



# WrightMUN

## High School Model UN Background Guide

### United Nations Environment Assembly

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Wright State University

White Hall

## **UNEA Background Guide**

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### **Topic: Plastic Pollution and a Global Plastic Treaty**

#### **Message from the Director of the UN Environment Assembly**

Delegates,

Welcome to the WrightMUN! My name is Marwah Almuzoughi and I am the Director of United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA). The UN Environment Assembly is the world's "highest-level decision-making body on the environment," and serves as the Governing Council of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).<sup>1</sup> It has universal membership of the 193 UN Member States and meets to prioritize and develop international environmental rules and law, as well as to implement environmental policy including the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This background guide is intended to offer delegates a starting point for research on an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution. However, it is not intended to limit research to the content provided within it. Delegates are advised to ensure they can address all of the questions posed by the Director at the end of this topic.

Please remember, this is a learning conference and all delegates are encouraged to please participate! That means raising your placard, making policy speeches, and creating working papers. Should you have any questions, please approach the Dais and we would be happy to assist.

Sincerely,

Marwah Almuzoughi  
Director, UN Environment Assembly

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<sup>1</sup> <https://enb.iisd.org/negotiations/un-environment-assembly-unea#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Environment%20Assembly,all%20193%20UN%20Member%20States>

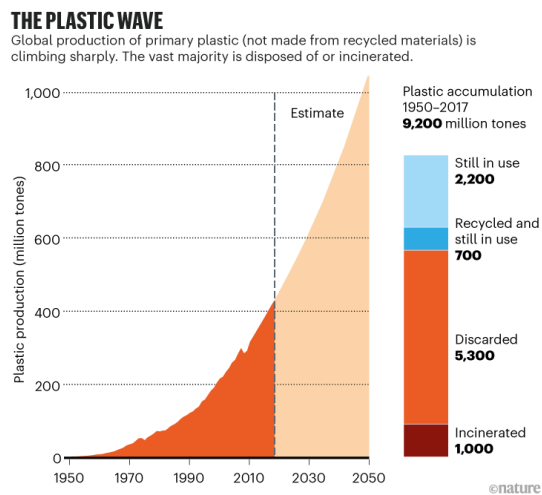
## Topic: Plastic Pollution and a Global Plastic Treaty

### Introduction

Plastics have been around since the 1940s, and have become ubiquitous in products pervasive in society. While most recognize some benefits of plastics in terms of cost and durability, they also come with liabilities. Chief among the concerns is that plastic takes at least 400 years to break down so, once created, it remains (ie. every plastic ever created still exists!).<sup>2</sup> Since plastic does not go away, vastly increased production has led to increased disposal and waste. UNEP estimates about 400 million tons of plastic waste is generated every year.<sup>3</sup> Very little is recycled (about 9%), so the rest is either gathering in landfills, incinerated or “improperly” discarded (see Figure 1 below).<sup>4</sup> Plastic pollution in the oceans, in rivers and on land is affecting not just the aesthetics of the environment but the health and wellness of human and animal life.

Some plastic products are seen as more “problematic and avoidable” than others.<sup>5</sup> Short-lived and single-use plastics common in the food and beverage industries are included in this category, as are products with intentionally added microplastics. Microplastics aren’t just created but also are the result of the breakdown of plastic into parts smaller than 5mm. The presence of microplastics (and even smaller nanoplastics) are adding to problems of pollution and potentially animal health as they are ingested and passed through the food chain. Chemicals that go into production are also seen as problematic to health and environment.

**Figure 1. Global Plastic Production and Disposal**



<sup>2</sup> [https://www.unep.org/interactives/beat-plastic-pollution/?gad\\_source=1&qclid=CjwKCAiA\\_tuuBhAUEiwAvxkgThOaErAowrfU5fHS\\_xcJC8\\_IRqpeX--5srFqkm6ifuNyTvPCYwZcXxoC6mMQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.unep.org/interactives/beat-plastic-pollution/?gad_source=1&qclid=CjwKCAiA_tuuBhAUEiwAvxkgThOaErAowrfU5fHS_xcJC8_IRqpeX--5srFqkm6ifuNyTvPCYwZcXxoC6mMQAvD_BwE)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.unep.org/interactives/beat-plastic-pollution/?gad\\_source=1&qclid=CjwKCAiA\\_tuuBhAUEiwAvxkgThOaErAowrfU5fHS\\_xcJC8\\_IRqpeX--5srFqkm6ifuNyTvPCYwZcXxoC6mMQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.unep.org/interactives/beat-plastic-pollution/?gad_source=1&qclid=CjwKCAiA_tuuBhAUEiwAvxkgThOaErAowrfU5fHS_xcJC8_IRqpeX--5srFqkm6ifuNyTvPCYwZcXxoC6mMQAvD_BwE)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-03793-3>

<sup>5</sup> “Removing Avoidable and Problematic (Plastic) Packaging. ERM Sustainability Institute <https://www.sustainability.com/thinking/removing-avoidable-and-problematic-plastic-packaging/>

In 2022, the UN Environment Assembly called for the creation of an internationally legally binding instrument (ILBI) on plastics pollution by the end of 2024. UNEA’s call started a process of successive meetings of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to End Plastic Pollution. This UNEA committee session will address those efforts to conclude a treaty based on the latest developments towards a treaty from the INC-3 in Nairobi, Kenya. The so-called “Zero Draft” (see below) serves as a common reference and point of departure for the UNEA simulation,<sup>6</sup> but the body is free to discuss other aspects of plastic pollution, or incorporate discussions based on prevailing and updated national, regional or international policies and agreements. UNEA may agree to endorse the Zero Draft as is, or offer recommendations for its alteration in the next negotiations (INC-4) later in April in Canada.<sup>7</sup>

Should the Member States wish to move beyond the contents of the INC deliberations, separate issues with a tie-in to plastic pollution could be considered that would be either narrower than a full treaty or wider and more encompassing. Arguments for action addressing plastic pollution can address multiple Sustainable Development Goals (see Figure 2 below). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13, Climate Action, focuses on combating climate change and its impacts.<sup>8</sup> Other connections to plastic pollution may include SDG 14 related to life below water, owing to the pollution in the oceans and in marine life. SDG 15, pertaining to life on land, touches on matters of pollution and quality of life. SDG 12, Responsible Consumption and Production, has a potential link to the life cycle of plastic, should Member States seek to make a connection.

**Figure 2. The Environmental SDGs**



Such separate issues can include, among others: Waste exports, Climate change and Health considerations. Given the enduring nature of plastic and the limited nature of recycling, the issue of plastic (and waste) export and import is an important consideration. Some countries are net exporters and others net importers in ways raising health and environmental concerns in receiving countries (see Figure 3 below).<sup>9</sup> This has led some countries to begin to “say no” to

<sup>6</sup> <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/44526/RevisedZeroDraftText.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.unep.org/inc-plastic-pollution/session-4>

<sup>8</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal13>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.statista.com/chart/18229/biggest-exporters-of-plastic-waste-and-scrap/>

plastic and broader waste imports, making the disposal question an increasing problem for the producing and exporting countries.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 3. Net Exporters and Importers of Plastic Waste**



Because 99% of plastics are produced from petroleum and other non-renewable fossil fuels,<sup>11</sup> the includes implications of plastic production to broader climate change. The UN defines climate change as “long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. These shifts may be natural, such as through variations in the solar cycle”.<sup>12</sup> Humans are both impacted negatively by climate change and also contribute by burning fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas. The continued rising global temperatures, CO2 emissions, and large-scale disasters increase levels of risk of human rights abuses, impacting livelihoods, displacement of persons, and threatening the lives of persons.<sup>13</sup> Petroleum products provide the basis for most plastics, and fossil fuels are at the heart of the man-made contribution to climate change. The WHO has called for the health consequences of both climate change and plastics pollution, the latter surrounding especially the chemicals behind plastic production and the health effects of improper disposal.<sup>14</sup>

### **Existing Frameworks and Initiatives**

Prior to UNEA Resolution 5/14 (2022), Plastic Pollution has been directly or indirectly addressed in previous arenas and initiatives including United Nations Environment Programme UNEP/EA.4/Res.6 on Marine plastic litter and microplastics (2019). The World Health

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, China’s “National Sword Policy (2017) <https://www.centerforecotecnology.org/what-is-the-national-sword/>

<sup>11</sup> “Plastic Pollution in the Ocean: 15 Dirty Facts You Should Know.” *Eco Redux* <https://www.ecoredux.com/plastic-pollution-in-ocean>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/ClimateChange/COP21.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Elaine Ruth Fletcher. “WHO Asks Member States: Join Talks on Global Plastics Treaty, Up Game in Climate Action for Health.” *Health Policy Watch*, January 27, 2024 <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/who-asks-member-states-to-join-talks-on-global-plastic-treaty-and-up-the-game-with-climate-action/>

Organization identified that drinking water was laced with microplastic, calling for more research into the possible adverse health effects.<sup>15</sup> The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, of which 187 countries were party by the end of 2020, restricted transboundary movement of hazardous and other wastes that – while not including plastic – applied to some chemical components of plastic.<sup>16</sup>

The founding document for a treaty process to address plastic pollution is UNEA resolution 5/14 (2022)<sup>17</sup>, which called for an internationally legally binding instrument on plastic pollution by the end of 2024. That process has yielded interim progress at various “INC” meetings. INC-1 took place in Uruguay late 2022, INC-2 was held in Paris May-June 2023, and INC-3 in Kenya last November (see Figure 4 below).<sup>18</sup> Reference to the “Zero Draft” document refers to the draft treaty from INC-3, found here: <https://www.unep.org/inc-plastic-pollution/session-4/documents>.

From these initial rounds there arose different camps in the plastics pollution debate. A “High Ambition Coalition” (HAC) sees plastic pollution as a “planetary crisis” necessitating an end to plastic pollution by 2040.<sup>19</sup> Others calling themselves the “Global Coalition for Plastics Sustainability” are calling for more nationally determined metrics and goals and the management of plastics.

**Figure 4. The Negotiation Timeline for a Plastic Pollution Treaty**



The content of the “Zero Draft” document after INC-3 centers around clarifying the objectives of the Instrument as well as the core Obligations and Measures to be expected of signatories. The issues contained in the Zero Draft document relate to the following stages in the plastic product life cycle: Production, Transportation, Consumption and Disposal.

<sup>15</sup> “Microplastics in Drinking-Water.” WHO Technical Document, 28 August 2019

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241516198>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.basel.int/TheConvention/Overview/tabid/1271/Default.aspx> and <https://www.epa.gov/hwgenerators/international-agreements-transboundary-shipments-hazardous-waste#basel>

<sup>17</sup> <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/39764/END%20PLASTIC%20POLLUTION%20-%20TOWARDS%20AN%20INTERNATIONAL%20LEGALLY%20BINDING%20INSTRUMENT%20-%20English.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

<sup>18</sup> While in the “real world,” an INC-4 is slated for April in Canada ahead of a final session in South Korea October-November 2024, we will treat this simulation as the culminating session to finish an instrument for adoption by the international community.

<sup>19</sup> [High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution \(hactoendplasticpollution.org\)](https://hactoendplasticpollution.org)

In addition to consulting the Zero Draft of the Plastic Pollution Treaty, Member States should consult domestic laws and policies as well as regional and other international agreements, treaties and policies addressing plastic production, transport, consumption and disposal.<sup>20</sup>

Should Member States seek to tie in broader issues such as climate change, it must be in explicit context of the effects of plastic production, transportation, consumption and disposal. Relevant recent instruments related to climate change include the Paris Agreement (2015), a multilateral Agreement legally binding Member States to combat climate change and its associated effects.<sup>21</sup> The Paris Agreement focuses on the mitigation of climate change damage, climate-oriented monetary aid, and harm avoidance through the reduction of greenhouse gasses.<sup>22</sup> The goal of the agreement is to keep the global temperature rise below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius.<sup>23</sup> Each State party to the agreement is required to create strategies to cut emissions and adapt to climate impacts, these strategies are nationally determined contributions (NDCs), to be updated every five years and assessed at that mark.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Questions to Consider***

Below are suggestions for research and cooperation in committee. Consider what effective action UNEA can accomplish to promote solutions to the plastics pollution problem.

- 1. What national, regional and global plastic laws has your state adopted? (Consult the Global Plastic Laws database for assistance: <https://www.globalplasticlaws.org/>)**
- 2. Is your Member State a member of the High Ambition Coalition, or the Global Coalition for Plastics Sustainability?**
- 3. Is your Member State an exporter or importer of plastic waste? Does your country benefit from these exports and imports? What options does it have to ameliorate the economic impact of reducing plastic intake? <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/cp/charting-the-movement-of-global-plastic-waste/>**
- 4. Is your country or its industries a producer of primary plastics, the chemicals behind plastics production, or the fossil fuels behind 99% of plastic production? What options does it have to ameliorate the economic impact of reducing plastic production?**
- 5. How does plastics pollution fit into the broader issue of climate change? What initiatives does your Member State have to combat climate change and contribute to SDG 13?**

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<sup>20</sup> See the Global Plastic Laws Database: <https://www.globalplasticlaws.org/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>

<sup>22</sup> [https://unfccc.int/kyoto\\_protocol](https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol)

<sup>23</sup> <https://unfccc.int/most-requested/key-aspects-of-the-paris-agreement>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/all-about-ndcs>