



TACKLING PLASTIC POLLUTION

THE CORNERSTONES OF A GLOBAL TREATY AND HOW WE GET THERE

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ABBREVIATIONS

UNEA	United Nations Environment Assembly
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
INC	Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee
OEWG	Ad Hoc Open-Ended Working Group
MEA	Multilateral Environmental Agreement



SUMMARY

Plastic pollution, a ubiquitous environmental crisis, is escalating at an alarming rate, with global plastic production estimated to double by 2045 and a staggering 79% of plastics ending up in landfills or the environment. This urgency prompted the UN Environment Assembly to adopt a landmark resolution, resolution 5/14 in March 2022, leading to the adoption of five (5) sessions of an [Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee](#) to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment (INC) - the Global Plastics Treaty (GPT).

Using a state-of-the-art review of relevant literature, case studies, and reports, this policy brief examines the significance, challenges, and prospects of the GPT in mitigating the plastics crisis. On the upside the GPT emphasizes capacity building, global cooperation, and a holistic approach encompassing prevention, mitigation, and removal, and stresses stakeholder inclusivity and consensus building. However, the path to implementing the GPT might face challenges, including the voluntary nature of state actions to reduce pollution, financial constraints for treaty implementation, and potential interference from major corporate polluters creating a case of conflict of interest in negotiating rooms.

Therefore, we back the need for a coherent, legally binding global response to supplement existing yet fragmented legal and policy approaches to plastic pollution management but also call for setting ambitious targets and ensuring compliance to achieve tangible outcomes, advocating for mandatory actions, securing adequate and sustainable funding, minimizing corporate influence, and leveraging on the impact of NGOs at the grassroots.



A waste recovery center in Kampala, Uganda leading local solutions to plastic pollution.

BACKGROUND

From the gutters of streets to the streams, winding their way into the vastness of the oceans, plastics are everywhere ^[1]. What began as an individual action; the casual disposal of a plastic item, has escalated into a global crisis, transcending borders and impacting ecosystems far and wide, necessitating global and coordinated action ^[3] ^[4]. The alarming scale of the global plastic pollution crisis is underscored by the fact that, despite growing awareness of its detrimental effects, plastic production is not only ongoing but also increasing ^[5].

Currently, the world produces about 450 million tons of plastic annually, and this figure is expected to double by 2045 ^[4]. This situation begs the question: Why hasn't plastic production been significantly curtailed or halted in light of its identified impacts? The handling of produced plastics paints a grim picture: only about 9% of plastics have been successfully recycled, a mere 12% have been incinerated, and a worrying 79% have accumulated in landfills or the natural environment ^[6].

If the current trends in plastic production and waste management persist, it is projected that by 2050, around 12,000 Mt (million tonnes) of plastic waste will either be languishing in landfills or polluting the natural environment ^[6]. This stark reality underscores an urgent need for reevaluating and transforming our global approach to plastic production and waste management ^[7, 8].



Youth at the frontline: Manually sorting waste to recover value and reduce waste leakage

In March 2022, a significant step was taken at the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5.2) to address the global plastic pollution crisis: a historic resolution was adopted to develop an international legally binding instrument, often referred to as the Global Plastic Treaty^[9]. This treaty aims to tackle plastic pollution, including its impact on the marine environment, by focusing on the entire life cycle of plastic, from production and design to disposal^[7]. The resolution called for the formation of an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to create this treaty that will address plastic pollution. Existing legal and policy approaches to tackle plastic pollution, while important, have proven to be insufficient in effectively addressing the issue in its entirety. Tools such as the no-harm rule, the prevention principle, the precautionary approach, and the polluter-pays principle, offer significant guidance and a framework for international cooperation. However, they fall short in prescribing specific, actionable plans that encompass the entire life cycle of plastics. While these principles are vital instruments in the toolbox of international environmental law, their application tends to be flexible and adaptable to varying policy agendas, lacking the comprehensive and targeted approach necessary for tackling the complex issue of plastic pollution^[10].

The existing efforts, despite their significance, remain fragmented and do not establish a coherent, unified legal regime^[4]. This disjointed approach highlights the pressing need for a coordinated and comprehensive international legal response.

The global scale of the plastic pollution crisis demands an overarching treaty that addresses the problem from production to disposal, including the management of plastic waste and its environmental impact^[11, 12]. The call for a Global Plastic Treaty represents a concerted effort to overcome the limitations of current measures against plastic pollution. This proposed treaty aims to consolidate various individual efforts into a cohesive, legally binding structure, providing a clear set of objectives and strategies to effectively reduce plastic pollution^[4].

This policy brief, therefore, focuses on evaluating the significance of such a global treaty in tackling plastic pollution, highlighting significant challenges it might encounter, while suggesting possible avenues and strategies that are critical for the treaty's successful adoption and implementation. This assessment was done using insights gathered through a state-of-the-art review of relevant literature, case studies, and reports from key stakeholders (e.g., UNEP, UNDP, and WWF) on plastic pollution. The reviewed literature was obtained through word searches of 'plastic pollution related' terms including but not limited to "The Global Plastic Treaty and its relevance", "Global Plastic Treaty and Plastic pollution", "solving plastic pollution" and "Policy approaches to plastic pollution" in Scopus and Google Scholar databases. This was beefed up with relevant case studies of plastic pollution in select countries offering insights into the impacts of plastic pollution and the need for the Global Plastic Treaty.

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2. WWF (2023). Plastic pollution inequalities and youth activism
3. Wysocki & Billon (2019)
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10. Duvic-Paoli (2020)



Youth Climate Council Uganda unites voices for impactful plastics advocacy

CORNERSTONES OF A GLOBAL TREATY TO TACKLE PLASTIC POLLUTION



The Global Plastic Treaty, a significant milestone in addressing the plastic pollution crisis, encompasses several key cornerstones to effectively combat this global challenge.



The Global Plastics Treaty: An international initiative

Firstly, the treaty recognizes the importance of capacity building and the provision of technical and financial assistance to support the involvement of all relevant stakeholders^[13, 3]. This approach facilitates effective participation, fostering networking opportunities, and raising awareness. It also allows parties to evaluate the benefits and burdens of their commitments, enabling them to define their interests within the treaty^[3].

Secondly, the treaty underscores the need for global cooperation involving various countries, international organizations, and stakeholders^[13]. It emphasizes coordination with existing regional and international conventions and organizations while avoiding duplication and promoting complementary actions^[14]. Furthermore, the treaty advances the work of the Global Partnership on Marine Litter and emphasizes the importance of enhancing scientific and technical knowledge for monitoring and sharing relevant data and information^[13].



A bottom up approach

The GPT is a comprehensive approach, focusing on addressing the plastic issue at its source and across its lifecycle, encompassing prevention, mitigation, and removal efforts^[13]. Stakeholder inclusivity is also paramount, considering various forms of knowledge, including scientific, traditional, and indigenous wisdom^[15]. It emphasizes learning from informal and cooperative settings and welcomes the participation of both member and non-member states, encouraging diversity in solutions^[16]. The principle of building global consensus is pivotal, providing opportunities for stakeholders to submit interventions, and fostering a bottom-up coordination of solutions^[17]. This approach has inspired international forums like the Global Plastic Summit^[18] and stakeholder dialogues hosted by local NGOs^[19]. It unites action at the grassroots level and empowers civil society groups to advocate for a strong and effective treaty^[20].



INC linkages

Lastly, as the problem of plastic pollution continues to escalate, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) established in 2022 and set to complete its work by the end of 2025, plays a crucial role in addressing this challenge^[15].

11 Brooks et al. (2018)

12 Jakobsen (2021)

13 UNEP (2022)





Conception of the INC

The Global Plastic Treaty's importance lies in its objective, drawing lessons from existing treaties, and fostering consensus to address plastic pollution with a focus on the full lifecycle of plastic, in line with the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development ^[13]. In March 2022, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) adopted Resolution 5/14, titled "End Plastic Pollution: Towards an International Legally Binding Instrument," initiating the negotiation process for this global treaty. UNEA Resolution 5/14 marked a significant milestone in global policymaking, recognizing the effectiveness of global treaties, exemplified by the Montreal Protocol's success in regulating ozone-depleting substances ^[3]. An ad hoc open-ended working group convened in Dakar, Senegal, following UNEA-5.2, to lay the groundwork for these negotiations, underscoring the global commitment to addressing the plastic pollution crisis. Five Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) meetings over the next two years were decided (Figure 1).



Empowering youths at the grassroots to champion plastic-free communities.



Impact of the INC

These negotiations not only address environmental concerns but also impact the health and rights of individuals and communities ^[17]. Thus, the INCs represent a turning point in the battle against plastic pollution, offering an opportunity for meaningful change on a global scale ^[3]. The escalating impact of plastic production and consumption on global pollution is a concern across different regions. In Africa, plastic waste management is spiraling out of control ^[21], while Asia, is the largest contributor to plastic pollution ^[22]. Australia, facing significant challenges in plastic waste management and recycling, often resorts to waste exportation ^[23]. Europe and America are major exporters of waste plastic intended for recycling ^[24], and South America also contends with significant waste management challenges ^[25]. This underlines the need for an international legally binding instrument to combat plastic waste pollution, including its impact on marine environments.

- 14 UNDP (2022)
- 15 Dauvergne (2023)
- 16 Oturai et al. (2023)
- 17 Landrigan et al. (2023)
- 18 Global Plastics Summit (2023)
- 19 Alves (2019)
- 20 Hub, C. (2023)
- 21 Jambeck et al. (2018)
- 22 Ng et al. (2023)
- 23 Hossain et al. (2022)

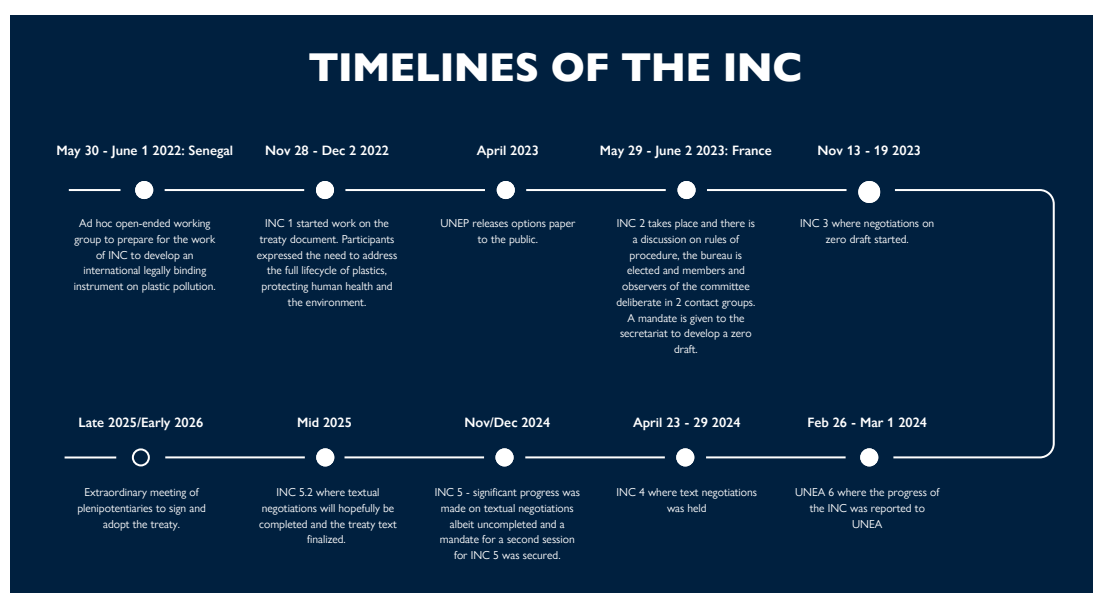


Figure 1;

Progression and Milestones of the Global Plastic Treaty: Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) Initiatives from 2022 to 2024 (source; own. Text; UNEP, Hub C 2023)

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING THE GLOBAL PLASTIC TREATY AND HOW TO NAVIGATE THEM.

While the Global Plastic Treaty (GPT) represents a positive step in addressing plastic pollution, it is essential to recognize the potential challenges it may face on its path to implementation.



Contributions by member states are voluntary

One key challenge arises from the potential voluntary nature of member states' contributions to the GPT coupled with weak obligations on production reduction, which could result in gaps and inaction^[26]. Although the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) encourages member states to take voluntary measures to combat plastic pollution, urgent action is imperative, and voluntary participation should be elevated to a mandatory priority^[17]. Drawing a parallel with previously negotiated MEAs like the failed Kyoto Protocol, which struggled to meet targets and maintain commitment^[3], it becomes apparent that global environmental governance faces inherent challenges in ensuring compliance with voluntary agreements. Setting ambitious and obligatory targets is crucial to achieving meaningful outcomes^[27].



Finance-driven Action

Another significant challenge is the dependency of major decisions within the treaty on the availability of financial resources^[28]. While some members of the committee, particularly African countries, are advocating for the establishment of a dedicated multilateral fund to support post-treaty implementation, the realization of such funds remains uncertain, given the previous delays in funding instruments like the Loss and Damage Fund^[29]. This opens the door for major corporate polluters to influence decision-making, potentially hindering efforts to combat plastic pollution^[30].

24 Filho et al. (2019)

25 De Faria et al. (2021)

26 Diana et al. (2022)

27 Stoett, P. (2022)

28 Rangel-Buitrago et al. (2023)

29 Mahase (2022)

30 Ralston et al. (2023)



NAVIGATING THE PATH FORWARD (REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TREATY)



Fortify the treaty

The influence of various factors including economic considerations, individual leadership, domestic pressure from non-state actors, scientific evidence, urgency perception, and reputation, can significantly impact the success of international regimes ^[3]. Notably, industries that contribute significantly to pollution, such as petrochemical companies, are actively engaged in lobbying and participating in the conversation ^[27]. Therefore, it becomes imperative to consider excluding major business centered actors due to their inherent conflicts of interest with the GPT's mission to end plastic pollution ^[30]. Despite these formidable challenges, it is crucial to recognize the urgency of the plastic pollution crisis, which demands a successful instrument for its resolution ^[17]. Well-designed treaties can incentivize participation, reward compliance, and deter non-compliance among the parties involved ^[3]. Therefore, addressing these challenges and fortifying the GPT's framework is essential to effectively combat the global plastic pollution crisis.



Strengthen INC Processes

While the treaty could not be finalized within the agreed timeframe i.e. from 2022 to 2024, the committee must as a matter of urgency, finalize the treaty by INC 5.2 in August 2025 and ensure all stakeholder voices are represented. Further delays in finalizing the treaty could diminish momentum and lead to a loss of already eroded public and stakeholder trust.



Integrate Regional & National Frameworks

Encourage countries to align their policies with the treaty while respecting their unique contexts. This can be achieved by promoting policy harmonization that connects global commitments with local realities, such as waste management infrastructure, economic capacity, and cultural practices. Regional cooperation should be strengthened through shared agreements and initiatives, enabling neighboring countries to tackle plastic pollution collectively, leveraging existing frameworks like those of the African Union or ASEAN. Additionally, technical and legislative support should be provided to assist nations in drafting and implementing policies tailored to their needs, alongside stakeholder engagement initiatives that bring together governments, NGOs, and private sector players. This approach ensures that the treaty's implementation is cohesive yet adaptable, addressing the global plastic crisis without compromising local priorities.



Increase Financial Support for participation and treaty implementation

A dedicated multilateral fund can provide resources for capacity building, technical assistance, and sustainable waste management, prioritizing vulnerable nations most affected by plastic pollution. Partnerships with financial institutions, private sector investors, and philanthropic organizations should mobilize resources through mechanisms like extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes and grants for innovation. Transparent funding allocation will ensure impactful projects are prioritized, fostering global collaboration and accelerating efforts to combat plastic pollution.



Initiatives like The Earthshot Prize drive youth-led plastic solutions



Leverage Existing Success Stories

Highlight and scale successful initiatives, such as zero-waste cities and promote its replication. Successful zero-waste initiatives^[31] across Africa offer scalable models for combating plastic pollution and fostering sustainability. GAYO's Zero Waste Accra project integrates informal waste collectors, achieving 50% waste reduction and 70% circularity. In Senegal, the My Zero Waste Restaurant project helps restaurants eliminate plastic waste through reusable alternatives, avoiding over 90,000 disposable items annually. Kenya's initiative empowers coastal women to recycle PET plastics, generating income while reducing marine pollution. Tanzania's Holistic Zero Waste Model achieves 95% compliance in waste separation, showcasing the effectiveness of community-driven systems. South Africa's composting pilot in Durban transforms organic waste into nutrient-rich compost, alleviating landfill burdens and creating jobs.



Leverage on the key role of Non-Governmental Organizations (like GAYO)

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), deeply embedded within local and global networks, are working tirelessly to ensure that the treaty's goals align with the needs of grassroots communities. They facilitate education and mobilization efforts, helping communities understand the treaty's implications and its aim to reduce plastic waste while fostering sustainable production and consumption patterns^[32].

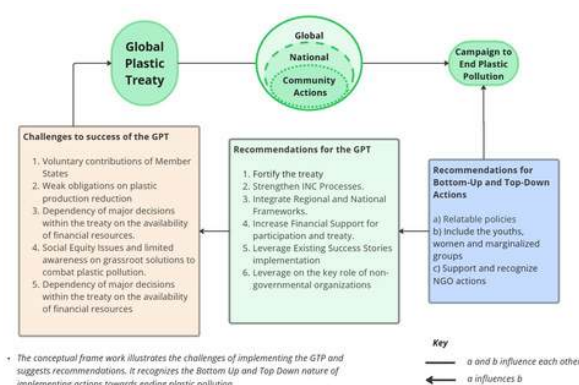
An example is the Green Africa Youth Organization (GAYO), which supports national consultations and facilitates awareness creation of the plastic treaty, its meanings, and possible means of implementation in Ghana and Uganda. Furthermore, GAYO hosts pre- and post-INC (Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee) meetings, bringing together all stakeholders, including youth and waste pickers to understand Africa's position in the treaty processes and how the work can be amplified. In 2023 ahead of INC-3, GAYO supported

and facilitated 15 young people from African countries to attend the Global Plastic Summit in Bangkok, Thailand, organized by the Economist Group. There, senior leaders collaborated to support and influence INC decision-making. Engaging plenary sessions and collaborative working groups addressed the issues at the heart of the treaty and devised creative solutions for an ambitious treaty that addresses the entire life-cycle of plastics. A summary report, including a briefing paper to be presented at INC-3, was created based on outcomes from the working groups.

Other NGOs also serve as a bridge, conveying the concerns and experiences of local communities to policymakers and ensuring that the future treaty's implementation is both effective and inclusive. Examples include the Ako Foundation, Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) and Break Free From Plastics (BFFP). Some NGOs further utilize research to amplify the negative impact of plastic pollution on humans. For instance, the Minderoo Foundation measures plastic particles in droplets of water, plastics in blood, and chemical concentrations.

Through their active participation, NGOs help shape a treaty that not only addresses environmental challenges but also supports economic and social development at the community level. This involvement is vital for creating a robust and responsive framework that can lead to meaningful reductions in global plastic pollution.

Conceptual Framework

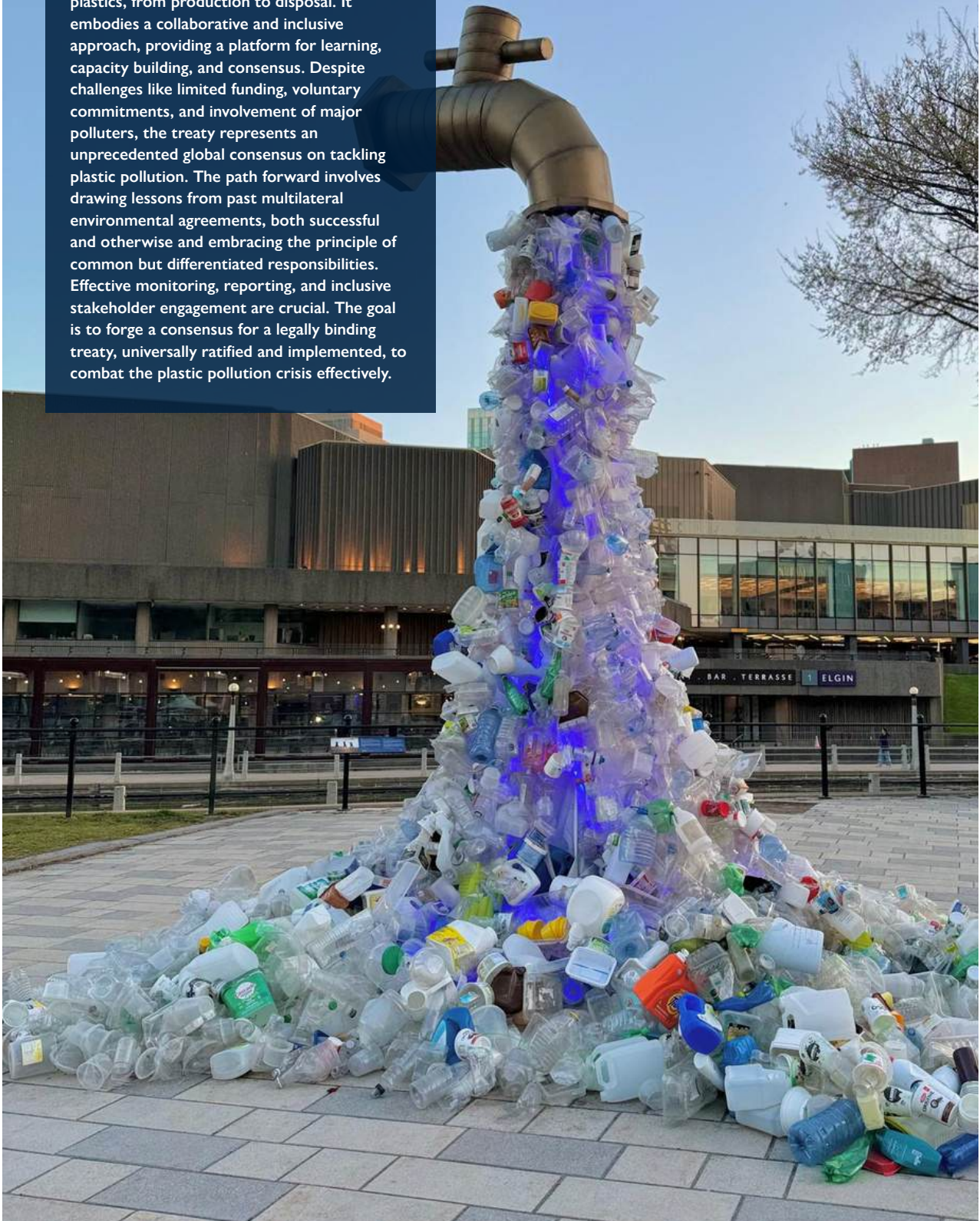


31 Global Alliance Incinerator Alternative V2-Final-Zero-Waste-Stories-From-Africa.pdf

32 Barrowclough & Deere Birkbeck, 2020

CONCLUSION

Plastic pollution poses a significant threat to our environment, economy, health, rights, biodiversity, and climate, necessitating immediate global action. The proposed Global Plastic Treaty offers a comprehensive solution, aiming to address the entire lifecycle of plastics, from production to disposal. It embodies a collaborative and inclusive approach, providing a platform for learning, capacity building, and consensus. Despite challenges like limited funding, voluntary commitments, and involvement of major polluters, the treaty represents an unprecedented global consensus on tackling plastic pollution. The path forward involves drawing lessons from past multilateral environmental agreements, both successful and otherwise and embracing the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. Effective monitoring, reporting, and inclusive stakeholder engagement are crucial. The goal is to forge a consensus for a legally binding treaty, universally ratified and implemented, to combat the plastic pollution crisis effectively.



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