



Junior Committee: Economic and Social Council

Issue: The Question of Environmental Sustainability Regarding the Usage of Single Use Plastics and Promotion of Suitable Alternatives.

Background Information

Plastics play a huge role in global society and have impacted immensely on the way we live. Nowadays we can find plastic everywhere, from the production of simple combs to the construction of buildings.

It is important to distinguish between plastics and single use plastics. According to the UN “Plastic is a lightweight, hygienic and resistant material which can be moulded in a variety of ways and utilized in a wide range of applications”. The focus of this issue is on single-use plastics which are “often also referred to as disposable plastics, are commonly used for plastic packaging and include items intended to be used only once before they are thrown away or recycled”¹

There are several reasons why the use of single use plastics is of great concern. Firstly, production of plastic escalated from 2 million tonnes in 1950 to 348 million tonnes in 2017, becoming a global industry valued at 522.6 billion\$² UN digits affirm that pollution by plastics is around 400 million tonnes per year and it is estimated to double by 2040 despite the evident increase in awareness of its risks to the

¹ UNEP. 2018. “SINGLE-USE PLASTICS A Roadmap for Sustainability.” Accessed January 2, 2024.

<https://www.unep.org/resources/report/single-use-plastics-roadmap-sustainability>.

² UNEP. 2022. “Historic day in the campaign to beat plastic pollution: Nations commit to develop a legally binding agreement.” 2 March. Accessed January 2, 2024. <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/historic-day-campaign-beat-plastic-pollution-nations-commit-develop>.

environment.³ The 11 million tonnes of pollution currently in the ocean is estimated to triple by 2040.⁴ Estimates also reveal that 91% of all plastic is single-use and since almost six decades ago, due to the rate of plastic mass production, it has resulted in 8.3 billion metric tons of plastic pollution.⁵

Secondly, the United Nations has officially identified single-use plastics as one of the world's biggest environmental challenges of modern times.⁶ Most plastics do not biodegrade, leading to the formation of microplastics. These cause negative environmental impacts by threatening the food chain, contributing to global warming, blocking waterways and exacerbating natural disasters.⁷ Single use plastics also choke our oceans given that more than 800 marine and costal species are killed through ingestion and entanglement.⁸ Disposal is also an issue since some nations generate large amounts of mismanaged plastic waste contributing to tons of plastic litter⁹ and many countries lack the infrastructure to prevent plastic pollution such as sanitary landfills, recycling capacity and circular economy infrastructure.¹⁰ Negative health and social impacts since the surfaces of the fragments of plastic may carry disease-causing organisms, acting as a vector for diseases in the environment causing hormonal imbalances, cancer and contributing to fertility problems.¹¹ Lastly, there may be negative economic damage since plastic litter can affect tourism, fishing and shipping industries in the Pacific-Asia region, 1.3 billion USD per year. The cleaning on the coasts

³ Carr, Lizzie. 2020. "Reducing Single-Use Plastic Pollution: A Unified Approach." 19 march. Accessed January 2, 2024. <https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/reducing-single-use-plastic-pollution-unified-approach>.

⁴ Persio, Sofia Lotto. 2023. "Quartz." *Get ready to hear a lot more about the proposed UN ban on plastic pollution*. 16 May. Accessed January 2, 2024. <https://qz.com/un-treaty-plastic-ban-1850438754>.

⁵ Carr, "Reducing Single-Use Plastic Pollution: A Unified Approach."

⁶ Carr, "Reducing Single-Use Plastic Pollution: A Unified Approach."

⁷ UNEP, "SINGLE-USE PLASTICS A Roadmap for Sustainability."

⁸ UNEP, "Historic day in the campaign to beat plastic pollution: Nations commit to develop a legally binding agreement."

⁹ UNEP, "SINGLE-USE PLASTICS A Roadmap for Sustainability."

¹⁰ IUCN. 2021. "Marine plastic pollution." November. Accessed January 2, 2024.

<https://www.iucn.org/resources/issues-brief/marine-plastic-pollution>.

¹¹ Lindwall, Courtney. 2020. "Single-Use Plastics 101." 9 January. Accessed January 2, 2024.

<https://www.nrdc.org/stories/single-use-plastics-101#what>.

of Europe costs around 630 million Euros per year and 13 billion USD is the loss to the world's marine ecosystem per year.¹²

Current Situation

According to the IUCN half of the 400 million tons of plastic that are produced per year, apply to single-use items such as shopping bags, cups and straws.¹³ Researchers also warn that the impact of microplastics in soils, sediments and freshwater could have a long-term negative effect on such ecosystems. It is said that higher than marine microplastic pollution is terrestrial microplastic pollution estimated at 4 to 23 times higher, depending on the environment.¹⁴

Global and Regional Actions

In September 2017 the UN launched the Sustainable Development goals (SDG).

The European Commission adopted the European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy in 2018.¹⁵ The shift to circular economy has objective of eliminating waste and pollution, allow circulation of products and materials, and regenerate nature.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it is a concept that is still under development and unfortunately, decreasing year by year with now only 7.2% of economy being circular.¹⁷

¹² UNEP, "SINGLE-USE PLASTICS A Roadmap for Sustainability."

¹³ IUCN, "Marine plastic pollution."

¹⁴ UNEP, "Plastic planet: How tiny plastic particles are polluting our soil."

¹⁵ European Commission. n.d. "Plastics in a circular economy." Accessed January 2, 2024. https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/research-area/environment/circular-economy/plastics-circular-economy_en.

¹⁶ Ellen MacArthur Foundation. n.d. "What is a circular economy?" *Ellen MacArthur Foundation*. Accessed January 2, 2024. <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/topics/circular-economy-introduction/overview>.

¹⁷ Circle Economy Foundation. 2023. "The Circularity Gap Report 2023." Accessed January 2, 2024. <https://www.circularity-gap.world/2023>.

The European Union had also implemented a law that started being active from 3 July 2021, where single-use plastic plates, cutlery, straws, balloon sticks and cotton buds could not be set on the EU Member States markets.¹⁸

More recently, in March 2022, UN member states responded to a plea from environmental groups and took the first steps towards establishing a formal agreement, on which they committed to delivering a treaty by 2024 targeting the end of plastic pollution by 2030. After the Heads of State, Ministers of environment and other representatives from the UN Member States gathered on the 2nd March of 2022 in Nairobi, they endorsed a resolution at the UNEA-5 (UN Environment Assembly, session 5) to end plastic pollution and agreed to institute an international legally binding agreement. **This resolution addresses the full lifecycle of plastic, including its production, design, and disposal, which Delegations should consider. Delegates should also note that resolution (5/14) is not yet a legally binding document, but a common expression of the will of all bodies involved in the committee session.** Moreover, there were negotiating sessions focused on the development of the UN treaty on plastic pollution, which strive to attain a science-based treaty that is legally binding, measurable, and enforceable.¹⁹ We can find that in the INC-1 position paper on plastic pollution treaty along with the 6 briefings the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) provided to support the treaty negotiating process.

Discussions regarding the building of the treaty should include many things including but not limited to: the obligations countries should commit to regarding i) consideration of marine, land, and water plastic pollution ii) integration with the UN SDG's (Sustainable Development Goals) which delegates are highly encouraged to mention.

¹⁸ European Commission. n.d. "EU restrictions on certain single-use plastics Information and resources on the new EU rules on single-use plastics." Accessed January 2, 2024. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/plastics/single-use-plastics/eu-restrictions-certain-single-use-plastics_en

¹⁹ UNEP, "Historic day in the campaign to beat plastic pollution: Nations commit to develop a legally binding agreement."

The Focus of Debate

Delegates should take into account that even though various actions are already being taken to minimize single use plastics, and some are even already being implemented, it is important to come up with new ideas, solutions, and improvements.

Delegates are encouraged to refer to relevant SDG's the UN has implemented (which can be found in <https://www.plasticsoupfoundation.org/en/plastic-problem/sustainable-development/individual-sdgs/>).

Member states should address points such as:

- the targeting of most problematic single-use plastics through assessment
- the causes of mismanagement
- consideration of the best regulatory, economic, awareness, voluntary actions to tackle the problem
- how to raise public awareness
- how to assess social, economic and environmental impacts of the changes, for example, how the poor will be affected by such actions.

Delegates are also encouraged to consult the selected case studies on the article “Single-Use plastics: A Roadmap for Sustainability” by the UNEP.

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