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Beyond the Global Plastics Treaty

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Although the latest round of Global Plastics Treaty negotiations ended without agreement, the process has mobilized research, funding, and public engagement. Rather than waiting for an agreement, governments and communities should sustain momentum and build readiness for a future treaty through coordinated national planning, ambitious policies, and local initiatives.

Delegations left the second part of the fifth Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee meeting (INC-5.2) without reaching an agreement. The INC is procedurally deadlocked because there is a lack of achievable middle ground between countries of varying ambition and the decision-making process requires a consensus, meaning that all countries must be in agreement. Although a treaty remains possible[1], it will require countries to work together politically to overcome the deadlock, and is therefore years away from being implemented. Meanwhile, plastic pollution continues to grow and action cannot wait. In this Comment, we outline how governments can accelerate change and lay the groundwork for the eventual implementation of a treaty and how communities can create social pressure and public demand to support ambitious policies.

Government action

Comprehensive national plastics strategies and action plans can help national and local governments align action across ministries, sectors and stakeholders and also unlock investment. Plans must be developed through an inclusive, iterative and nationally led process to be effective[2]. This planning process should establish clear institutional ownership and be grounded in stakeholder consultation, transparency and evidence-based target setting[3] to build legitimacy and trust. Early involvement of finance ministries and development partners provides pathways for blending domestic and external funding, giving donors and investors confidence that plans are ready to implement[2]. Planning processes that begin with diagnostic assessments, align with national development goals and other commitments (such as health, climate and biodiversity), have clear financing plans, and embed monitoring from the start are more durable and deliver faster results[4]. The development and delivery of national plans can begin immediately, providing a practical route for governments to strengthen coordination and attract investment, even in the absence of a treaty.

Governments can also implement innovative policy measures. For example, targeted restrictions on single-use plastics and incentives to support the use of alternative materials and business models can be introduced. Economic instruments such as extended producer responsibility (EPR), which makes producers financially responsible for end-of-life disposal or recycling, or the introduction of levies on the production of virgin plastics can provide financial support for reuse and refill business models to shift costs from society onto producers. Such approaches are already in use in some jurisdictions; for example, the introduction of EPR in several EU countries has improved the operational and financial viability of plastic waste management[5]. Additionally, governments should fund research to identify plastic additives that are harmful to human health and the environment[6] and set evidence-based criteria for durability and labelling of materials to develop science-led standards and regulations. Detailed monitoring and evaluation plans are needed to ensure that policies are credible, practical, and aligned with emerging best practice[3]. It is also important to scale and adapt policies that are already working at national and regional levels to other contexts.

Even without a treaty, countries can make progress by working together through regional groups and voluntary coalitions. Platforms such as the G7, G20, Commonwealth, African Union, and Regional Seas Conventions can set shared principles, coordinate policy approaches, and maintain plastics as a standing item on international agendas. These smaller groups can act faster and test what works before global rules are finalized. Cooperation helps to share costs, build technical skills, and align standards so future trade and regulation are smoother. Collaboration between countries facing similar challenges can be particularly effective, as they can co-develop and exchange practical, affordable solutions suited to their contexts. Such collaborations can attract financial and technical support from international partners, helping to correct existing imbalances that arise when funding and decision-making power rest with a few donor countries. Building partnerships based on shared priorities and mutual capacity exchange would create more equitable and lasting cooperation models. Additionally, donors and development partners must cooperate with one another to avoid duplication and improve delivery. Governments can also take steps to support cooperation, reduce trade friction and prepare for future international rules, for example, by improving transparency on plastic flows, sharing customs data, and aligning regional standards for packaging and product design.

Community and societal action

Cities and municipalities often act faster than national governments and can test innovative approaches to reduce plastic use. Many cities, such as Buenos Aires, Riga, Jakarta, and Lisbon are already introducing bans on single-use plastics, mandating reuse and refill schemes, and trialling local deposit-return systems[7]. These initiatives not only reduce waste but also deliver co-benefits such as cleaner public spaces, reduced waste management costs, and support for local circular economy jobs. Although such measures require investment in supporting infrastructure, especially for collection, washing and redistribution systems, the long-term savings and economic opportunities often outweigh the upfront costs. Cities that already have strong municipal waste systems, or established local business networks, are well positioned to pilot these innovations and demonstrate their feasibility. Society can support these schemes by participating in pilots, backing local regulations, and choosing to buy from businesses adopting reuse and refill models. Visible city-level success can help to normalize these approaches, making national adoption easier.

Communities can also work to recognize and protect informal sector jobs linked to plastic waste to improve livelihoods and strengthen efforts to reduce plastic pollution. In many low- and middle-income countries, waste pickers are central to plastic collection and sorting. However, as informal workers, waste pickers have no employment rights and precarious incomes, with extreme vulnerability to fluctuations in the price aggregators are willing to pay. In lower capacity and lower income countries, cooperatives, non-governmental organizations, and community groups have organized to provide fair pay, safer conditions, and recognition for waste pickers[8]. These local partnerships can strengthen collection networks and create direct market links, even in the absence of national policy. Strengthening informal waste systems not only improves working conditions but also increases the efficiency and reliability of plastic collection.

Governments and communities should integrate plastics into health and chemicals agendas, framing it as a public health challenge as well as an environmental one. There is growing evidence linking plastics and associated chemicals to human health risks, including cancer, respiratory diseases, endocrine disruption and increased spread of infectious diseases[9]. It is estimated that these risks are responsible for health-related economic losses exceeding US $1.5 trillion annually[9]. Universities, research groups, and civil society can amplify this emerging evidence by translating complex scientific findings into accessible formats, communicating risks to the public and policymakers, and integrating health impacts into advocacy, education, and policy dialogues. Such communication helps to build public understanding and political urgency for stronger plastics regulation. Strong science–policy interfaces are needed to connect this research with decision-making at local, national, and international levels. Furthermore, community campaigns can use this evidence to influence consumer behaviour and press companies to act, regardless of government pace.

Maintaining momentum

The Global Plastics Treaty negotiations are slow and uncertain, but the process has helped to catalyse action to tackle plastic pollution. Increased attention and funding linked to the negotiations has increased the pace of research, created a global community of practice (connecting policymakers, scientists, and civil society actors who exchange knowledge, coordinate initiatives, and test solutions across regions), and increased awareness of the problem. This momentum must be harnessed while negotiations are ongoing, ensuring that action to address plastic pollution does not wait for the slowest-moving governments and stakeholders. National planning, ambitious policies, and community action can deliver immediate results and should be pursued as a priority. Therefore, governments and communities should see this moment not as a pause on progress, but as an opportunity to demonstrate leadership, take meaningful interim action, and prepare for a future treaty.

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Author contributions

The authors contributed equally to all aspects of the article.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.