

COMMON

Taming the plastic storm

Capping and reducing production is the only way

Position Paper

Fifth Meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC-5) to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution

Busan, Republic of Korea

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“People have forgotten this truth,” the fox said. “But you mustn’t forget it. You become responsible forever for what you’ve tamed.”

THE LITTLE PRINCE, ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

Introduction – Loving plastics, again

The history of industrial modernity is rife with examples of neglect. Neglect over the impacts of technology on people and ecosystems, but also neglect over technologies themselves. As Bruno Latour recalled in a [famous essay](#), Dr. Frankenstein’s creature became a monster because it was abandoned. It is painfully aware of it, and tells its creator: “Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.”

What Mary Shelley foresaw, in the early 19th century, was that industrial development was undergoing without proper care after our own creations. That this was morally questionable, both for the consequences this would have, but also for the type of relationship we would have with them. Because of how we were, already back then, treating them.

When publishing [our first position paper](#) on INC-5, back in August, this is why we chose the image of a battered and lonely bottle for the cover. Plastics have been immensely useful, for lots of other technologies, for hygiene, for health applications. But our neglect has transformed them into a monster that now seems uncontrollable.

History has made it so that INC-5 will take place under the contemplative gaze of two other famous characters from the literature. In the Gamcheon neighbourhood - “Cultural Village” - of Busan, the statues of the Little Prince and the fox are looking over the city. They remind

us that we have built a very intimate relationship with the molecules composing plastics. We may have forgotten it, but we are deeply responsible, forever, over them.

These are the deeper stakes of the “Plastics Treaty” process. In our August paper, we shared our concern about the amount of work that was still necessary to develop a robust and meaningful treaty. As much as we can understand the usefulness of deadlines for an international process of this scope, this treaty is not about bureaucratic achievements. **So we will repeat it from the outset here: if there needs to be an INC-6, so be it.**

1. No-go for a non-paper

The production of plastics has become out of control. In October, the OECD released a [report](#) on policy scenarios to end plastic pollution. The report summarises the staggering numbers and prospects that we had recalled in our August paper.

Global plastic production was 435 million tons in 2020, and is expected to increase to 736 million tons annually in 2040. Only 6% of plastics are recycled today, with little prospects for improvement by 2040: this would lead to 617 million tons of waste produced in 2040, compared to 360 million in 2020. Almost doubling. And plastic waste could [quadruple](#) by 2050.

This plastic storm has multiple and tremendous effects on ecosystems and human health. Besides its impacts on biodiversity, plastic production also has strong impacts on climate: it could represent 5% of global greenhouse gas emissions in 2040 according to the OECD report. Most of it being emitted to produce materials that will end up in waste.

It is against this backdrop that in 2022, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) decided to launch a two-year process to establish a new treaty that would address the full life-cycle of plastics. The urgency of the mandate mirrors the urgency of the problem. The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution (INC) has had four meetings so far, and INC-5, in Busan, is theoretically supposed to be the last one. The reader can find an overview of the process [here](#) and [here](#).

To prepare for this negotiation, the Chair of the INC, Ambassador Vayas Valdivieso from Ecuador, released a [Third Non-Paper](#), based on his interpretation of where consensus was between countries. On many levels, this Non-Paper is an aberration. Its language is surprisingly

weak and as multiple comments have stressed (see [here](#) for example), it is hard to see how the treaty would bring any substantial added value in this shape.

On the core issues, it leaves aside crucial matters such as regulating plastic production. Mentions of single-use plastics, for instance, and other instances of problematic and avoidable plastic products have been erased. Microplastics get a passing mention. Nevermind that these three things are the crux of the plastic pollution crisis. If we don't address these instances then everything else will inevitably fail. The question of finance is also left in limbo.

Procedurally speaking, the paper is puzzling: it suggests to adopt something in Busan, but to keep working on the other elements before the “diplomatic conference” (DipCon) when the treaty is supposed to be adopted, and then even between DipCon and COP1 of the treaty Parties. With so much work left, what exactly is supposed to be adopted in Busan is unclear, despite the Chair's claim that countries can reach their “shared goal” of “a legally binding instrument on plastic pollution by the end of 2024.”

The [stakes are high](#) for INC-5, and we expect a showdown between countries gathered in the High Ambition Coalition, who want a treaty [that covers the entire life-cycle of plastics](#), and a group of countries led by Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Russian Federation, who notably want to exclude plastic production from the treaty's scope.

As we recalled in our [August paper](#), the oil and gas industry's interests in plastic production are very high. They have stalled progress by constantly bracketing and equivocating, bogging down the treaty in debates over trivial adjectives. These tactics obscure real progress, as the core issues surrounding production are pushed aside. This obstructionism creates a smokescreen, enabling them to evade commitments to meaningful change while frustrating those pushing for genuine action.

A common refrain in opposition to stringent plastics regulation is that it could stifle economic growth, particularly in developing countries. This defence is not about protecting economies; it is about protecting entrenched interests. The notion that developing countries must choose between economic growth and environmental health is a false dichotomy, propped up by those who stand to profit from ongoing production. **The evidence is clear:** if production remains unchecked, these same developing countries will bear the brunt of plastic pollution's devastating impacts.

In the Annex, we make comments to the Chair's Third Non-Paper. Our recommendation, given its shape, is that countries do not use it as a basis for negotiations, but that they rather use the **compilation of texts stemming from INC-4**. INC-5 can be organised in contact groups that will focus on the most contentious sections of the text.

To the risk of repeating ourselves: if INC-5 doesn't deliver in the short week that it will have, it is better in our view to add negotiation steps rather than rush towards a moot agreement. The staggering scale of the crisis creates an urgent need to respond, indeed: but it requires impactful and lasting solutions.

2. For a stronger connection between the treaty and the implementation of the Paris Agreement and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework

Between the beginning of INC's work and now, the science of plastics impact has become even clearer. In a [landmark study](#) published this November, authors highlight the multiple pathways through which plastic pollution worsens other environmental emergencies, in particular climate change and the loss of biodiversity.

On climate, the authors' literature review shows that in 2050 plastic production could account for between 21% and 26% of the remaining global carbon budget for limiting global warming to 1.5°C. Single-use plastic production alone is projected to consume between 10% and 15% of the global carbon budget. Bearing in mind that most of this plastic would become waste, the staggering prospect is that we are on course to literally throwing away a fourth of our remaining carbon budget.

Plastics are [poorly addressed](#) within UNFCCC processes, and the Plastics Treaty, if it addressed plastic production properly - and included, for instance, a cap on and reduction of production - could be highly complementary to the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement.

Concerning biodiversity, while the impacts of plastic pollution on species has become relatively familiar to the public, recent research shows that microplastics can have more pervasive effects on ecological processes, including on microbial communities in soils and aquatic ecosystems. Accordingly, in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), adopted in late 2022, governments have committed to address this issue by preventing, reducing, and working towards eliminating plastic pollution (Target 7). The Plastics Treaty is the main global policy vehicle that could enable doing so.

As pointed out by the [International Union for the Conservation of Nature](#) (IUCN), several proposals were made during the INC process to include decisions of the CBD in the Treaty, stressing the need and usefulness of cross-cutting measures between treaties. These references were all omitted from the Chair's Third Non-Paper. References to and provisions addressing Indigenous peoples, local communities and human rights aspects of plastic pollution and associated impacts got deleted, too. Similarly, all references to climate change were deleted from the Non-Paper. This should all be reverted and stronger cooperation between treaties and their national implementation instruments should be sought after.

There is, also, another lesson for the Plastics Treaty from the UNFCCC and the CBD: the importance of having a decent package on finance from the start. If not, this will impede national implementation and become a poison for the treaty's COPs. Even if countries still disagree on the financial mechanism at this stage, there is not really a way around that, and it should be a priority in Busan because it has [already crippled](#) the process.

There has already been [substantial work](#) on finance during the INC process, on which it is possible to build upon. [Estimates](#) show that developing countries face a financing gap of US\$350 to 500 billion from 2026 to 2040 to implement an ambitious global plastics treaty. During negotiations so far, a fee on plastic production has been proposed as means to mobilise the necessary financing. [Estimates](#) also show that a fee of US\$60 to 90 per tonne on primary polymer production would be sufficient to close the financing gap for developing countries, and be compatible with the polluter pays principle.

Countries remain divided about whether or not to establish a fund and/or include the mention of such fees in the text. Our reading is that there is technically enough available information to develop a comprehensive financing package that would at least include all the options to explore until COP1 and the decisions it should make.

3. To Busan – and beyond

“Time was a wave, almost cruel in its relentlessness...”

THE VEGETARIAN, HAN KANG

The articles on production (“Supply”, Article 6 in the Chair’s Non-Paper) and finance (Article 11) will largely determine the actual ambition of the treaty. If and how countries will be able to cap and reduce plastic production will determine whether this instrument will be up to the task of the initial UNEA mandate. Such quantified targets could be quantified and agreed by the Conference of Parties, and implemented through national plans, through modalities that could also be determined subsequently. But the instrument must include the goal of capping and reducing production, otherwise it will simply miss the point. For finance, there is ample and sufficient experience to draft a solid content for the treaty, that would inspire trust between Parties, and that could be operationalized swiftly after the treaty’s adoption.

The year 2025 could be a pivotal year for sustainable development, and the development of the Plastics Treaty is part of a rich sequence. The year will likely not go without turbulence, but there are a lot of opportunities for the INC process to gain more political attention and support. If there needs to be additional negotiations to develop a robust instrument, this should not be seen as a failure of Busan or the INC, but rather as a sign of responsibility from countries and the process’ curators.

This treaty would be a historical achievement, and it is something that a vast majority (close to 9 in 10) of citizens worldwide demand. We bet that most people would understand that some more time is necessary, and would even prefer that more time is allowed to have a treaty that works. The international community should have collective pride in finally working towards creating this instrument - this is no small challenge and no easy task.

But in this creative process, it has to care properly about this new object it has engaged with. In Busan, remember who’s watching from the hills. We become responsible forever for what we’ve tamed.

Annex – Comments on the Chair’s Third Non-Paper

Third Non-Paper – Sections**Our comments**

Preamble

The impacts of plastic pollution are not equally shared. Special recognition and accommodation needs to be made for the people and the communities, as well as the ecosystems, that are forced to live in direct proximity with plastic facilities. Additionally, the Right to a Healthy Environment must be recognized, as per the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in 2021, and the UN General Assembly which added it to the list of internationally recognized rights in 2022.

For there to be any hope of meeting the 1.5°C threshold, or even holding at 1.7°C, studies demonstrate that we must achieve a peak in plastic production by 2025 through all available measures, including this treaty, national production reduction mandates and a moratorium on new plastic manufacturing facilities. References to this connection between plastics production and climate change must appear in the preamble.

Article 1. Objective

“Ambition” is an insufficiently precise term that leaves room for varied interpretation and diluted commitments. To drive meaningful action, the text should adopt clear and definitive language that directly underscores the ultimate goal of ending plastic pollution. This includes articulating measurable targets, binding timelines, and enforceable actions that reflect the urgency and scale of the crisis.

Article 2. Definitions

No comment.

Third Non-Paper - Sections

Our comments

Article 3. Plastic products and chemicals of concern as used in plastic products

As a preliminary observation, this section requires further elaboration to facilitate the identification, categorization, and qualification of chemicals of concern. Reference should be given to the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants

Certain chemicals are so toxic that they simply shouldn't be manufactured anymore. Chemicals of concern should not be isolated to their use in products but need to be understood in and of themselves rather than in relationship to their utility in products. Such an approach keeps chemicals of concern in play and shifts the burden of responsibility away from chemical producers.

As a general observation, leaving decisions at the national level undermines the core purpose of establishing a global treaty. Without robust, harmonised global controls, countries are susceptible to conflicts over trade and regulatory standards, creating opportunities for regulatory arbitrage and weakening collective outcomes.

Language stressing that plastic products are not just to be controlled, but for some eliminated or phased out, must be added.

Article 4. Exemptions

Explicit, standardised criteria for granting exemptions, requiring applicants to substantiate a demonstrable and compelling need, are necessary. Each exemption should undergo a thorough evaluation process and include a predetermined timeline for periodic reassessment to ensure continued justification.

Article 5. Plastic product design

Language must be strengthened, with the use of "shall", to facilitate the inclusion of legally binding mechanisms.

Additionally, we suggest including language to establish clear criteria for universal product design, which would streamline the production process while significantly enhancing the potential for circularity across the plastics lifecycle. Such criteria should focus on standardising materials, design practices, and labelling to ensure compatibility with recycling and reuse systems globally.

Consistent standards are critical to these efforts, as they enable interoperability, reduce contamination in recycling streams, and encourage innovation in sustainable design. By harmonising product design requirements, Parties can drive efficiency, minimise waste, and advance the transition to a circular economy.

Third Non-Paper - Sections**Our comments**

Article 6. Supply

The treaty must mandate explicit, quantifiable reduction targets with defined timelines to phase out primary polymer production. This approach ensures accountability and measurable progress toward minimising reliance on virgin plastic materials.

Establishing international standards is essential to streamline processes for manufacturers, producers, recyclers, and waste managers. A fragmented approach to product design and waste management creates regulatory gaps and inconsistencies, which could undermine the efficacy of the effort.

It is critical to establish a recognized reduction target with clear, actionable next steps on this issue. Continued primary plastic polymer production is incompatible with a sustainable future, as it notably erases any hope of achieving the 1.5°C climate target.

Including the reporting of imports and exports of primary and secondary plastic polymers in the INC plastic treaty is essential for ensuring transparency, accountability, and effective monitoring of global plastic flows. This data enables governments and stakeholders to track supply chains, identify mismanagement hotspots, and design policies that reduce reliance on virgin plastics while promoting circular economies.

Article 7. Emissions and releases

This section could be further strengthened by noting that any emissions to the atmosphere, soil, etc., ultimately affect human health, regardless of a person's proximity to plastic facilities. This could be done through the inclusion of language on fenceline and neighbouring communities, thus acknowledging the human impact of pollution.

The treaty would benefit from the inclusion of provisions requiring petrochemical, manufacturing, waste management, and similar facilities to provide transparent education and informational materials to surrounding communities. This should encompass clear communication about the substances to which residents may be exposed, levels of exposure, potential health impacts, and other pertinent information related to associated risks. Such measures would empower communities with the knowledge needed to protect their health and advocate for their well-being, aligning with principles of environmental justice and the right to information.

Third Non-Paper - Sections	Our comments
Article 8. Plastic waste management	<p>Enhanced legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms must be developed to enable affected countries to take definitive legal action against unauthorised or harmful waste imports and exports. These frameworks should prioritise the sovereignty of receiving nations, ensuring they have both the jurisdiction and resources to regulate, monitor, and penalise illicit waste transfers.</p>
Article 9. Existing plastic pollution	<p>Numerous developing countries face significant deficits in financial resources, infrastructure, and technical expertise required for the sustainable and effective management of accumulated waste, particularly in contexts exacerbated by waste colonialism.</p> <p>To address these challenges, a dedicated financial mechanism should be established to support the development and enhancement of critical waste management infrastructure and ensure access to expert technical knowledge. Such mechanisms must guarantee predictable, adequate, and easily accessible funding, with a focus on capacity-building, technology transfer, and the equitable distribution of resources.</p> <p>Integrating these measures into a global, legally binding framework is essential to rectify systemic inequities and ensure alignment with international obligations on waste management and pollution prevention.</p>
Article 10. Just transition	<p>We commend the Chair for acknowledging informal workers, indigenous peoples and others impacted by plastic pollution, we suggest the inclusion of language that covers workers in the entirety of the supply chain.</p> <p>In addition, and as a general recommendation, the language in this section is completely voluntary. There should be strong, legally binding language in this section that requires corporations, regardless of the country they are operating in, to adhere to a universal standard.</p>

Third Non-Paper - Sections	Our comments
Article 11. Finance, including the establishment of a financial mechanism	<p>The financial mechanism should be dedicated to comprehensive, holistic measures that incorporate Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks, holding industries and private entities accountable for their environmental and social impacts.</p> <p>By requiring industries responsible for pollution to bear the costs of managing and mitigating its effects, this principle shifts the financial burden away from communities, particularly those already facing systemic inequities and disproportionate harm.</p> <p>Implementing this approach promotes environmental justice by recognizing that historically marginalised groups often bear the brunt of pollution's consequences while having contributed the least to its causes. It also fosters equity by levelling the playing field and creating incentives for industries to adopt cleaner, more sustainable practices.</p> <p>The text should specify that Parties will mandate contributions from the private sector, guided by the polluter pays principle.</p>
Article 12. Capacity building, technology assistance and technology transfer, including international cooperation	<p>As a general recommendation, specific provisions should be included to safeguard against any potential neo-colonial impact. Mechanisms should prioritise structural empowerment by enabling direct financial access pathways for frontline communities and integrating inclusive financing models for informal sectors.</p> <p>Additionally, standards should be set to ensure capital flows directly reinforce local value chains and enhance socio-economic resilience, thereby maximising the fund's impact on vulnerable economies and labour segments.</p>
Article 13. Implementation and compliance	No comment.
Article 14. National plans	<p>As a general recommendation, the language in this article needs to be strengthened. National plans should be mandatory and due on specific timelines.</p> <p>Provisions should be included to ensure frontline, Indigenous, and otherwise disproportionately impacted communities (whether health or economically) are a part of the decision-making processes to shape the national plan and are able to receive direct access to funds.</p>
Article 15. Reporting	No comment.

Third Non-Paper - Sections

Our comments

Article 16. Effectiveness evaluation and monitoring

The Conference of the Parties (COP) must prioritise the establishment of an independent panel of multidisciplinary experts and scientists, free from any affiliations with specific industries, including fossil fuel interests, and devoid of identifiable conflicts of interest. This panel should be structured to uphold the highest standards of impartiality and scientific integrity, ensuring that its guidance is grounded solely in robust evidence and aligned with the global climate agenda.

Such an independent mechanism is critical to mitigate potential bias and undue influence from vested interests that may compromise the credibility and effectiveness of climate negotiations and policy frameworks. To this end, the selection process for panel members should be transparent, equitable, and overseen by a neutral body, with clear criteria emphasising expertise and impartiality.

Article 17. Information exchange

No comment.

Article 18. Awareness, education and research

No comment.

Article 19. Health

While health considerations are implicitly embedded across the articles, explicit language should reinforce these concerns and effectively obligate Parties to implement actionable measures to safeguard human health. This includes ensuring that health protections are not only recognized but also operationalized through clear, enforceable commitments.

Education, training, and safety guidelines must be extended to all workers—both formal and informal—who interact with chemicals of concern, hazardous materials, or other toxic elements involved in the plastic lifecycle. These efforts should prioritise vulnerable populations, particularly those in low-income or marginalised sectors, who often face disproportionate exposure without adequate protections.

We understand that some countries already provide such training and education.

Language must use “shall”.

Article 20-21.

No comment.

About Common

We want to create a space for dialogue where new ideas about the global economy are resolutely focused on the common good and common sense first: biodiversity, on which most of the world's economic activity depends, must be at the centre of this global conversation.

Common was founded in early 2024 by experts and leaders from the biodiversity and new economy movements, following six months of consultation with scientists and leaders from civil society, youth, women, Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities. It brings together a highly organised group of leading experts committed to positioning biodiversity as a key component of ongoing processes and debates on global financial reform, as a precondition for the emergence of a new global economy that works with, not against, biodiversity.

We are a team of recognised interdisciplinary experts with a worldly and balanced international perspective, particularly in the fields of biodiversity, climate, development, economics and geopolitics. We have worked or held senior positions at the United Nations, Greenpeace, WWF, Friends of the Earth, Avaaz, IDDRI, Sciences Po, EFE, Caritas, Harvard, Reuters, Oxfam and Microsoft - and now we have taken on a new challenge: to shape a conversation that puts biodiversity at the heart of the new global economy.

We're building this new initiative in response to the gap in the broader movement to reform the global financial architecture. We want to create a space for dialogue where new ideas about the global economy are resolutely focused on the common good and common sense first: biodiversity, on which most of the world's economic activity depends, must be at the centre of this global conversation.

Half of the world's economy depends directly on healthy ecosystems, yet biodiversity loss continues to grow exponentially. Political commitments to change financial flows and finance the conservation and

sustainable use of biodiversity rather than its destruction have yet to be translated into credible and viable policy pathways. The years 2024-2025 are crucial for the global financial architecture, and it is vital that biodiversity has a seat at the table in these discussions. At this critical juncture, ground-breaking decisions must be made, and sustained pressure throughout 2030 will be essential for effective implementation. In these historic times, Common is committed to shaping economic conversations, political priorities and policy decisions to fully integrate the importance of investing in biodiversity.

Our theory of change revolves around overcoming policy gatekeepers to ensure that biodiversity is properly considered at the highest levels of decision-making. This involves translating public demands into actionable policy pathways and gaining the support of influential actors across sectors. Through targeted briefings, reports, interactive platforms and workshops for key stakeholders, we aim to bridge the gap between public opinion and policy implementation.

The Initiative's programming will expand in 2025 as we welcome new partners and collaborators. We will launch a series of pilot projects on the political economy of biodiversity, climate and land, and its intersection with debt and fiscal justice, global financial architecture reform and community-driven just transition, and bioeconomy and livelihoods.

To stay in touch and learn more, join our mailing list at www.thecommoninitiative.org

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