



IN CRISIS LIES OPPORTUNITY

MAJORITY-LED EFFORTS ARE ESSENTIAL TO BREAK DEADLOCK AND DELIVER A FIT-FOR-PURPOSE PLASTIC POLLUTION TREATY

The latest negotiation session showed once again that the INC process requires a major rethink. Without fundamental changes and proactive steps taken within the ambitious group in the interim period, the only possible outcome will be a weak treaty unfit for purpose. While the failure in Geneva has sent the INC process into limbo, with no clear decisions on the way forward, it has also created a unique opportunity for the progressive majority to take back control of the process.

The urgency of establishing a robust and effective global regime to end plastic pollution cannot be overstated. Every hour, [over 1,250 tons of plastic enters our oceans](#), infiltrating ecosystems from the deepest marine trenches to the food we consume. Plastic pollution has become a pervasive threat to biodiversity, contributing to the death of wildlife and the degradation of fragile habitats. It contaminates the air we breathe and the water we rely on, with microplastics now detected in human brains, lungs, placentas, and blood. Scientific research increasingly links these particles and their toxic additives to serious health conditions, including cancer, infertility, cardiovascular disease, and irreversible developmental harm.

Beyond the environmental and health implications, plastic pollution poses significant societal and economic risks. It undermines food security, and exacerbates inequalities, especially in communities least equipped to manage waste. Economically, the costs of inaction are mounting, from the loss of tourism and fisheries revenue to the escalating expenses of clean-up operations. As new research continues to reveal the far-reaching consequences of plastic pollution, the need for a decisive, coordinated global response grows ever more critical.

A strong treaty is the fastest, most effective and economically viable route to solving the plastic pollution crisis. The ambitious majority advocating for such a treaty must now consider taking bold, collective action to drive progress and safeguard the planet for future generations. **At this unique point in the negotiations, the majority must ramp up their efforts with full force.**

This brief outlines the following:

- How the INC is deadlocked, and why more of the same can only lead to a weak outcome.
- Why INC members working for an effective treaty—the majority—need to focus their collective efforts.
- How a majority-led effort can advance the negotiation process.

WWF calls on the [majority of states](#) to:

- Focus their efforts and work for an effective endgame for the treaty.
- Conduct informal interim work before any new INC meeting, to advance a fit-for-purpose treaty text and address key substantive matters.

THE INC IS DEADLOCKED

The plastic pollution treaty negotiations are currently [stuck in a deadlock](#). In August 2025, after eight months and ten meeting days in overtime, at least [USD 8.7 million more than estimated budget](#), and more than 7 million tons of additional plastic pollution in our oceans since its last failed attempt, the INC once again adjourned without agreement on a treaty text.

The main reason is the overreliance on consensus-based decision making, which in practice has given member states the ability to veto and block progress. There is still ambiguity around the rules of procedure, leaving negotiations trapped in procedural limbo. The INC should, in line with the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties and best practices from past multilateral treaty negotiations, adopt clean rules of procedure for the committee.

The INCs to date have confirmed the existence of a small group of states who are negotiating in bad faith. These states have shown no intent to agree to anything, instead working to derail, delay, and diminish the outcome. The result is an inevitable downward slide in the level of ambition.

When members failed to reach consensus during the first week of INC-5.2, the Chair took the initiative to compile a text proposal, in hope of a “landing zone” acceptable to all while still providing the needed solutions. This approach relied on several false assumptions, namely: 1) that this “landing zone” exists; 2) that lowering the strength of the measures will ultimately secure universal agreement; 3) that all states are negotiating in good faith; 4) that all states agreeing to conclude the text now would ratify later; and 5) that weaker measures agreed by all will be more effective at addressing plastic pollution than stronger measures agreed by most.

INC 5.2 outcome reaffirmed that there are fundamentally incompatible views on core obligations. On issues such as bans on high-risk plastic products and other upstream measures, there is no middle ground. Compromise is structurally impossible, regardless of how many INC meetings are convened. It is therefore highly unlikely that a “landing zone” between the ambitious majority and the few spoiling states exists.

Even if consensus were somehow reached, such an agreement would not guarantee universal membership or an impactful environmental outcome. No major multilateral environmental agreement in the last three decades—despite being concluded by consensus—has achieved universal membership. Meanwhile, a weak treaty without global rules adds nothing to the status quo. Countries are already pursuing nationally determined, voluntary actions. Thirty years of such initiatives since the [1995 Washington Declaration on Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-Based Activities](#) have yielded little, while plastic pollution [has grown](#) as global plastic waste generation more than doubled from 2000 to 2019.

Weakening the treaty to secure major producers’ membership is a false bargain. The Paris Agreement illustrates this: the largest GHG emitters are parties; yet most have missed their own voluntary targets, and collective goals remain out of reach. Pursuing major producers’ participation at all costs, while neglecting the incentives that could instead compel participation, is a flawed strategy that has invariably failed for other environmental issues.

It takes a considerable leap of faith to believe the current approach will deliver an end to plastic pollution. The most likely outcome is a diluted, waste management-focused instrument, agreed to by all states, joined by most, and implemented voluntarily and partially by some—in other words, the world as it already is.

Either way, maintaining the current approach without change means that endless procedural delays would continue to erode trust, drain energy, and hand victory to obstruction. This recognition makes a strong case for a daring next step in the negotiations: to move on without the few, and continue the work with the many.

MEMBER STATES WORKING FOR AN EFFECTIVE TREATY MUST REFOCUS THEIR EFFORTS

Throughout these negotiations, a large—and growing—majority of countries have united around a shared vision for a treaty with binding measures along the full life cycle of plastics. WWF identifies [four must-have elements](#) as the minimum starting point. A majority of countries, [133 countries](#), support these key measures needed and demonstrate a clear alignment on the key elements needed in an effective treaty and the final outcome of the negotiations.

Most recently at INC-5.2, this ambitious majority showed that they can influence the direction of the negotiations with their united voice. When the Chair presented [a text proposal without global rules](#), it was decisively rejected by this majority, who re-emphasised their commitment to a strong treaty with binding measures to address the full lifecycle of plastics.

Furthermore, proposals for binding measures in the treaty were tabled by [Mexico and Switzerland, on behalf of 85 countries](#) for phasing out problematic and harmful plastic products, by [Chile and the United Kingdom on behalf of 32 countries](#) for regulating plastic product designs, and by [Colombia and Peru on behalf of 118 countries](#) for COP decision-making rules. Detailed means of implementation were discussed in Contact Groups, and efforts to merge proposals into a balanced package took place on the sidelines.

While the majority has the numbers, they need to align better to convert those numbers into a credible and effective solution for the instrument. It is time for states to rethink how they approach the design of an effective treaty. Most treaties do not start with, or ever achieve universal membership, and the plastic treaty will likely be no different. While harmonised bans of harmful plastics across the world from day one would be ideal, harmonised bans across half the world's markets could be enough to shift global production and consumption. The question therefore is—what and who is needed for this instrument to be effective now and in the long run?

One way of assessing the effectiveness of the new instrument is to look at key markets for plastic and plastic products. When a significant percentage of the world's markets follow one set of rules, the rest of the market will need to respond and thus create needed change. The Montreal Protocol and MARPOL both used this demand-driven logic. By covering a critical mass of global consumption (Montreal) and fleet tonnage (MARPOL) before entering into force, they built effective regimes that mattered from the outset. Market gravity then expanded participation and propelled the treaties towards universality. These learnings could be valuable input in the design of the new treaty on plastic pollution. Every additional state that joins the treaty brings with them another segment of the global market under common rules, creating de facto global standards. Embedded incentives in the treaty would further encourage wider participation.

INFORMAL INTERIM WORK LED BY THE MAJORITY TO BREAK THE DEADLOCK

The majority need to create space to further align on crucial technical considerations for the treaty.

While there is already general alignment on the essential elements within [the group of 133 countries](#), technical questions and considerations remain. At a time when the INC finds itself in limbo, leading countries within this majority group must take the opportunity to invite—in their national capacity—similarly-minded states to a conference to further discuss core treaty provisions. Such informal interim work will allow the majority of states to consolidate their support base for necessary treaty measures, away from the pressures and disruptions of the formal INC process and before any new INC meeting.

To avoid continuing the downward slide in ambition, the negotiations must realign with its core purpose: to develop an effective legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution. This purpose must drive the treaty's design, shape negotiation dynamics, and determine the pathways to adoption. There is a strong case for majority-led efforts to break negotiation deadlock and deliver a fit-for-purpose plastic pollution treaty:

- 1) Specific, legally binding and well-resourced measures, that are proportionate to the scale of the problem and adaptable over time, are essential for real impact, as demonstrated by other successful MEAs.
- 2) A broad majority of states [have declared readiness](#) to adopt and implement strong, binding rules, ensuring meaningful impacts from the outset even without all states, or the largest producers.
- 3) With the right incentives and mechanisms that reward compliance and participation (such as access to market, financial assistance, technical cooperation and technology transfers), the global market will gradually adjust to consumers' demands and the treaty will attract more states, including major producers, to join over time.

INC-5.2 demonstrated both the limits and the potential of the current process toward a global agreement on plastic pollution. To sustain the momentum and prepare for the next negotiating session, WWF urges governments to convene an open-ended intersessional consultation on core treaty provisions. The consultations should be technical and inclusive, open to all states who are aligned on the shared vision for a strong and effective treaty and designed to advance substantive understanding and text development between INC meetings. The broad majority committed to an effective treaty must now leverage their strength to conclude the much-needed treaty to end plastic pollution.



or visit:

wwf.panda.org/plastictreaty

for information on the treaty negotiation, including timeline, reports, briefs and quick guide to the INC process

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