

**ECONOMIST  
IMPACT**

# Global Plastics Summit

Working towards a robust UN plastics treaty  
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Outcomes and key recommendations









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# Key recommendations from the Global Plastics Summit

-  Ensure the treaty is comprehensive, encompassing the full life cycle of plastics and protecting human and environmental health.
-  Establish a robust science-policy interface (SPI) to support negotiators in making evidence-based decisions about the treaty (including the detailed annexes), followed by a permanent SPI to support treaty implementation. All delegations, and later signatories, including those from global south countries and small island developing states (SIDS), must be able to access technical expertise.
-  Allow a more diverse stakeholder group to participate substantively in the negotiation process. This must include global south countries, which need a stronger voice in negotiations, as well as communities, youth, the private sector and scientific experts.
-  Strengthen the treaty's focus on the unique needs of SIDS. Plastic pollution presents an existential crisis for these countries, and they will need extensive support to implement an ambitious treaty.
-  In the treaty, adopt the precautionary principle regarding the health impacts of plastics and retain enough flexibility that provisions in the treaty can continue to be tightened as the science evolves.
-  Reuse systems will be critical in the transition to a circular economy for plastics. The treaty must include a much greater level of detail and focus on reuse, and set out clear definitions and standards.
-  Design funding mechanisms to ensure the transition to a circular economy for plastics is fair and just.
-  Achieve agreement among negotiators on the treaty's key definitions, principles and scope at the upcoming negotiation session (INC-3). Signing the treaty by the end of 2024 will take an ambitious work programme in the time between the formal negotiations, dubbed the "intersessional period". INC-3 must deliver a clear mandate for this detailed work.

## Towards a comprehensive treaty

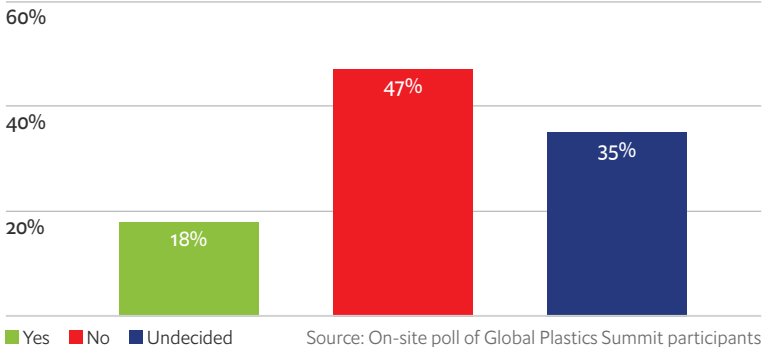
Plastic pollution is one of the world’s most pressing environmental issues. The 14m tons of plastic entering the ocean each year damages marine ecosystems and human health, and the scale of this crisis demands urgent action.

Economist Impact convened the Global Plastics Summit in October 2023 in Bangkok, supported by The Nippon Foundation and the Minderoo Foundation and held in association with the Back to Blue initiative. The summit took place one month before the start of the third session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) for a UN plastics treaty and weeks after the release of a “zero draft” of that treaty.

The Global Plastics Summit aimed to enable stakeholders from government, the science community, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector to debate the details of the zero draft and identify aspects that are unclear or require further examination. Critically, the summit saw stakeholders

### Poll #1: Do you feel that the current zero draft treaty has a balanced whole-of-lifecycle approach to plastics pollution, including upstream considerations?

Multiple choice poll: 158 votes/158 participants



examine the key themes that arose during the first and second sessions of the negotiating committee (INC-1 and INC-2) and had not been fully anticipated before negotiations opened. Held during the intersessional period between INC-2 and INC-3, the summit enabled a wider group of stakeholders to have their voices heard than the formal programme of intersessional meetings had allowed for.

The Global Plastics Summit focused specifically on several areas of the zero draft that stakeholders identified during INC-2 as key to the treaty's success. These included the role of science, the health implications of plastics, the unique circumstances that small island developing states (SIDS) face, the role of reuse systems and ways to ensure treaty negotiations are as inclusive as possible.

The recommendations in this report reflect the synthesised views of the 381 participants, from 56 countries, who attended the summit. They do not necessarily reflect the positions of all individual participants, many of whom took part in a robust exchange of ideas. Nevertheless, important themes and areas of consensus emerged.

Participants agreed that the negotiation process must deliver a comprehensive treaty that encompasses the full life cycle of plastics. The treaty must include measures to protect human and environmental health by reducing plastic production and increasing incentives for reuse, product redesign and recycling. Policies to support the transition to a circular economy, including extended producer responsibility (EPR), will be an essential part of this.

A strong consensus emerged among participants about the urgent need for treaty negotiators from global south countries, and SIDS in particular, to access the scientific and technical support that would enable them to participate in the negotiations meaningfully. Margaret Spring, chief conservation and science officer at the Monterey Bay Aquarium and chair of the International Science Council's working group on plastics, invited negotiators to ask the scientific community for assistance. "We are here to help," she said. "Tell us—and the [INC] Secretariat—what you need." The mechanism for requesting support could be informal during the negotiation period, but a robust and institutionalised science-policy interface (SPI) will be crucial to support the treaty's implementation after it is signed.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has set an ambitious timeline for the treaty, which it hopes to sign before the end of 2024. With negotiations at the halfway point, most participants in the Global Plastics Summit expressed cautious optimism about the process. The treaty draft provides a wide range of options and gives negotiators a solid basis to begin their work, said Gonzalo Guaiquil, climate change and plastics negotiations coordinator at the directorate of environment, climate change and oceans in Chile's ministry of foreign affairs.

Yet some participants, particularly scientists and representatives of NGOs, expressed concern that the lack of clear definitions and detail in the draft, especially the appendices, will weaken the treaty. Christina Dixon, ocean campaign leader at the Environmental Investigation Agency, said that agreeing on which provisions and targets must be decided by the end of 2024, and which can be taken as decisions by the future governing body, will be a priority for the upcoming round of negotiations. She noted that the treaty will need to take a "start and strengthen" approach.

How to finance the treaty's implementation is a pressing question. Large amounts of public and private capital will be needed, and a mechanism to provide financial support to global south countries, for purposes including upstream solutions such as reduction and reuse, will be critical to ensure that the transition to a circular economy for plastics is fair and just.

Much remains to be done. Negotiators must urgently agree on the treaty's key definitions, principles and scope. Signing by the end of 2024 will take an ambitious programme of intersessional work between the formal negotiations.

## Negotiators need access to scientific and technical advice

There was a strong consensus among participants of the Global Plastics Summit about the immediate need for all negotiators, particularly those from SIDS and global south countries, to have access to scientific and technical advice to support decision-making during the negotiations.

Informal mechanisms, such as the [Scientists' Coalition for an Effective Plastics Treaty](#) and the [International Science Council](#), can be readily strengthened to give negotiators immediate support. The INC Secretariat should develop a road map to enable this as part of the INC process and intersessional periods. The best available scientific and technical advice must inform the final treaty draft.

Advice from the natural and health science communities is essential, and it will also be vital for negotiators and policymakers to have access to advice from economists and other social scientists to help them determine the most appropriate policy responses for their circumstances. Given the short time frame for negotiating the treaty, a delegate-led approach that enables negotiators to ask for advice and consultation in specific priority areas will be most efficient and effective. The secretariat could offer a road map showing how negotiators can seek advice throughout the INC process.

Negotiators should seek input from the independent scientific and technical community on the detailed contents of the treaty's annexes, particularly for the standards and definitions needed for appendices A-C on environmental and human health criteria for polymers and chemicals of concern, "problematic" plastic products and "safe" alternatives or substitutes. INC-3 must provide a mandate for intersessional work that formally integrates scientific advice on these topics into the draft.

Second, a permanent SPI will be critical to the treaty's implementation. INC-3 should mandate a technical working group to begin preparation for setting up a permanent scientific advisory body. This body should be able to convene ad hoc technical working groups under specific terms and make recommendations to the treaty's conference of the parties (COP) or governing body. Existing models for such an SPI can be adapted to the specific functions needed to implement the treaty with input from existing or planned expert reports and consultations with other science-policy bodies.

Larger countries often have well-funded domestic scientific advisory bodies and may have a chief scientist advising government decision-makers. Smaller and global south countries, including SIDS, often do not have these domestic resources and will be particularly reliant on a global SPI for ongoing scientific and technical advice in implementing the treaty. Barriers to access, such as language, should be considered in the design of the process.

The SPI must be mandated to co-operate with other relevant advisory bodies, such as the UNEP's [Science-Policy Panel to Contribute Further to the Sound Management of Chemicals and Waste and to Prevent Pollution](#).

## A diverse group of stakeholders will need support to participate in negotiations

Enabling a more diverse group of voices during formal negotiations will be an important marker of progress for INC-3. Global south countries, communities, youth, the private sector and scientific experts need a stronger say in negotiations.

At the Global Plastics Summit, Dechen Tsering, regional director for Asia and the Pacific at the UNEP, called on agencies and organisations to fund participants from the global south to attend INC meetings. She said every country is in different circumstances, so negotiations must include the broadest possible group of member states. She warned that if only a small group of countries negotiate the treaty, there is a danger it will not be implemented and will fail to achieve its objectives.

### Regional organisations can support negotiators by:



**Catalysing partnerships**



**Facilitating financing**



**Enabling the sharing of best practices**



**Giving legal and regulatory guidance**



**Providing access to technology**



**Convening regional stakeholders**



**Harmonising monitoring and standards within regions**



Jonathan Gillibrand, senior adviser on plastic pollution at the Office of Environmental Quality in the United States Department of State, called on global south countries to formally put forward their views during INC-3. Hearing a more diverse set of voices during formal negotiations will help countries such as the United States better understand the views of SIDS and the global south more clearly, he said.

Existing regional organisations can support global south countries to participate in the treaty negotiations. The very tight timeline makes it crucial to build on existing regional bodies and mechanisms, such as the UNEP [Regional Seas Programme](#) and regional multilateral development banks. Such regional bodies can be valuable intermediaries, connecting national and local commitments to the treaty's global goals.

National action plans (NAPs) will enable countries to implement the treaty effectively in a way that suits their circumstances. "NAPs will be the translation mechanism for the treaty, and without them, any ambition won't be realised," said Christian Kaufholz, acting co-director of the Global Plastic Action Partnership at the World Economic Forum (WEF). The WEF's [national plastic action partnerships](#) aim to serve as country-led and stakeholder-inclusive collaboration platforms providing evidence-based insights that guide informed action from policymakers and other decision-makers within the scope of binding or voluntary requirements.

## The treaty must recognise the unique needs of small island developing states

SIDS were well-represented at the Global Plastics Summit. SIDS participants expressed strong support for a robust and ambitious treaty. But many highlighted the specific challenges that small island states face. Some SIDS participants expressed concern about how key treaty provisions will apply to their unique economic contexts.

SIDS deal with large volumes of plastic waste relative to the size of their economies. They must manage plastic waste generated by domestic consumption and a significant amount of plastic waste washed up as marine litter. The small size of many SIDS economies compounds this challenge, and some participants in the summit worried this will make many of the treaty's proposed provisions unviable.

Participants from SIDS were keen to trial reuse systems, and many noted that SIDS' smaller economies can be a conducive environment for them. Global standards for reuse systems will be needed, particularly as most of the goods SIDS consume are imported.

Tourism and hospitality make up a large proportion of many SIDS economies. While they produce significant waste, they also depend on healthy local ecosystems to attract international visitors. SIDS could partner with these industries to pilot and expand reuse systems. Participants noted that there are already some examples of reuse partnerships, and a platform to share and exchange experiences and ideas on upscaling reuse systems in SIDS would be beneficial.



**“A united, solidified Pacific response is critical. Pacific Island states ‘speak with one voice’ on the issue of plastics.”**

J. Uduch Sengebau Senior, vice-president, Palau



**“Island nations are suffering the consequences of the world’s inability to reduce its plastic production and consumption and properly manage its plastic waste.”**

**Peter Thomson**, secretary-general’s special envoy for the ocean, United Nations

In contrast, some participants questioned how the proposed inclusion of EPR in the treaty would work for SIDS. Many were interested in understanding how EPR could fund reduction and waste prevention measures, along with improved waste management, and participants largely agreed that a treaty that regulates EPR globally would help level the playing field for small countries.

But SIDS negotiators often have a limited understanding of technical concepts surrounding EPR. Participants from many SIDS said they need further technical support to feel confident negotiating treaty provisions on matters such as EPR. In particular, many SIDS are unsure about the benefits of a phased approach to implementing EPR, the pros and cons of voluntary and mandated approaches, and of how to avoid unintended consequences or perverse incentives in designing EPR systems.

A consistent and standardised approach to policies relating to reuse and EPR will be vital for SIDS. Schemes must be regional to succeed; multiple overlapping solutions and schemes that do not have buy-in from the private sector will likely fail.

Summit participants agreed that case studies showing how specific policy solutions such as reuse and EPR will work in the SIDS context would support the decision-making of SIDS negotiators.

SIDS need technical support and finance to actively participate in treaty negotiations and implementation, said J. Uduch Sengebau Senior, vice-president of Palau. She called for a dedicated panel of experts that SIDS can contact for scientific and technical support and advice.

## The treaty must adopt the precautionary principle regarding the health impacts of plastics

“Evidence is mounting that plastics damage human health,” said Peter Thomson, the United Nations secretary-general’s special envoy for the ocean. Negotiators must adopt the precautionary principle on this issue, he believes. [The Minderoo-Monaco Commission on Plastics and Human Health](#) has shown the significant effect that the chemicals in plastics can have on health, and the [Minderoo Foundation’s plastic health](#) map gives negotiators a dashboard where they can explore data on the health impacts of plastic.

Participants largely agreed that the treaty must include a clear focus on the health impacts of plastics and binding provisions on regulating the chemicals they contain, as well as micro- and nanoplastics.

The treaty must be flexible enough that provisions governing the use of chemicals in plastics can be strengthened over time as new evidence becomes available. The long-term health impacts of plastics may not be fully known for years or decades, and the treaty must be adjusted and strengthened as needed. The treaty should require periodic reviews to update the annexes related to human health.

Greater transparency about the chemicals in plastics should be a key goal of the treaty. An open public register of chemicals, monomers and polymers used in plastics, based on accepted global standards, will be a valuable tool. [The Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management](#) (SAICM), a global policy framework to foster the sound management of chemicals, is a model that can be built on, as is the European Union’s [Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals](#) (REACH) legislation.

A robust science-policy interface (as described in recommendation two of this outcomes paper) will play an essential horizon-scanning role, enabling policymakers to keep up with the emerging science on chemicals and health. The SPI must have

a specific mandate to consider the health impacts of plastics. One option would be a dedicated working group. Alternatively, the SPI could collate the work of existing research organisations and public health bodies.

INC-3 must mandate detailed intersessional work to determine definitions, classifications, criteria, standards and targets for chemicals, polymers, monomers and their content in virgin and recycled plastics (such as appendices A-C of the draft treaty).

Participants agreed that the zero draft is a helpful starting point, but much work remains to close the gap in understanding between health scientists and negotiators. As previously discussed in this report, participants highlighted the need for negotiators to access scientific advice. This advice is particularly important in technical areas such as the health impacts of plastic. For example, the treaty must determine what is “safe” and what is “problematic” or “has the potential for adverse impacts on human health”.

Ultimately, the onus of proof must be reversed so that chemicals require independent testing before market release, followed by formal post-market biomonitoring to detect any emerging harms to human health from plastic chemicals and micro- and nanoplastics.

## **The treaty must include a much greater level of detail and focus on reuse, and set out clear definitions and standards**

Reuse systems will be critical in the transition to a circular economy for plastics, and the treaty must include a much greater level of detail and focus on reuse. Participants at the Global Plastics Summit agreed that reuse is a stand-alone system that doesn't naturally fit into the same category as redesign and product alternatives. As such, it should be dealt with separately in the treaty. As Tiza Mafira, director of the Indonesia Plastic Bag Diet Movement, said, "Reuse is not product redesign; it is value chain redesign." New business models, financing models and ecosystems will be required.

It will be necessary for the treaty to set out clear definitions and standards for reuse. These should include sector-specific requirements, minimum standards outlining how often a product must be reused, and end-of-life requirements, said Vivekanand Sistla of Unilever. He added that it will also be essential to determine the type and extent of infrastructure required for large-scale reuse systems. Christina Dixon of the Environmental Investigation Agency agrees these definitions and standards should be a priority in intersessional work.

To be effective, reuse systems must be large-scale and embedded in municipal waste management systems. According to Edith Cecchini, director of international plastics at the Ocean Conservancy, negotiators urgently need information about the most appropriate policy options to develop reuse systems at scale.

The scale required to develop effective reuse systems means significant funding will be needed. Intersessional work should consider the links between EPR and reuse systems and how the former could be used as a mechanism to incentivise the transition to the latter. Innovative financing models such as blended finance will likely be required to meet the significant capital requirements for reuse infrastructure.

Despite the need for scale and common standards, participants agreed that a prescriptive and one-size-fits-all approach to reuse systems would likely fail. Member states and local communities must be given the flexibility to adopt different systems depending on their circumstances. The treaty should provide room for innovation by both the public and private sectors. Intersessional work on reuse could focus on developing case studies to demonstrate how reuse systems already function in practice.

Developing large-scale reuse systems can also support a just transition, mainly by providing employment opportunities (such as collection and washing) for displaced waste-pickers. Yet the transition to employment in the reuse economy must be bottom-up and led by the needs and aspirations of individual workers. Building positive employment outcomes into reuse systems will incentivise communities to adopt them. The treaty sections focused on the just transition should reference the potential for the reuse economy to support equity.

## Funding mechanisms must ensure the transition to a circular economy for plastics is fair and just

Summit participants overwhelmingly agreed that fairness and inclusion should be underlying principles embedded across the treaty and not just dealt with in a single section.

Waste-pickers are not mentioned in the zero draft, and Kabir Arora, national co-ordinator of the Alliance of Indian Waste-pickers and Asia-Pacific co-ordinator of the International Alliance of Waste-pickers, asked that negotiators formally recognise waste-pickers' right to a living income and social protection in the treaty.

Yumi Nishikawa, the plastic smart-city lead for Asia at WWF, called for a binding rule requiring a portion of EPR fees to improve infrastructure, provide capacity-building and training, and improve livelihoods for waste-pickers and affected communities.

Funding mechanisms to ensure global south countries can effectively implement the treaty will be vital to ensuring not just that it succeeds, but also that it is equitable. Sangmin Nam, director of the environment and development division of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), noted that the current draft only gives a general overview of financing. In contrast, the United Nations Environment Assembly resolution 5/14 specifically requested a focus on finance.



**“A just transition means that communities must share the problems and benefits created by plastics equally.”**

**Betty Osei Bonsu, country manager,  
Green Africa Youth Organisation**



Funding for developing countries must be accessible. Blended finance will play an important role, yet robust accountability mechanisms will need to be implemented, said Pushkala Lakshmi Ratan, Asia lead for climate finance in the financial institutions group at the International Finance Corporation (IFC). The treaty must include a financing mechanism that recognises and faithfully adheres to the waste hierarchy, meaning that elimination and reuse are incentivised above recycling, and single-use plastics are disincentivised, said Nicky Davies, executive director of the Plastic Solutions Fund.

Participants largely agreed that a dedicated multilateral fund would allow the treaty to unlock further funding from the public and private sectors. Needs for capital will differ between countries. The fund should enable early and easy access to capital for global south countries to immediately implement the treaty while developing parallel institutional arrangements for longer-term funding mechanisms. The multilateral fund must focus on unbankable activities so it does not crowd out the private-sector investment that all summit participants agreed is necessary and desirable. Intersessional work should include scenario analysis to determine the funding needed given different levels of ambition and the bankability of various solutions, and to identify compelling pathways for private-sector investment.

## **Negotiators must agree on the treaty’s key definitions, principles and scope at INC-3, which should deliver a clear mandate for an ambitious intersessional work programme**

“The zero draft contains great options,” said Marcus Gover, director of the Minderoo Foundation’s plastics initiative. “Now we need to make the right choices. A treaty with binding global targets would allow us to address the plastics crisis quickly.”

Yet, many participants at the Global Plastics Summit expressed concern that the lack of detail in the annexes is a hurdle to achieving an ambitious treaty. An extensive programme of intersessional work will be required to address this. Steve Fletcher, professor of ocean policy and economy and director of the Global Plastics Policy Centre at the University of Portsmouth, noted that the zero draft does not list the principles underpinning the treaty. A set of guiding principles would enable member states to translate and implement the treaty consistently and coherently.

Some criteria, definitions and annexes that will be pivotal in meeting the objectives of the treaty remain undefined, said Margaret Spring of the Monterey Bay Aquarium. She noted that neither the zero draft nor the INC Secretariat has set a path for filling these gaps. Establishing this should be a priority for the secretariat and delegates during the intersessional period.



**“Being realistic and pragmatic doesn’t have to mean losing ambition.”**

Luis Vayas Valdivieso, co-chair, Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee

Binding targets are the “elephant in the room”, said Christina Dixon of the Environmental Investigation Agency. INC-3 must provide a mandate for discussions to begin on quantifying targets. Nevertheless, she believes the “red flags” in the zero draft are technical rather than substantive. These include a lack of detail on the mechanism for delivering the treaty’s obligations and defining the role of the COP. Other participants agreed that some missing details could be left for the COP to determine after signing the treaty. Establishing how the COP and the SPI will work is a high priority for negotiators, said Chile’s Gonzalo Guaiquil.

Yet, at the Global Plastics Summit, opinions diverged about what is most important to agree before the end of 2024, when the treaty is due to be signed. Some participants favour prioritising the procedural details, which will set out how the treaty will work after signing, while others wish to focus on more substantive questions about its ambition and detailed targets.

Camila Zepeda, director-general of global affairs at the Mexican foreign ministry and Mexico’s chief climate and biodiversity negotiator, said that while pursuing consensus may make for a weaker treaty, the alternative risks the largest economies withdrawing from the negotiations and not ratifying the treaty. “Scope is going to be contentious,” she said.

Joe Papineschi, chairperson of Eunomia Research and Consulting, suggested that a compromise treaty may emerge that either extends some implementation timelines or makes aspects of the treaty optional. This would at least allow high-ambition countries to adopt a full-scope treaty, which would begin to reduce global demand for plastic. He warned that expecting all producer countries to agree to production caps may not be realistic.

“Being realistic and pragmatic doesn’t have to mean losing ambition,” said Luis Vayas Valdivieso, co-chair of the INC and ambassador of Ecuador to Britain. Success, he says, will be to conclude INC-3 with a new draft (“the ‘first’ draft”) and a mandate for an ambitious programme of intersessional work between INC-3 and INC-4, which will be held in May 2024.

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**“Just do it.”**

**Viliame Gavoka**, deputy prime minister and minister for tourism and civil aviation, **Fiji**

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<b>Sian Sutherland</b>	Co-Founder	A Plastic Planet + PlasticFree

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