic Pollution

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Introduction

In March 2022, the UN Environment Assembly took a landmark step when 175 nations—including the U.S. and China—committed to drafting a legally binding global treaty to end plastic pollution. Comparable in ambition to the Paris climate agreement, this initiative aims to finalize the Global Plastics Treaty (GPT) by the end of 2024. The decision to proceed, even amidst the war in Ukraine, underscores a strong political will and growing global consensus on environmental action.

If successful, the GPT could be transformative for several reasons:

1. Accelerated Timeline with High Impact

Unlike typical international treaties, which take five to seven years to negotiate, the GPT's two-year timeline is aggressive. If adopted and implemented effectively, it could become the most potent instrument for advancing the circular economy agenda. Previous national and voluntary efforts have fallen short, while projections warn that plastic pollution could triple by 2040.

2. A Targeted Approach with Broader Implications

Past global environmental agreements—such as the climate and biodiversity treaties—often cast wide nets. The GPT's focused scope allows for establishing a uniform regulatory framework for plastic producers and users. If successful, it could inspire similarly precise treaties in other sectors, such as chemicals or construction materials.

3. Elevated Role for the Private Sector

Unlike the Paris Agreement or the Kunming-Montreal biodiversity accord, the GPT is expected to assign a central role to corporations.

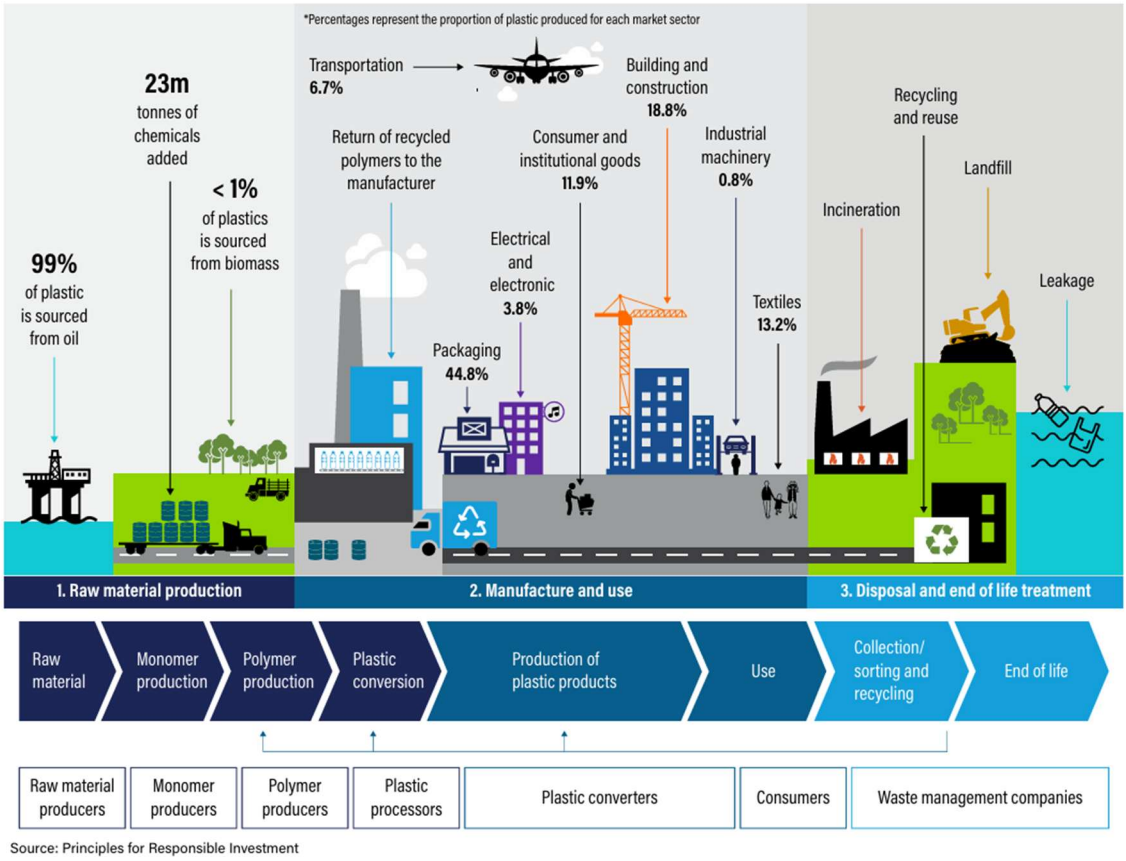
- Risks: The treaty is likely to mandate corporate disclosures on plastics use and impact, potentially harmonizing these across borders. These disclosures may evolve to include standardized reporting on risks, opportunities, dependencies, and environmental footprints.
- Opportunities: Businesses will gain openings to invest in recycling innovations, sustainable product design, and new circular industries. Just as the Paris Agreement accelerated growth in renewables, the GPT could catalyze the emergence of green manufacturing sectors and transformative supply chains.

Turning the Page: Toward a United Vision for Plastic Governance

Among the possible outcomes of the Global Plastics Treaty (GPT), the most ambitious would prioritize the use of recycled and recyclable polymers, while actively targeting problematic and unnecessary plastics throughout supply chains. This approach aims to shift the industry toward sustainability through proactive material design and consumption patterns.

While some advocates are pushing for a treaty that addresses the entire lifecycle of plastics—from production to disposal—others view efforts focused solely on end-of-life management, such as recycling infrastructure and waste collection improvements, as less transformative. These narrower strategies are often seen as incremental, falling short of the systemic change needed to curb plastic pollution across sectors and borders.

The treaty will likely focus on end of life while HAC members will tackle the supply chain



Source: Principles for Responsible Investment

Despite perceptions to the contrary, focusing on end-of-life solutions for plastic waste remains a highly ambitious endeavor—especially considering that only 9% of plastics are currently recycled globally. Achieving significant improvements will require massive infrastructure investments, the development of supportive policies, and robust coordination between public and private sectors. Labeling such efforts as "low ambition" underestimates the scale and complexity of the challenge, particularly in light of global disparities.

Currently, advanced waste disposal and treatment methods—such as controlled landfills and regulated waste facilities—are mostly concentrated in high- and upper-middle-income nations. In contrast, open dumping remains the dominant practice in low-income countries, where an estimated 93% of waste is disposed of this way, compared to just 2% in high-income regions. Compounding this is the fact that only 16% of waste in low-income countries is recyclable, a figure likely to decline as industrialization escalates and waste generation increases.

To build scalable and equitable recycling and waste management systems, five core challenges must be addressed:

1. Boosting Recyclability — Designing complex material ecosystems that meet high standards while minimizing environmental harm.
2. Expanding PCR Content — Increasing post-consumer recycled inputs in products, despite variations in feedstock quality and performance issues.
3. Reducing Dependence on Virgin Feedstocks — Identifying and adopting alternative materials that deliver comparable product functionality.
4. Enhancing Infrastructure Equity — Bridging gaps between the Global North and South through targeted investment and policy support.
5. Fostering Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration — Building cross-sector partnerships to align incentives and mobilize collective action.

Accelerating circularity demands substantial investments in infrastructure—namely in collection, sorting, and recycling systems. Ensuring a reliable supply of circular materials for food-grade and sensitive applications is also critical. Alongside these efforts, industries must reduce greenhouse gas emissions while meeting rising consumer demands and fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities to drive business growth.

A successful Global Plastics Treaty would include a clear, measurable, and time-bound goal, with 2040 seen as a feasible horizon for achieving systemic transformation. Establishing this long-term timeline is essential for enabling financial institutions—including banks, insurers, investors, and asset managers—to align their strategies with the treaty's objectives. This model mirrors the way the Paris Agreement helped provide clarity and certainty for global climate finance.

Tight schedule for the UN plastics treaty negotiations

Sources: UN, Geneva Environment Network

Yet, the treaty's consensus-driven nature may temper its ambition. Although UN treaties carry symbolic power and garner substantial support from environmental organizations, their immediate impact tends to be less forceful than binding environmental regulations, such as those adopted by the EU. Consequently, the final GPT may fall short of surpassing the stringent national standards already enacted by countries including India, Canada, the EU, and the UK.

Instead, its greatest contribution might lie in elevating the Global South to meet minimum international standards—particularly through stronger enforcement against open burning and illegal dumping.

Anticipated outcomes of the treaty include the establishment of a permanent institutional framework, possibly featuring an annual COP-style summit devoted exclusively to plastic pollution—paralleling global meetings on climate change, biodiversity, and desertification.

This report intentionally moves away from binary narratives that have dominated negotiations since INC-1 in Uruguay (2022). Instead, it promotes constructive, nuanced dialogue around the specific risks and opportunities posed by the treaty across various industries and geographies. Central to this discussion are three key pillars:

1. Chemicals of Concern – Addressing harmful additives and components across the plastic lifecycle
2. Financing for Waste Management – Creating scalable, equitable mechanisms for infrastructure development
3. Product Design – Embedding circular principles and innovation into material and product creation

Road to INC-5: What negotiators have agreed to work on ahead of the final round of talks

Sources: UNEP, IISD, Eurasia Group