

# Taking Stock on the Global Agreement on Plastics: challenges and lessons for a systemic solution

## Webinar Insights



## Introduction

Each year, **460 million tons of plastic are produced**, yet **less than 15% is ever recycled**, leaving the majority to pollute land, waterways and oceans. Since 2022, governments have been **negotiating a Global Plastics Treaty** to address plastic pollution across its full lifecycle – from production and design to waste management. Despite progress, **negotiations have stalled and remain divided** between reducing plastic production and focusing on downstream recycling and waste management.

This webinar, convened by the EU SWITCH-Asia Policy Support Component and the European Environmental Bureau, updated Asian and Pacific officials, experts and business representatives on the negotiation outcomes and discussed how **national and regional actions could advance circularity and collective solutions**, while negotiations for a global agreement are under way.

Opening the webinar, Dr. Zinaida Fadeeva, Team Leader at the SWITCH-Asia Policy Support Component, framed the challenge considering difficult treaty negotiations:

*“The progress so far falls short of the ambitions many of us expected. But this does not mean we pause. Instead, it challenges us to ask what levers we can already use here in the Asia Pacific region to keep moving forward.”*

Her message set the tone for a discussion focused not only on the challenges of the negotiation process but also on the **opportunities for regional leadership, scalable solutions and practical pathways** available to Asian stakeholders today.

## Reflections on the Negotiations Process

Patrizia Heidegger, Deputy Secretary General of the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), offered a short assessment of the political dynamics shaping the treaty:

*“The draft considered during the negotiation round in August 2025 omitted most binding commitments on reducing plastic production. The draft had shifted towards downstream waste management rather than the life-cycle approach that was at the core of the mandate.”*

She also highlighted the imbalance in stakeholder participation:

*“Those with strong interests in fossil fuel extraction and petrochemicals were very present, while frontline communities most impacted by plastic pollution were not.”*

The exchange highlighted several **key tensions shaping the negotiations**, beginning with the sharp divides over ambition, as several countries continue to resist binding measures on production caps, chemicals and polymers of concern, for instance. This fragmentation has raised the **risk of a weak treaty**, prompting Heidegger’s warning that “it may be better not to conclude a treaty immediately rather than one full of loopholes and voluntary measures.” At the same time, other speakers noted growing **momentum for a ‘treaty of the willing’**, a coalition of ambitious countries which could advance strong commitments, demonstrate feasibility in practice and draw others towards higher standards.

## Experiences from implementation

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Fang Wong of UNEP emphasized in his keynote that the world is no longer in the dark about solutions:

*“Compared to five years ago, we can confidently say the solutions to plastic pollution have been mapped – the question now is how to combine them and scale them.”*

UNEP’s key observations included:

- There is no silver bullet to address plastic pollution without a **systemic approach** which involves a mix of policies, business solutions and stakeholder inclusion.
- **Solutions exist across the life cycle**, but implementation is uneven.
- **Most investment remains downstream**, with “less than 10% spent on upstream and midstream solutions.”
- **Asia-Pacific has strong policy momentum**, but enforcement and scaling remain major gaps.
- **Reuse cultures in Asia are a strategic advantage**, offering a foundation for modern circular systems.
- **A just transition is essential**, especially for informal workers and SMEs.

Wong also stressed the need for **blended finance**, **cross-border cooperation**, and **sector specific interventions** beyond packaging – including textiles, agriculture and durable goods.

## Asian perspectives of the treaty negotiation process

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The first panel provided a deeper analysis of the treaty negotiations. **International regulation for the global problem of plastic pollution is needed**, addressing the full life cycle of plastics, as stressed by Arab Hoballah, Senior SCP Expert with SWITCH-Asia.

Tobias Dan Nielsen of the European Environmental Agency (EEA) emphasized that plastic pollution is not a single point failure. It is the result of **interconnected systems**: production, consumption, design, waste management, trade, and economic incentives. Because of this, **isolated interventions will not work**. He argued for **coherent, cross-value chain approaches** that align policy, markets, and infrastructure-point failure.

A central message was that **downstream measures alone cannot solve the problem**. Recycling and waste management are necessary but insufficient. Tobias stressed the need for the reduction of plastic production, for design changes that eliminate unnecessary plastic, reuse and refill systems and for control of chemicals. He highlighted that upstream action is where the biggest environmental gains lie – and where current global negotiations have struggled most.

With global negotiations stalled, Tobias encouraged **regional and national leadership**. He noted that Asia-Pacific countries already have strong pilot projects, emerging policy frameworks, growing business innovation and community level momentum. He argued that **regional coalitions and “coalitions of the willing”** can move faster than global consensus and can ultimately shape global norms.

Tobias also highlighted that **data gaps** remain a major barrier. Without reliable information on material flows, chemical additives, waste leakage and recycling performance. The lack of data makes it impossible to design effective policies or track progress. He called for **better monitoring systems**, harmonized methodologies, and transparency across the value chain.

Pinky Chandran, Coordinator at the Break Free From Plastic (BFFP) for Asia-Pacific, stressed that a **weak treaty creates the illusion of progress** rather than resolving the plastic pollution crisis. She stressed, for instance, that a weak treaty would be one that did not set binding rules, would allow infinite expansion of petrochemicals or would leave toxic chemicals unaddressed.

Dinara Azhigaliyeva from the Central Asia Climate Fund argued that the difficulties in the negotiations are no reason to pause, but to take action, especially at the regional level. She highlighted concrete examples for what is already developing in the region:

- **Kazakhstan** – Policy analysis and guidelines for transitioning to a circular plastics economy, with emphasis on EPR and secondary materials markets.
- **Mongolia** – Local recycling hubs connecting households, MSMEs, and authorities, showing circular systems can work even in dispersed settings.
- **Cambodia & Myanmar** – Projects helping food vendors and packaging producers reduce single-use plastics through alternatives and incentives.
- **Lao** – A circular business hub for plastics and collaboration with the World Bank on a national action plan for single-use plastics.
- **China** – Contribution to a zero-waste city roadmap integrating plastics into urban planning and linking local reforms to national policy.

These examples illustrate **policy reform, business innovation, and community engagement already happening on the ground**. Dinara invited the audience to reflect how these fragmented efforts can be connected to trigger systemic change.

## What is important now for stakeholders in Asia?

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The second panel established that **Asia is central to the global plastics challenge** – and therefore **central to the solution** – as the region combines major manufacturing hubs, rapidly expanding consumer markets, and some of the world's most ambitious circular economy initiatives.

To accelerate progress, stakeholders across Asia will need to **strengthen upstream measures**, since many countries already have bans and design regulations under development but remain in the early stages of implementation, making effective scaling essential. Advancing next generation EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility) systems is equally important, shifting from recycling focused schemes toward models that also require reuse, refill, and recycled content integration.

**Mobilising investment** for circular innovation will be critical, as grants alone cannot transform systems. Asian governments and financial institutions are well positioned to de-risk circular business models and unlock larger flows of capital. Supporting SMEs and informal workers must remain a priority, reflecting Fang Wong's reminder that "plastic pollution is not only about waste – it is linked to climate, nature, toxicity, and social benefits," and ensuring that a **just transition** is embedded in policy design.

The region can also leverage its **long-standing cultural familiarity with reuse** – from refillable containers to repair traditions – which provides a strong foundation for modern circular systems.

At the same time, promoting **regional harmonization of standards** for design, chemicals and recycled content can reduce trade barriers and accelerate innovation.

Finally, addressing plastic pollution as a cross-cutting issue will require policies that reflect its **connections to climate, biodiversity, health and trade**. Together, these priorities reinforce the webinar's central message: Asia does not need to wait for a global treaty to lead.

## Conclusion

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The webinar underscored a shared reality: **global negotiations are slow, but action in Asia can be fast**. The region already has **strong policy foundations, innovative business models, active civil society movements and cultural practices aligned with circularity**. The task now is to **scale, connect, and accelerate** these efforts – while continuing to push for an ambitious global treaty. Asia has the opportunity not only to respond to global developments but to shape them.

## What is next for the Treaty?

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Although the most recent negotiation round, INC 5.2 in August 2025 in Geneva, ended without consensus, the process of the negotiation of a global Plastic Treaty continues. The next phase will be critical for determining whether a meaningful treaty can be concluded which can still deliver effective global action. At a follow up meeting – INC 5.3 – on 7 February 2026 in Geneva, **treaty negotiations did not resume** but a new Chair was elected before substantive negotiations can continue. A **full negotiation round, INC 6** is expected to:

- Reopen negotiations on the treaty text;
- Address unresolved issues from INC-5.2;
- Consider country submissions made during the intersessional period;
- Rebuild consensus on the scope and ambition of the treaty;
- Revisit key areas of divergence, including production caps, chemicals and polymers of concern, reuse and refill systems, EPR and financing and monitoring and reporting frameworks.

The months leading up to INC-6 offer a strategic window for **stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific region** for aligning regional positions, strengthening national commitments, engaging in intersessional consultations and influencing the next consolidated treaty draft. With global negotiations temporarily paused, **regional leadership becomes even more important**. Asia can use this moment to shape the agenda, demonstrate ambition and build momentum for a strong treaty once negotiations resume.

## References

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### Global Plastics Treaty:

- **UNEP Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution** Official homepage of the treaty process, including mandates, session documents, reports, and schedules <https://www.unep.org/inc-plastic-pollution>
- **UN News – Coverage of INC Negotiations** <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165658>
- **Global Plastics Policy Centre – Treaty Timeline and Analysis** Independent research hub providing treaty text analysis, policy briefings, and academic outputs. <https://plasticpolicy.port.ac.uk/global-plastics-treaty/>
- **CFACT Report on INC-5 Negotiations (Geneva, 2025)** Detailed summary of negotiation dynamics, areas of disagreement, and the status of the draft text. <https://www.cfact.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/CFACT-Global-Plastics-Treaty-Talks-FInal-Final-.pdf>

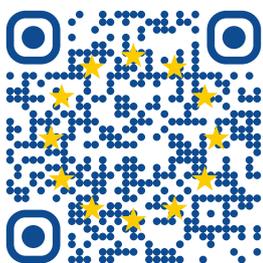
### Key Publications on Plastic Waste Reduction in Asia:

- **UNEP – Turning Off the Tap: How the World Can End Plastic Pollution** Global systems analysis with strong relevance for Asia; outlines upstream and downstream solutions and financing needs. <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/turning-tap-how-world-can-end-plastic-pollution>
- **UNEP – Asia-Pacific Waste Management Outlook** Comprehensive assessment of waste systems, policy gaps, and circular economy opportunities across the region. <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/asia-pacific-waste-management-outlook>

- **OECD – Plastic Pollution Outlook for the Asia-Pacific Region** Data-rich analysis of plastic flows, policy uptake, and future scenarios for Asian countries. <https://www.oecd.org/environment/plastic-pollution-outlook-asia-pacific.htm>
- **World Bank – Plastic Circularity in South and East Asia** Country-level diagnostics and investment pathways for circular plastics systems. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/environment/publication/plastic-circularity>
- **SWITCH-Asia – Country Projects on Plastics** Detailed documentation of SWITCH-Asia projects. <https://www.switch-asia.eu/projects/>
- **SWITCH-Asia – Knowledge Products on Plastics:** <https://www.switch-asia.eu/our-work/multi-country/plastics/>
- **SWITCH-Asia – Knowledge Products on Extended Producer Responsibility:** <https://www.switch-asia.eu/our-work/multi-country/enabling-effective-extended-producer-responsibility-epr-systems/>

#### **Additional Authoritative Sources:**

- **UNEP – Global Partnership on Plastic Pollution and Marine Litter (GPML)** Knowledge platform with tools, datasets, and policy guidance. <https://www.gpmarinelitter.org/>
- **UNEP – Global Environment Facility (GEF) Plastics Portfolio** Overview of GEF-funded plastics projects, including the new 108M USD global programme referenced in the webinar. <https://www.thegef.org/topics/plastics>
- **Ellen MacArthur Foundation – Plastics and Circular Economy** Leading research on reuse systems, design standards, and business models. <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/plastics>



Watch the recording [here](#)