



## 4th Session of Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee

**For Prelims:** [Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee \(INC-4\)](#), [United Nations Environment Agency](#), [Plastic](#), [Carbon Emissions](#), [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#), [Extended Producer Responsibility](#)

**For Mains:** Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, Single-use plastics and related concerns, Environment Pollution and Degradation, Conservation.

**Source:** TH

### Why in News?

Recently, the fourth session of the [Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee \(INC-4\)](#) of the [United Nations Environment Agency \(UNEA\)](#) was held in **Ottawa, Canada** attracting participation from over 170 member states.

- This session is part of the ongoing negotiations **to build a legally binding treaty on [plastics pollution](#)** by the end of 2024 under UNEA.
- The INC-4 for a global plastics **treaty failed to reach an agreement**. Negotiators aim to reach a consensus by the end of 2024 at **INC-5 which is scheduled for November 2024 in South Korea**.

### Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC)

- The INC is a committee established by the [United Nations Environment Programme \(UNEP\)](#) in March 2022 **to develop an international legally binding agreement on plastic pollution**.
- The INC's mandate is to develop an instrument that addresses the entire life cycle of plastic, including in the marine environment, and could include both voluntary and binding approaches.
- The INC-1 started in November 2022 in **Punta del Este, Uruguay**. The INC-2 occurred in May-June 2023 in Paris, France. The INC-3 convened in Nairobi in December 2023.

### Why is a Global Plastics Treaty Needed?

- **Rapid Expansion of Plastic Production:**
  - Since the 1950s, **plastic production** worldwide has skyrocketed. It increased from just 2 million tonnes in 1950 to more than **450 million tonnes in 2019**.
    - If left unchecked, the production is slated to double by 2050, and triple by 2060.
- **Plastic Waste and Burden:**
  - Although plastic is a cheap and versatile material, with a wide variety of applications, its widespread use has led to a crisis.
    - As plastic takes anywhere **from 20 to 500 years to decompose**, and less than

**10% has been recycled till now**, nearly 6 billion tonnes now pollute the planet, according to a 2023 study published by *The Lancet*.

- About **400 million tonnes of plastic waste is generated annually**, a figure expected to jump by 62% between 2024 and 2050.
  - Much of this plastic waste leaks into the environment, especially into rivers and oceans, where it breaks down into **smaller particles (microplastic or nanoplastic)**.
    - These contain more than 16,000 chemicals that can **harm ecosystems and living organisms**, including [humans](#), the chemicals are known to disturb the body's hormone systems, cause cancer, diabetes, reproductive disorders, etc.
- **Climate Change:**
- Plastic production and disposal are also contributing to climate change. According to a report by the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#), in 2019, plastics generated **1.8 billion tonnes of GHG emissions** (3.4% of global emissions).
    - Roughly 90% of these emissions come from plastic production, which uses fossil fuels as raw material. If current trends continue, emissions from production could grow 20% by 2050.

## What Can the Global Plastic Treaty Entail?

- **Global Objectives:** The treaty aims to address marine and other types of environmental pollution caused by plastics.
  - It focuses on establishing global objectives to **combat plastic pollution and assess its impact on ecosystems**.
- **Guidelines for International Cooperation:** The treaty may outline how wealthier **nations can support poorer ones** in achieving their plastic reduction goals.
- **Prohibitions and Targets:** It could include **bans on specific plastics, products, and chemical additives**, along with legally binding targets for recycling and recycled content in consumer goods.
- **Chemical Testing Mandates:** The treaty might require the testing of certain chemicals present in plastics to ensure safety and environmental protection.
- **Consideration for Vulnerable Workers:** Details may be included regarding a just transition for waste pickers and workers in developing countries reliant on the plastic industry for livelihoods.
- **Progress Assessment:** The treaty will include provisions for assessing member states' progress in implementing plastic pollution reduction measures.
  - Regular evaluations will ensure accountability and drive continuous improvement in global efforts to combat plastic pollution.

## What are the Challenges in Advancing the Treaty?

- **Resistance from Oil and Gas Giants:**
  - Some major oil and gas-producing nations, along with fossil fuel and chemical industry groups, aim to **narrow the treaty's focus solely on plastic waste and recycling**.
- **Polarising Negotiations:**
  - Since the inaugural talks in Uruguay in November 2022, [oil-producing countries](#) like Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Iran have strongly **opposed plastic production caps**, resorting to various delay tactics, such as procedural disputes, to obstruct productive discussions.
  - The **decision-making process** for the treaty remains contentious, with **countries yet to agree on whether consensus or majority voting should determine its adoption**.
- **High-Ambition Coalition vs. US Stance:**
  - The "**High Ambition Coalition (HAC) to End Plastic Pollution**," comprising approximately **65 nations including African nations and most of the [European Union](#)**, advocates for ambitious goals such as ending plastic pollution by 2040 and phasing out problematic single-use plastics and harmful chemical additives.
    - The US, although expressing a desire to end plastic pollution by 2040, diverges from the coalition's approach by **promoting voluntary measures instead of binding commitments**.
- **Influence of Industry Interests:**
  - Fossil fuel and chemical corporations are actively working to dilute the treaty's effectiveness, as evidenced by the record number of lobbyists.

- These industries, which profit heavily from plastics derived from fossil fuels, oppose production cuts and falsely assert that the plastics crisis is solely a waste management issue, rather than acknowledging the fundamental problem of plastic production itself.

## What is India's Stance at INC-4?

- **Preamble and Objective:**
  - India advocated for the preamble to reaffirm "**the sovereign rights of states to sustainable development**".
    - The proposed objective is "to **safeguard human health** and the environment from plastic pollution, including in marine environments, while ensuring sustainable development".
  - India emphasised the incorporation of principles such as **equity, sustainable development, and common but differentiated responsibilities**.
  - However, the list does not include fundamental human rights principles, such as the **right to a healthy environment and the right to access information**.
- **Restrictions on Plastic Production:**
  - India opposes any limitations on **primary plastic polymers or virgin plastics**, arguing that production reductions exceed the scope of **UNEA resolution 5/14**.
    - India highlights that some chemicals used in plastic manufacturing are already subject to prohibition or regulation under different conventions.
- **Chemicals and Polymers of Concern:**
  - India advocates for a **transparent and inclusive process** informed by scientific evidence to make decisions regarding chemicals.
    - India disagrees with the inclusion of language about polymers of concern.
- **Midstream Measures:**
  - Stresses the role of sustainable and efficient plastic usage, advocating for improved design to enhance product longevity.
  - Asserts the need for nationally determined approaches for downstream measures like **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)**, excluding international supply chains.
- **Emissions and Releases:**
  - India emphasises the need to **prioritise the elimination of plastic waste leakage into the environment**, excluding considerations of emissions and effluents during manufacturing and/or recycling.
- **Prioritising Waste Management:**
  - Advocates for prioritising plastic waste management as the primary area of intervention, excluding considerations of emissions during manufacturing and recycling stages.
  - Expresses concerns regarding cross-cutting issues such as trade and financing, insisting on comprehensive financial and technical assistance alongside technology transfer.

## What are the Initiatives Related to Plastic?

- **Global:**
  - **UNEP Plastics Initiative:**
    - It aims to end global plastic pollution by **reducing the flow of virgin plastics** and promoting the transition to a **circular economy**.
    - It focuses on **innovation, reduction, and reuse of plastics**. The strategic goals include reducing the size of the problem, designing for circularity, ensuring circularity in practice, and managing plastic waste.
    - By 2027, the initiative aims to improve plastics policies in 45 countries, engage 500 private sector actors in circular solutions, and involve 50 financial institutions in supporting the transition.
  - **Global Tourism Plastics Initiative:**
    - It aims to unite tourism stakeholders to fight plastic pollution. Led by the **UN Environment and United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)**, the initiative supports organisations in reducing plastic waste and improving plastic use in their operations.
    - It is developing commitments for the private sector, destinations, and associations

to implement by 2025.

- **Circular Plastic Economy:**
  - In 2015, the EU created a **Circular Economy Action Plan** which later consisted of the European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy.
    - This approach helps limit the amount of plastic waste by creating more of a **“circular” method of reusing products and straying from single-use plastics.**
- **Ban Plastic:**
  - Several countries have implemented bans on plastic products.
    - In 2002, Bangladesh was the first country to ban thin plastic bags.
    - China implemented a ban on plastic bags in 2020 with phased implementation.
    - In the US, 12 states have banned single-use plastic bags.
    - The European Union implemented the **Directive on Single-Use Plastics in July 2021**, which bans certain single-use plastics for which alternatives are available, including plates, cutlery, straws, balloon sticks, cotton buds, expanded polystyrene containers, and oxo-degradable plastic products.
- **India:**
  - [Plastic Waste Management \(Amendment\) Rules, 2024](#)
  - **The Plastics Manufacture and Usage (Amendment) Rules (2003).**
  - **UNDP India’s Plastic Waste Management Program (2018-2024).**
  - **Prakrit initiative.**
  - **EPR Portal by Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).**
  - [India Plastics Pact](#)
  - [Project REPLAN](#)
  - [Swachh Bharat Mission](#)

**Drishti Mains Question:**

Q. Assess the effectiveness of existing global initiatives such as the UNEP Plastics Initiative and the Circular Plastic Economy in combating plastic pollution, highlighting their strengths and limitations.

**UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)**

**Prelims**

**Q. Why is there a great concern about the ‘microbeads’ that are released into the environment? (2019)**

- (a) They are considered harmful to marine ecosystems.
- (b) They are considered to cause skin cancer in children.
- (c) They are small enough to be absorbed by crop plants in irrigated fields.
- (d) They are often found to be used as food adulterants.

**Ans: (a)**

**Q. In India, ‘extend producer responsibility’ was introduced as an important feature in which of the following? (2019)**

- (a) The Bio-medical Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 1998
- (b) The Recycled Plastic (Manufacturing and Usage) Rules, 1999
- (c) The e-Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 2011
- (d) The Food Safety and Standard Regulations, 2011

**Ans: (c)**

**Mains:**

**Q:** What are the impediments in disposing the huge quantities of discarded solid waste which are continuously being generated? How do we remove safely the toxic wastes that have been accumulating in our habitable environment? **(2018)**

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