

Towards a global treaty on plastic waste

Plastic pollution is one of the biggest challenges facing the world today, but no one country or organisation can solve it alone. To address this, sustainability experts Lili Fuhr and Nils Simon make the case for a global plastics treaty.



By Lili Fuhr and Nils Simon

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Trash along Singapore's East Coast Parkway beach. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates that by 2050, there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean. Image: Eco-Business

If there are any geologists in millions of years, they will easily be able to pinpoint the start of the so-called **Anthropocene** – the geological age during which humans became the dominant influence on our planet's environment. Wherever they look, they will find clear evidence of its onset, in the form of **plastic waste**.

Plastic is a key material in the world economy, found in cars, mobile phones, toys, clothes, packaging, medical devices, and much more. Worldwide, 322 million metric tons of plastic were produced in 2015. And the figure keeps growing; by 2050, it could be four times higher.



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But plastic already is creating massive global environmental, economic, and social problems. Despite requiring resources to produce, plastic is so cheap that it often is used for disposable – often single-use – products. As a result, a huge amount of it ends up polluting the earth.

Plastic clogs cities' sewer systems and increases the risk of flooding. Larger pieces can fill with rainwater, providing a breeding ground for disease-spreading mosquitos. Up to 13 million tons of plastic waste end up in the ocean each year; by 2050, there could be **more plastic** in there than fish. The plastic that washes up on shores **costs the tourism industry** hundreds of millions of dollars every year.

Moreover, all that plastic poses a serious threat to wildlife. Beyond the dead or dying seals, penguins, and turtles that had the bad fortune of becoming entangled in plastic rings or nets, biologists are finding dead whales and birds with stomachs stuffed with plastic debris.

Plastic products may not be all that good for humans, either. While the plastics used, say, to package our foods are usually nontoxic, most plastics are laden with chemicals, from softeners (which can act as endocrine disruptors) to flame retardants (which can be carcinogenic or toxic in higher concentrations). These chemicals can make it through the ocean and its food chain – and onto our plates.

Addressing the problem will not be easy; no single country or company, however determined, can do so on its own. Many actors – including the biggest plastic producers and polluters, zero-waste initiatives, research labs, and waste-picker cooperatives – will have to tackle the problem head-on.

The first step is to create a high-level forum to facilitate discussion among such stakeholders, with the goal of developing a cooperative strategy for reducing plastic pollution. Such a strategy should go beyond voluntary action plans and partnerships to focus on developing a legally binding international agreement, underpinned by a commitment from all governments to eliminate plastic pollution.

Negotiations on such a treaty could be launched this year, at the United Nations Environment Assembly in Nairobi in December.

Scientists have already advanced concrete proposals for a plastic-pollution treaty. One of the authors of this article **proposed a convention** modeled after the Paris climate agreement: a binding overarching goal combined with voluntary national action plans and flexible measures to achieve them.



A research team from the University of Wollongong in Australia, taking inspiration from the Montreal Protocol, the treaty that safeguards the ozone layer, has **suggested caps and bans** on new plastic production.

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Some might ask whether we should embark on yet another journey down the long, winding, and tiresome road of global treaty negotiations. Can't we engineer our way out of our plastic problem?

The short answer is, probably not. Biodegradable plastics, for example, make sense only if they decompose quickly enough to avoid harming wildlife. Even promising discoveries like bacteria or moths that can dissolve or digest plastics can provide only auxiliary support.

The only way truly to address the problem is to slash our plastic waste. Technology might be able to help, offering more options for substitution and recycling; but, as the many zero-waste communities and cities around the world have shown, it is not necessary.

For example, Capannori, a town of 46,700 inhabitants near Lucca in Tuscany, signed a zero-waste strategy in 2007. A decade later, it has **reduced its waste** by 40%. With 82% of municipal waste now separated at source, just 18% of residual waste ends up in landfills. Such experiences should inform and guide the national action plans that would form part of the treaty on plastics.

The European Commission's "circular economy package" may provide another example worth emulating. Though it has not yet been implemented, its waste targets have the **potential** to save the European Union **190 million tons** of CO₂ **emissions** per year. That is the equivalent of annual emissions in the Netherlands.

Of course, the transition to zero waste will require some investment. Any international treaty on plastic must therefore include a funding mechanism, and the "polluter pays" principle is the right place to start. The global plastic industry, with annual revenues of about \$750 billion, surely could find a few hundred million dollars to help clean up the mess it created.

A comprehensive, binding, and forward-looking global plastics treaty will not be easy to achieve. It will take time and cost money, and it will inevitably include loopholes and have shortcomings. It certainly will not solve the plastic pollution problem on its own. But it is a prerequisite for success.

Plastic pollution is a defining problem of the Anthropocene. It is, after all, a global scourge that is entirely of our making – and entirely within our power to solve as well.

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