

The Global Plastics Treaty

An Opportunity for Climate Reduction

“The most important international multilateral environmental deal since the Paris climate accord.”

- U.N. Environment Programme Executive Director, Inger Anderson

The Global Plastics Treaty (GPT) is a key opportunity for climate funders to address a growing climate crisis that is fuelled by single use plastics, which releases greenhouse gas emissions at every step of its lifecycle.

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International negotiations over the legally binding treaty that will cover the lifecycle of plastics have just begun, with the ambition to have completed a draft agreement by the end of 2024.

In this time, we have a rare opportunity to address the issue by sending a unifying message to policymakers, the media, and the general public: Plastic is carbon, its proliferation worsens the climate crisis, and we need to take action to address the damage it is causing.

The Problem of Single-Use Plastics

If plastic were a country, it would be the fifth-largest emitter of carbon emissions. This climate footprint is growing more rapidly than any other sector's, and production is expected to triple by 2060. At least 70% of global emissions currently come from the manufacture, transport, use, and disposal of goods. This includes materials produced with plastics, making plastic production the fastest growing source of industrial greenhouse gas emissions, and plastic waste one of largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions. Reports indicate that by 2050, greenhouse gas emissions from plastic will consume 15-32% of the Earth's remaining carbon budget.

Plastic is a fossil fuel.

Ninety-nine percent of plastics are made from fossil fuels. With demand from energy and transport facing long-term decline, the oil and gas industry is investing heavily in plastic to justify its expansion. As a result, it is expected that petrochemicals will become the largest driver of global oil consumption, ahead of trucks, aviation and shipping. Ending the plastic expansion would reduce emissions and accelerate the transition away from oil and gas.

Plastic is made from methane.

Methane is 81 times more potent than carbon-dioxide over a 20-year period, making it the second most damaging greenhouse gas to our climate. The petrochemical sector contributes to methane emissions through the use of fossil gas as both feedstock and energy source. In the U.S, plastic is a major driver of fossil gas fracking, transportation, and storage, all of which leak large quantities of methane. Adequately addressing this sector's role is a critical step towards reducing the impact of single use plastic on the climate.

Plastic is pollution.

U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres said recently that "plastics are fossil fuels in another form, and pose a serious threat to human rights, the climate, and biodiversity." While the massive impact of fossil fuels can be difficult to visualize, plastic is exacerbating all aspects of the triple planetary crisis: climate, pollution, and biodiversity. It is a physical manifestation of the excessive and harmful practices of the fossil fuel industry.

Plastic threatens health.

Prolonged exposure to plastic can cause adverse effects in fertility and hormonal, metabolic, and neurological activity in humans. Insidious microplastics have contaminated the entire planet, and new research shows they have been found in human blood and placenta tissue. Microplastics can cause cell death, allergic response, and damage to cell walls, as well as trigger the onset of cancers in case of chronic exposures. They act as a Trojan horse, hiding harmful substances and carrying them inside our bodies via inhalation, absorption, and ingestion.

Plastic is an environmental justice issue.

Plastic production facilities produce carcinogenic emissions and are concentrated in poor and politically vulnerable communities such as Cancer Alley in the USA, where the political power of the petrochemical industry permits it to weaken regulations. Informal waste workers, who have earned a prominent position in the negotiations, are burdened with the collection and processing of low-value plastic waste. A just transition that ensures environmental justice for all workers in the value chain has been recognized as a key element of the treaty.

We must take a holistic view of the crisis and bring together multiple movements in a coordinated fashion. As policy experts, funders, and advocates from frontline communities come together on the Global Plastics Treaty, we have an opportunity to align our movements and build our collective power to enact transformational change.



Leveraging the Global Plastics Treaty

Plastic pollution sits at the intersection of different crises, intensifies climate change, and fans the flames of social inequality. The Break Free From Plastic movement paved the way for this moment, while some of its members pushed the international community to create a globally binding treaty that examines the entire lifecycle of plastics.

Collective organizing is already underway, with groups like the High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution, bringing together more than 50 countries to push for mandatory global measures to reduce plastic production.

The benefits of a strong, successful global plastics treaty are outsized. It has the potential to limit and reduce plastic production, throttling the fastest-growing source of climate change and toxic emissions. It will send a strong signal to investors that the oil, gas, and petrochemical industry is in a sunset phase and a poor investment prospect, while also delivering a model for a just transition that can be geared to fit the entire fossil fuel transition in time. If we mobilize movements within and across countries to keep a high ambition, legally binding treaty on the table, the negotiations will provide a platform for narrative shift, a mechanism for focusing global media attention on the scale and diversity of plastic harms, and a powerful signal to market actors and decision makers alike, that continued investment in single use plastics poses unacceptable risks and a rapidly shrinking upside.

Yet, this treaty is only an opening—combatting the climate-changing impact of plastic production means that our work cannot stop when negotiations do. We must work together against an industry that sees this as another chance to distract from the problem they created and ensure that business as usual continues to protect their profits and plant build-out plans.

Advancing the important work of this movement will require a significant amount of new funding. Below are key opportunities for funders to support a cross-movement synergy.

Build opportunities in the Global South.

The momentum behind the treaty is in large part thanks to the leadership of nations from the Global South eager to tackle plastics' role in the climate crisis, and the continued strength of this treaty is tied to their ability to continue advancing their work on the ground. We need solutions that are sustainable and globally equitable that give voice to organizations in the most-impacted nations and communities. Groups throughout the Global South need resources to engage in the treaty negotiations globally, and in their home countries. Following adoption, implementation monitoring and accountability will be central to the sustained success of the treaty, making today's investments key to long-term progress.

Treaty Mobilization.

We must ensure that groups invited to engage in the treaty's negotiation have the financial means to participate. This means supporting travel to and from treaty meetings, providing strategic communications and coalition support, and investing in the development of national strategies that reflect the GPT's commitments.

End plastics as the oil & gas Plan B and emphasize the market risk.

For too long, the oil and gas industry has seen plastic as its Plan B. The viability and profitability of petrochemical investments are risks we must make clear. Production cuts, product bans, and phaseouts remain a serious element of negotiation for this treaty. The resulting reduction in global plastic demand would undermine the business and public policy cases for big investments in costly infrastructure. These declines, coupled with requirements for greater sustainability, transparency, and environmental justice, will increase the costs associated with plastic production, making it bad business.

Advance ambitious standards for domestic regulations.

Throughout the treaty discussions, participants will have the opportunity to introduce new concepts and ideas to their home governments about methods to curb plastic pollution. Both producing countries and local NGOs will need funder support to advance emerging priorities beyond the treaty discussions.

Weaken the relationship between industry and governments.

Only a handful of countries are major producers of plastics and hold close relationships with FMCG corporations like Unilever and Nestle. Yet in some cases, the relationship between industry and governments is far too familiar, with state officials often parroting industry talking points. Partnerships between industry and governments emphasize voluntary-based approaches to the problem, which have not resulted in change. Industry must transition away from single-use plastics, stop placing the burden of plastic pollution on individual consumers, and pressure regulators to enable the reuse economy. This means running nation-focused campaigns to influence key country positions.

Transform the global toxics regime.

The current patchwork of international instruments to regulate hazardous chemicals is insufficient to protect human health. We must confront the loopholes that allow corporations to impede the regulatory progress under the guise of protecting "confidential business information." Treaty negotiations open the door to a global ban on the most harmful chemicals.

Jumpstart the global reuse economy.

Plastic packaging comprises about 40% of global plastics, most of which are disposed of after one use and left for waste management corporations to handle. Product design is one of the essential elements that will be addressed through the treaty, providing the chance to challenge the resource-inefficient, "take-make-waste" economy at the core of plastic production. This treaty is an opportunity to jumpstart the reuse economy and move toward a regenerative and circular society.

Summary

This treaty will have profound implications for climate action and for the future of the fossil economy.

An ambitious treaty could curtail one of the fastest growing sources of emissions while closing a major escape hatch for fossil fuel producers. But funders must engage with it early to stop the petrochemical industry from writing false solutions to the climate crisis into international law.

The Break Free From Plastic movement and its members are well positioned to take advantage of this moment and advance a framing of plastic production that emphasizes its harm. To make the greatest impact inside and outside of treaty negotiations, we need your support, joining the more than 2,800 organizations, particularly those leading key movements in the Global South, that are working globally to show that this movement cannot be ignored and cannot afford to be dismissed.

To discuss how best to support and for specific funding opportunities, contact the Plastics Solutions Fund at GPT@plasticsolution.org.