

2025 Ocean and Peace Workshop Session 2: A Cooperative Ocean for Peace

Marine Debris Management in Southeast Asia

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OUTLINE

- Marine plastic pollution as environmental challenges
- Global plastic treaty negotiations
- ASEAN instruments and initiatives on marine debris
- Discussions

Marine plastic pollution has emerged as a pressing environmental challenge of our time, ranging from microplastics to large debris, like bottles, bags, and food packaging

Negative impacts on oceans and ecosystems, marine life, and human health, from entanglement and ingestion by marine species to the disruption of food chains; persistence of plastics in the environment

Our planet is not a dumping ground for plastic debris; in this era of heightened environmental awareness, addressing the issue of marine plastic pollution has become an urgent global imperative, demanding concerted efforts from all stakeholders: to safeguard ecosystems from irreversible damage, to preserve biodiversity from plastic pollution, and also to prevent plastics from entering the food chain

Therefore, it is an action to ensure the vitality of our oceans, and also to promote a sustainable future for both the environment and humanity

The Rationale for a global plastic treaty

There are existing regulations at national and international levels which tackle specific aspects of plastic pollution.

At the national level, many countries have banned or restricted certain plastic products, including single-use plastics and microbeads. Others have introduced extended producer responsibility schemes for end-of-life management and product design measures to increase recyclability and compostability. However, the details of instruments and enforcement vary widely.

Table A1 Regional Baseline – implemented and planned laws and policies.

Country	Waste Law	Plastic Law	National Strategies	SUP Bans	SUP Fees	EPR	MSW Collection	Import Regulation	Marine Debris
Brunei Darussalam									
Cambodia					Not monitored	Planned			
Indonesia									
Lao PDR									
Malaysia				Non-binding		Planned			In National Action Plan
Myanmar				Local			Local		
Philippines				Non-binding					In National Action Plan
Singapore				5	6	Planned ⁷			In National Action Plan
Thailand				in National Parks		Planned			
Viet Nam				Non-binding					

Note: Light green = mandatory, orange = voluntary, planned in the strategies, or limited scope, gray = absent. EPR = extended producer responsibility, Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic, SUP = single-use plastic, MSW = municipal solid waste. Waste law defines what materials are classified as waste, responsibilities and authorities regarding collection, handling, and treatment, and rules on disposal methods. Plastic law provides rules on the use of natural resources and materials, including for example the use of plastic packaging. National strategies provide time-bound targets and key actions for solid waste management in general or plastics specifically. SUP Bans prohibit or restrict the sales or use of certain single-use plastic items. SUP Fees are mandatory charges or taxes targeting certain types of single-use plastic items. Marine debris refers to national legislation, strategies, or action plans focused on combating marine debris.

The Rationale for a global plastic treaty

For existing international legal instruments, there is no convention dedicated to the management of plastic pollution.

- Part XII of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea: provides the general obligation to protect and preserve the marine environment, and to prevent, reduce and control land-based pollution.
- The amendments to the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal: regulate hazardous plastic waste movements through the Prior Informed Consent procedures, which require notification from the exporting country, and consent from the importing country before any shipment takes place.

The Rationale for a global plastic treaty

For existing international legal instruments, there is no convention dedicated to the management of plastic pollution.

- The International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships and the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter and its Protocol regulate the disposal and dumping of plastic waste at sea.
- Several legally-binding protocols under the UNEP Regional Seas Programmes tackle plastic pollution through their regulation on land-based pollution.

The Rationale for a global plastic treaty

It is also observed that, existing regulations on plastic pollution, both at the international and national levels, pay more attention to waste management, the end-of-life phase of plastic management, while neglecting upstream issues including primary processing, product design, and production, calling for a full life cycle approach in the management of plastics, and prompting the adoption of the UNEA Resolution in 2022.

INC processes

The UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) has recognised the importance of this issue in five resolutions on the subject (resolutions 1/6, 2/11, 3/7, 4/6 and 5/14). Resolution in 2022 (5/14) requested the Executive Director of the UNEP to convene an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment, which is to be based on a comprehensive approach that addresses the full life cycle of plastic, including its production, design and disposal of plastic products.

INC processes

The INC began its work in the second half of 2022 and was originally expected to conclude a treaty by the end of 2024, with five INC sessions planned. The delegations at the last round of negotiations at INC-5.1 failed to reach an agreement and decided to resume negotiations in the second half of 2025. INC-5.2 in August 2025 did not have an agreed text either.

The third part (INC-5.3) is scheduled for 7 February 2026 in Geneva, for a one-day resumed session for organisational and administrative purposes, with the focus on the election of officers including a new INC chair. No substantive negotiations will be held during this resumed session.

Divided opinions

Among the heatedly debated issues during INC processes, it was extremely difficult for countries to agree on the issue of full life cycle approach. The inclusion or exclusion of the full life cycle approach, namely whether to tackle the plastic pollution from the sourcing of primary materials to waste management, or focus more on waste management, remained a contentious issue. The second issue that divides states concerns states' obligations in treaty implementation, especially for some big producers of plastic products to provide more financial assistance in supporting the most vulnerable countries to meet their treaty obligations.

Divided opinions

The High Ambition Coalition (HAC), with around 100 countries joining, supported the full life cycle approach. They adhered to the UNEA 5.2 resolution 5/14, which requested the INC to take ‘a comprehensive approach that addressed the full life cycle of plastic’. HAC also promoted measurable and time-bound targets for implementation, including a reduction in production and consumption of primary plastic polymers to sustainable levels.

Some other countries, represented as ‘like-minded countries’, expressed their preference for downstream solutions, especially enhancing waste management, recycling, and reuse, and they opposed capping plastic.

Divided opinions

For the negotiations on financial obligations, a new grouping of states, ‘parties with a capacity’, was proposed to discuss the obligations of developing countries that have production and export capacities and have benefited from plastic production and sale, to contribute to financing the implementation of the future treaty. Other countries expressed their support of applying the common but differentiated responsibilities principle, taking into account historical responsibility, and respect of national circumstances.

<https://enb.iisd.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/enb3643e.pdf>

Southeast Asian Countries' submissions at INCs

Expressed common concerns shared by other developing states, and states with reliance on coastal industries (fisheries, in particular), including the right to develop their traditional industries and to receive technical and financial assistance, as well as the consideration of national circumstances and conditions in fulfilling responsibilities under the plastic treaty, including the reliance on consumer plastics, and fisheries and aquaculture as livelihoods

2017 Manila Plan of Action to Advance the Phnom Penh Declaration on the East Asia Summit Development Initiative (2018-2022)

The Plan of Action suggested that ASEAN Member States collaborate to adopt **a regional approach to manage plastic pollution**, focusing on the prevention and management of litter and investments in waste management infrastructure, including cooperation with the private sector.

2018 East Asia Summit Leaders' Statement on Combating Marine Plastic Debris

This Statement, in addition to reiterating commitments to combating marine plastic debris, emphasised international and regional collaboration among ASEAN Member States and other East Asia Summit members (Australia, China, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the US) and the functions of other regional and sub-regional forums. The diversity of Member States in the East Asia Summit forum called for efforts **to support the development of national action plans** that would take national circumstances into consideration.

2018 ASEAN+3 Marine Plastics Debris Cooperative Action Initiative

ASEAN+3 countries in this cooperative initiative identified **marine science** relevant to marine debris as a key in their collaboration, therefore aspiring to enhance their cooperation on preliminary research on marine debris, including microplastics, collection of scientific information, and assessment of impacts from marine debris on marine organisms and ecosystems. In addition, the **sharing of knowledge** was encouraged, including good and innovative practices, non-state actors' participation, recycling technology and alternative materials.

2019 ASEAN Framework of Action on Marine Debris

This ASEAN Framework served as the precursor of a more detailed ASEAN Regional Action Plan and listed suggested activities for **four framework components**, i.e., (1) policy support and planning, (2) research, innovation and capacity building, (3) public awareness, education and outreach, and (4) private sector engagement. These four framework components were later adopted as the four pillars of the ASEAN Regional Action Plan.

2019 Bangkok Declaration Combating Marine Debris in the Region

This Declaration was a signature ASEAN document for Member States to show their commitment and determination in **working collaboratively towards a cleaner marine environment**.

2021 ASEAN Regional Action Plan for Combating Marine Debris in the ASEAN Member States (2021-2025)

This Regional Action Plan outlined a comprehensive strategy to address marine plastic pollution in the ASEAN region. It suggested a five-year plan for ASEAN Member States to tackle the issues in a systematic and integrated manner, including three key stages of the plastic value chain:

- (1) To reduce inputs into the marine environment;
- (2) To enhance waste collection and minimise leakage;
- (3) To create value for recycling and reuse, promoting a circular economy.

The Southeast Asia Regional Program on Combating Marine Plastics (SEA-MaP): a five-year project (2022-2027) aiming to prevent land- and sea-based marine plastic pollution in Southeast Asia, with three key aims:

- **Reducing** plastics consumption
- **Increasing** recycling
- **Minimising** leakages

Recommendations for a Plastic Pollution Indicator Framework for ASEAN, published in August 2024:

Proposed regional roadmap: 1. start measuring and reporting on common **indicators**; 2. develop a comprehensive **data collection** framework; 3. set quantifiable **targets** for plastic reduction; 4. implement **monitoring, evaluation, and reporting**

The setback at INC-5.2 reminds the world of the struggles in tackling plastic pollution, as it is more than an environmental issue, but implicates complex questions about human health, the right to development, global supply chains, ocean governance, as well as a balance between environmental governance, economic interests, and social justice in the treaty negotiation and future implementation.

Looking ahead for the INC processes, it is imperative for delegations to seek common ground and to continuously strengthen convergence on articles or paragraphs that states have agreed upon, so that to have countries of different groups on board to combat plastic pollution.

ASEAN has been emphasising waste management in its approach to reducing and preventing plastics from entering the coastal and marine environment.

Undeniably, waste management is indeed a critical phase in curbing plastic pollution, yet it is of significance to implement a full life cycle approach in managing the plastic pollution crisis.

ASEAN Member States could enhance cooperation and coordination on this issue in the region and beyond, especially within the ASEAN +3 framework and East Asia Summit, and other closely related regional organisations and initiatives that share memberships and mandates.

The building and maintenance of an interface of law, policy and science; the cultivation of a network of experts

Just transition remains a key concern in the region; the prevalence of the informal sector in waste management across the region; discussions and initiatives on reskilling, upskilling and integration

Thank you!

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