

NEXT IAS

**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

**Remoulding the Global
Plastics Treaty**

www.nextias.com

REMOULDING THE GLOBAL PLASTICS TREATY

Context

- As discussions still continue for an international legally binding treaty on plastic pollution (ie the Global Plastic Treaty), it becomes crucial to consider how it can support a **fair transition for individuals** who **collect and recycle plastic waste informally**.

Understanding Plastic Pollution

- Plastic pollution is a global crisis that threatens our environment, health, and future. It can alter habitats and natural processes, reducing ecosystems' ability to adapt to climate change, directly affecting millions of people's livelihoods, food production capabilities, and social well-being.
- Life-cycle approach:** It refers to all the potential impacts associated with the **production and consumption of plastics**, including raw material extraction and processing, design and manufacturing, packaging, distribution, use and reuse, maintenance and end of life management, including segregation, collection, sorting, recycling, and disposal.
- Single-use plastics:** These include polyethylene shopping bags and polystyrene food containers as well as the **PET (polyethylene terephthalate, a form of polyester)** drinks bottle. Today around 500 billion PET drinks bottles are sold every year, the majority of which end up in the ocean.
- Microplastics:** These are **tiny shards of plastic** that come from a variety of sources, including tyres, health and beauty products, synthetic fabrics, artificial turf, lost or discarded fishing gear and leakage from industrial manufacturing and agricultural processes.

UN Data on Plastic Pollution

- Every day, the equivalent of 2,000 garbage trucks full of plastic are dumped into the world's oceans, rivers, and lakes.
- Every year 19-23 million tonnes of plastic waste leaks into aquatic ecosystems, polluting lakes, rivers and seas.
 - Globally, countries are currently producing and consuming about 430 million tonnes of plastic each year, **two thirds of which are short-lived products which soon become waste**.
- Since the 1950s, 9.2 billion tonnes of plastic have been produced, of which 7 billion tonnes have become waste, filling up landfills and polluting lakes, rivers, the soil and the ocean/ Plastic's durability means it can take thousands or even tens of thousands of years to degrade.
- According to the **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)**, of the 9% recycled, 85% was done by informal recycling workers.

OECD's Global Plastic Outlook

- The global production of plastic waste was 353 million tonnes in 2019 — more than double since it was in 2000, and is set to triple by 2060.
- Only 9% of this was recycled, 50% sent to landfills, 19% incinerated, and 22% disposed of in uncontrolled sites or dumps.

Data on India

- India generates 9.46 million tonnes of plastic waste annually, of which 40% remains uncollected.
- The production of polluting single-use plastic rose by 6 million tonnes per year from 2019 to 2021 despite tougher worldwide regulations.

Sector-wise Distribution of Plastics

- Packaging Sector:** It is the **largest generator of single-use plastics** in the world, with around 36% of all plastic produced used for packaging.
 - 85% of this ends up in landfills or as hazardous waste.

- **Consumer products:** Plastic is found in everything from toothbrushes to medical devices and children's toys. The scale of the damage this causes is huge, with the plastic used in consumer goods resulting in US\$75 billion in environmental damage every year.
- **Building and construction:** Plastic is used extensively in the construction industry, from plastic pipes and flooring to paint.
 - ♦ It generates around 100 billion tonnes of waste every year, 35% of which is sent to landfill.
- **Agriculture:** Around 12.5 million tonnes of plastic products are used in plant and animal production worldwide every year.
 - ♦ These include biosolid fertiliser, mulch film and even plastic-coated film, which can leach into the soil damaging soil health and negatively affecting crop yields.
- **Fisheries:** Around 20% of all plastic in the ocean comes from fishing, shipping and recreation, with more than 45 million kg of plastic entering the ocean from industrial fishing gear alone.
 - ♦ It can trap and suffocate marine life and pollute the ocean with microplastics.
- **Energy:** Energy companies are some of the largest plastic polluters in the world, with single-use plastic being made almost exclusively from fossil fuels.
- **Textiles:** About 60% of the materials made into clothing is plastic, and every second one garbage truck of textiles is landfilled or incinerated.
- **Travel and tourism:** 80% of tourists visit coastal areas every year, adding to the 8 million tonnes of plastic that enters the ocean annually.
- **Transportation:** 30% of components in cars are made of plastic. Most of that plastic is made of low-cost virgin polymers and ends up in landfills.

Need for a Global Treaty

- In response to the escalating crisis of plastic pollution, the **United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA)** voted to formulate an **international legally-binding instrument** to end plastic pollution.
- An **Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) of UNEA** is responsible for delivering a **Global Plastics Treaty by 2025**.
- The resolution identifies the threat that plastic pollution poses to human health and all environments, and focuses on the need to undertake measures throughout the lifecycle of plastics in order to efficiently reduce their negative impact.
- The treaty is expected to address plastics through their entire lifecycle - from when they are produced, to how they are used and disposed of.
- It focuses on elements like **global objectives to tackle marine and other types of environmental pollution** and their impact, and worldwide obligations and measures throughout the lifecycle of plastics, right from product design to waste management.

Informal Waste and Recovery Sector (IWRS)

- It plays a significant role in **worldwide municipal solid waste management systems**. These workers collect, sort, and recover recyclable and reusable materials from general waste, alleviating municipal budgets of financial burdens around waste management.
- They promote **circular waste management solutions** and help mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, contributing significantly to sustainability.
- Their efforts reduce plastic content in landfills and dump sites, effectively preventing plastic leakage into the environment.
- However, these workers are often overlooked and remain highly vulnerable in plastic value chains.
- They face risks such as increasing privatisation of waste management, waste-to-energy or incineration projects, and exclusion through other public policy interventions in plastic waste management in the norms of **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)**.

Need for Recognition

- The **IWRS** accounts for 80% of municipal solid waste recovery in many cities.
- A recent study by **UN-Habitat and the University of Leeds** estimates that around 60 million tonnes of plastic from municipal solid waste pollute the environment, including water bodies, due to inadequate collection services and mismanagement of solid waste.
 - ♦ Without the IWRS, the volume would be higher.
- However, strategies to reduce plastic pollution often neglect to effectively involve the recovery capacities, skills, and knowledge of the IWRS.
- It is essential that the **Global Plastics Treaty** ensures social justice and equity principles for the informal recycling worker.

Managing Plastic Pollution and India

- In 2022, India banned the manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale, and use of **single-use plastic (SUP)** items with low utility and high littering potential, by amending the **Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules, 2021**.
- The '**Report on Single Use Plastics**', worked on by an expert committee constituted by the Department of Chemicals and Petrochemicals (DCPC), has categorised plastic products based on their environmental impact and utility.

Negotiating a global agreement on plastic pollution presents several key challenges

- **Differences Among Countries:** Global negotiations often face difficulties due to wide differences among countries over key issues.
 - ♦ Each country has its own priorities and strategies for managing plastic waste, which can make it challenging to reach a consensus.
- **Scope of the Agreement:** Deciding on the scope of the agreement is another challenge. Questions arise such as whether the agreement should cover the creation of plastics as well as disposal, whether it should cover just ocean pollution or all plastic pollution, and whether different types of plastic or ingredients in plastic should be banned or treated differently.
- **Reporting and Monitoring:** Establishing a common reporting and monitoring system is crucial for the success of any global agreement. However, there may be concerns about the reliability of national self-reporting, as nations might underestimate their contributions to plastic disposal.
- **Strategic Financing and Governance:** The agreement should include approaches to strategic financing, innovative solutions, circularity-supporting trade policies, behaviour change campaigns, and proper governance.
 - ♦ However, aligning these aspects across all participating countries can be complex.
- **Timeframe:** The urgency of the plastic pollution problem demands a rapid response.
 - ♦ However, reaching a global agreement can be a lengthy process, which might not align with the urgency of the issue.

Conclusion and Way Forward

- The Global Plastics Treaty is a step in the right direction, but it needs to go beyond just addressing the issue of plastic pollution. It must also ensure the recognition and inclusion of the IWRS and their significant contributions to waste management and environmental sustainability.
- This will not only help in remoulding the Global Plastics Treaty but also in shaping a sustainable future
- As the final round of negotiations for the **Global Plastics Treaty approaches the INC-5**, a key question remains — how can a global instrument to end plastic pollution enable a just transition for nearly 15 million people who informally collect and recover up to 58% of global recycled waste.

- Without urgent action that figure will rise three-fold by 2060, with devastating impacts for ecosystems and human health.
- It is therefore time to eliminate unnecessary plastic, redesign products so they can be reused, repurposed, repaired and recycled, switch to non-plastic substitutes and strengthen systems for sound waste management.

Mains Practice Question

[Q] How far do you think the implementation of the Global Plastics Treaty could impact the current state of plastic pollution worldwide? What are the key challenges faced by countries in negotiating a global agreement on plastic pollution?

