

**ECONOMIST
IMPACT**

Small island developing states and plastics: roundtable and working group

Global Plastics Summit
October 11th-12th 2023 | Bangkok

Lead supporters



The first session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastics Pollution (INC-1) in Uruguay in 2022, and the second session (INC-2) in Paris in May-June 2023, began work towards a global United Nations (UN) treaty to minimise plastic pollution. As negotiations continue with the third session (INC-3) in Nairobi in November 2023, work remains in coming to an agreement that covers the whole life cycle of plastics and satisfies the needs of small island developing states (SIDS), which are particularly affected by this pollution.

To keep up momentum towards the treaty, on Wednesday October 12th Economist Impact convened a roundtable discussion and working group to examine progress, establish what SIDS need from a plastics treaty and ask how they can be supported in negotiations and implementation. Held as part of the Global Plastics Summit in Bangkok, the event was supported by the Nippon Foundation in association with the Back to Blue Initiative, and took place under the Chatham House Rule to encourage frank debate.

Though they do not produce plastic or products packaged in it, SIDS do import and consume plastic, and have little space for landfill disposal. Meanwhile, plastics from larger countries wash into the ocean and onto their shores. The SIDS are individually small, but together they are a formidable presence at the UN and can influence treaty negotiations so their interests are considered.

“The SIDS are individually small, but together they are a formidable presence at the UN.”

Delegates from SIDS began the day with a roundtable conversation along with academic experts and leaders from non-governmental organisations. Participants shared an understanding of what is needed from a treaty, so in his capacity as moderator, Charles Goddard, executive director of the Economist Group’s World Ocean Initiative and editorial director of Economist Impact, encouraged consideration of what support SIDS need in the negotiations and then in implementation.

The conversation highlighted the need for technical, legal and economic support during the negotiation process to make up for the SIDS’ small size. The population of Palau, for example, is only around 20,000 people. Britain has as many statisticians; Palau has just three. The roundtable also heard calls for the treaty to be global and enforceable, not voluntary and national like the Paris Agreement on climate change.

SIDS need a global plastics treaty to curb pollution

Following the roundtable discussion, the working group session “SIDS: Understanding the zero draft from an island perspective—opportunities for EPR, reuse and refill schemes” divided the audience into tables over two breakout segments to discuss policies for the reuse and refilling of plastic containers, and the design of extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes that would see corporations and developed countries support the evolution of waste-management practices and infrastructure in SIDS. At the end of these sessions, a representative from each table presented key takeaways to the audience.

An introductory address from J. Uduch Sengebau Senior, the vice-president of Palau, posed numerous questions to stimulate discussion. What will a circular economy for plastics look like in SIDS? How can initiatives to combat plastic waste be funded? And what role will the private sector play, especially through EPR schemes?

A trio of panellists representing individual SIDS and an intergovernmental organisation then continued to set the scene. The audience heard how an initiative driven by grassroots pressure to phase out single-use plastics in one SIDS highlighted a lack of technical capacity and indicated the importance of using bilateral business-to-business and government-to-government relations to help control imports. The experience of another SIDS suggested a need for mandatory rather than voluntary regulation, as well as the desirability of reducing the production of newly made “virgin” plastics.

“Participants saw a global treaty as necessary because SIDS cannot defeat pollution at the national level.”

The effect of plastic pollution washed ashore from elsewhere in making SIDS less attractive as tourist destinations was a shared concern. Participants saw a global treaty as necessary because SIDS cannot defeat pollution at the national level.

Breakout session 1: Scaling up container reuse and refilling in the SIDS context

Four-tenths of plastic production goes into single-use packaging, which damages SIDS' economies and environment as waste at the end of its brief life cycle. Working to reduce ocean plastic leakage by 20%, Common Seas, which partners with governments in data-gathering and planning to tackle plastic pollution, is collaborating with Economist Impact and the Global Plastics Policy Centre at the University of Portsmouth to develop a blueprint for scaling up reuse and refilling in the SIDS context. Reuse involves containers owned by operators of a system such as a restaurant chain or beverage brand, while refilling covers vessels owned by end users, such as personal drink bottles or tiffin boxes for carrying meals.

Jo Royle, the founder of Common Seas, set breakout groups the task of co-designing the blueprint by helping to prioritise four elements: system scoping (establishing design standards, goals and context), empowering businesses to move towards reuse, engaging people in behaviour change, and establishing reuse-enabling policies.

After around 30 minutes of discussion, tables came back with their proposals and reflections. The first to report described becoming bogged down in the problems. But it had agreed that incentives for reusing containers were better motivators than penalties for not doing so. Another table suggested that incentives for reuse and refilling should empower people and encourage local economic growth. This resonated with another takeaway that no one-size-fits-all solution will work across SIDS. Nevertheless, global standards could be adapted into national policies.

“Incentives for reuse and refilling should empower people and encourage local economic growth.”

Countries with a large share of GDP from tourism could make it the launchpad for promoting reuse, with models implemented by groups of tourism operators before extending to consumers as acceptance grows. Another proposal was for showcasing success stories and best practice in educational campaigns to promote good behaviours.

Multiple tables believed the four areas Ms Royle gave as priorities must be addressed together if a blueprint was to break habits and establish a more sustainable life cycle for plastics. Shifting to reuse will come at a cost, and that must not be so high it deters stakeholders. Fortunately, reuse and refill can be cheaper for price-sensitive families and individuals.

Breakout session 2: How extended producer responsibility schemes could help SIDS address pollution

Skipping a coffee break, participants pressed on into the second breakout session, on extended producer responsibility (EPR). Common Seas again helped set the scene, this time with an introduction to EPR from Carla Worth, a policy lead at the organisation.

EPR schemes expand producers' responsibility beyond the point of sale to their products' whole life cycle, including waste collection and management. Producers come to cover costs including those that pollution imposes on governments, environments and the communities they support. The zero draft of the plastics treaty has given options for including EPR, so far stating that parties shall encourage or operate EPR systems. Part of the task for breakout groups, then, was to establish what that would mean for SIDS.

Are EPR schemes even feasible for SIDS? One table answered yes, then asked what principles, implementation requirements and funding arrangements would have to go into the treaty to support EPR. SIDS need an assessment of the costs and implications of administering EPR schemes at a national level. Appetite to be the first country to move, becoming a case study that guides others, appears limited. This reluctance could be overcome by a fund, supported by developed countries, that finances EPR schemes and the remediation of "legacy" plastic pollution, which has been dumped to end up in the ocean over several decades.

“SIDS are in the awkward position of having to be followers in solving a problem that affects them most acutely.”

SIDS are in the awkward position of having to be followers in solving a problem that affects them most acutely. Equity—between larger and smaller businesses, and rich and poor consumers—was a significant concern. Multiple tables doubted whether SIDS should shoulder EPR implementation, since larger developed countries are more responsible for legacy pollution and can achieve more with their resources. The dissenting view that SIDS are in the best position to do what works for them, expressed by a participant not from a SIDS, garnered an amiable titter from the audience.

Practical proposals included a combination of penalties and bonuses, with subsidies and incentives to be phased out gradually as change takes hold. EPR schemes could be tailored to suit an objective or particular problem, for example the disposal or replacement of water bottles supplied during an emergency. A speaker from a startup suggested using the power of gamification— incentivising real-world behaviours by offering virtual rewards such as items within a videogame—to promote consumer engagement with EPR schemes.

“EPR schemes need strong governance and adequate financial incentives to succeed.”

EPR may not be as new as some participants assume, with container deposit schemes and similar initiatives in Mauritius, the Philippines and Indonesia being cited as precursors. These all had failings, and participants noted that schemes need strong governance and adequate financial incentives to succeed. Any fees imposed on producers must be enough to cover not only collection and recycling costs, but also to remedy the effects of plastic pollution on the environment.

Conclusion

As the session concluded, Steven Fletcher, director of the Global Plastics Policy Centre, drew participants' attention to "[Seven Policies to Reduce Plastic Pollution in Small Island Developing States](#)", a document the centre co-authored with Common Seas. The Global Plastics Policy Centre, Common Seas and Economist Impact all gathered insights from the day, to be analysed and communicated in formats including this summary report. Participants will take these experiences into further treaty negotiations, research and local initiatives as SIDS continue their battle against plastic pollution in the ocean.

Key takeaways

- **SIDS will need support not just in negotiations towards a plastics treaty but also in its implementation.** Given their small size, island states will benefit from outside technical and legal expertise, and from external funding, to bolster their capacity to act against plastic pollution.
- **A global treaty with mandatory rather than voluntary regulation would do the most to defeat pollution.** Participants saw the voluntary national targets of the Paris Agreement as an inadequate solution to a worldwide environmental problem. SIDS would benefit from a more robust approach.
- **Promoting the reuse and refilling of plastic containers is one way to reduce locally generated pollution.** Programmes could include both incentives for reuse and penalties for disposal, and should be tailored to empower people and encourage growth in specific places.
- **Extended producer responsibility schemes could address the burden that legacy plastic pollution places on SIDS.** Large companies and developed countries are in the most powerful position to eliminate new pollution and remedy what has built up over decades, taking responsibility for the full costs their products impose on communities and the environment.

Copyright

© 2023 The Economist Group. All rights reserved. Neither this publication nor any part of it may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of The Economist Group. Whilst every effort has been taken to verify the accuracy of information presented at this conference, neither The Economist Group nor its affiliates can accept any responsibility or liability for reliance by any person on this information.

Economist Impact

Economist Impact is a part of The Economist Group, publisher of *The Economist* newspaper. Sharing *The Economist's* commitment to informed, impartial and independent debate, we are recognised the world over as a leading provider of highly interactive meetings—including industry conferences, private gatherings and government roundtables—for senior executives seeking new insights into important strategic issues.

1301, 13/F 12 Taikoo Wan Road, Taikoo Shing, Hong Kong
events.economist.com