

Unlocking opportunities to fulfil the Global Plastics Treaty

Antaya March & Samuel Winton

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Negotiations for the Global Plastics Treaty are yet to reach an agreement owing to structural challenges and voting deadlocks. To move forwards, we need clear and comprehensive definitions of plastic pollution through its entire lifecycle, efforts to resolve procedural deadlocks and coordinated action from ambitious countries.

In November 2024, the fifth Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee meeting (INC-5) on the Global Plastics Treaty concluded without reaching an agreement. Thus, the committee failed to meet the ambitious UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) Resolution to agree on a legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution by the end of 2024. This failure reflects structural challenges, including a lack of clear definitions, unagreed voting procedures and delays to coordinated action by ambitious countries. In this Comment, we reframe these challenges as unresolved opportunities that must be grasped to ensure success at INC-5.2 in Geneva in August 2025, according to our discussions with diverse stakeholders at the negotiations.

Adopt ambitious definitions

Despite the UNEA Resolution¹ recognizing that plastic pollution must be tackled across the full plastics lifecycle, resistance to controls on upstream plastic production remains entrenched. Some countries have proposed narrow definitions of plastic pollution, for example, limiting the definition to plastic products that have been mismanaged at end of life. Such definitions exclude any emission or release of plastics or the chemicals used to process them during the manufacture or intended life of the materials and products and would severely limit the effectiveness of the treaty. Furthermore, the extent of the full lifecycle of plastics is under debate, with some countries arguing that the lifecycle begins only after a plastic product has been manufactured. This viewpoint is strongly opposed by many stakeholders², who argue that without an adequate definition of the full lifecycle, the treaty risks becoming a waste-management agreement rather than a systemic response to plastic pollution³.

These discussions have unnecessarily taken substantial time from the process. Ahead of INC-1 (in Punta del Este, 2022) the secretariat outlined the scope of a life-cycle approach to plastic pollution as including “all the activities and outcomes associated with the production and consumption of plastic materials, products and services – from raw material extraction and processing (refining, cracking, polymerization) to design, manufacturing, packaging, distribution, use (and reuse), maintenance and end-of-life management, including segregation, collection, sorting, recycling and disposal”⁴. This text should be adopted

as a definition and used henceforth. Although some countries might wish to make changes to this definition, reaching consensus on such changes has been demonstrated to be impossible. We argue that the next round of negotiations must prioritize the quick adoption of this comprehensive lifecycle definition to ensure that production controls remain on the table and to avoid any further loss of time.

Resolve procedural deadlocks

So far, the negotiations have failed to adopt agreed rules of procedure to determine how the negotiating countries will make decisions – either through voting or consensus. Therefore, a single dissenting country is at present empowered to veto important decisions, allowing a small number of countries to block progress. This limitation has led to the blocking of any intersessional work after INC-3 (Nairobi, 2023) and to a substantial reduction in the mandate of the intersessional work agreed at INC-4 (Ottawa, 2024). Despite these impacts, it appears that there is insufficient appetite among countries to introduce a voting mechanism at the start of INC-5.2. The lack of a clear process for resolving deadlock could prevent progress in addressing key issues, such as production measures, the regulation of chemicals of concern and the provision of an adequate and accessible financial mechanism.

In the absence of voting, we identify two key measures that might allow the committee to move past this stalemate. First, stronger leadership by the Chair could take control of the process, such as by bolstering diplomatic engagement outside of the formal negotiation settings and increasing the use of bilateral meetings to enable the Chair to identify possible zones of convergence. Although this approach is likely to receive pushback owing to the reduced transparency, it has been successful in previous negotiations, including the Paris climate summit in 2015 (ref. 5). Despite stressors including strained political relationships and differing national ambitions for the treaty, trust in the negotiation leadership remains generally high among national negotiators. For example, countries have accepted the Chair’s previous text suggestions (in the form of a Non-Paper for INC-5; ref. 6) as a basis for negotiation. High-ambition countries must be prepared to further support the Chair in making such proposals, providing that these proposals remain ambitious.

Second, if low-ambition countries show no willingness to shift from entrenched positions, there might come a time when the negotiations must be moved outside the United Nations system. This move would enable a smaller group of countries to negotiate a treaty that would alter global market dynamics and thus contribute to changing the relationship of the world economy and society with plastics. Such an approach has previously been effective in other international agreement settings. For example, the Ottawa Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention was taken outside the United Nations system following several years of stalled progress and now has 165 parties⁷. Thus, the possibility of moving the Plastics Treaty negotiations outside the United Nations system – used either as a threat, or as a real option – could

help to resolve the deadlock. However, for this approach to be effective, the threat must be credible and clearly understood as such, necessitating strategic coordination between high-ambition countries before INC-5.2.

Coordinated action from ambitious countries

Levels of ambition vary greatly among countries⁸. Most stakeholders believe that the role of the High Ambition Coalition (HAC) was often inconsistent in previous rounds of negotiation. In the previous INCs, failure to exert unified influence has limited the ability of the HAC to counter low-ambition proposals. However, at INC-5, ambitious countries demonstrated more coordinated leadership and clearer positioning, helping to shape and drive key discussions. For example, in the final days of INC-5, Panama's submission provided clear text on sustainable plastics production, which was supported by 90 countries. This submission was followed in plenary by a statement read by Rwanda on behalf of 85 countries calling for ambitious text on sustainable plastics production and chemicals of concern. Consequently, a clear majority of the committee, over 100 countries, has now committed to ambitious measures to reduce plastics production and the use of chemicals of concern.

It is unclear why this show of ambition did not occur until INC-5 and whether earlier strategic interventions could have prevented some of the deadlocks. Regardless, it is undeniably positive that this ambition has finally emerged. The challenge now is for INC-5.2 to build on the momentum of the closing days of INC-5. Ambitious countries must be willing to work across coalitions to ensure that ambition translates into tangible outcomes and that key provisions are not diluted.

Summary

With INC-5.2 set to be a pivotal moment, we argue that key procedural gaps and challenges must be addressed to achieve a meaningful agreement. Clear, ambitious and pre-existing definitions should be adopted at the earliest possible opportunity, the Chair must seize procedural control, and ambitious countries must be prepared to support the Chair in these efforts. The willingness of countries to stand against a treaty limited to waste management at the end of INC-5 suggests that there is still potential for a powerful treaty to be agreed. However,

co-ordinated action is required to ensure that INC-5.2 does not end with another failure to reach an agreement and continued delay to the urgently required action to end plastic pollution.

Antaya March  & **Samuel Winton** 

Global Plastics Policy Centre, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK.

✉ e-mail: antaya.march@port.ac.uk

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