Topic A: Global governance on plastic pollution and the transition to a circular economy

United Nations Environmental Program

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Voices of a new era:
youth facing global
challenges

Introduction to the committee

We are pleased to welcome you to this edition of the Model United Nations of Universidad Anáhuac Querétaro (UAQMUN 2027). The School of International Relations and the organizing team sincerely thank you for your participation, and we wish you a formative, challenging, and enriching experience within this model.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is the leading global authority on the environment, dedicated to tackling the triple planetary crisis: the crisis of climate change, the crisis of nature, land and biodiversity loss, and the crisis of pollution and waste. Since its founding in 1972, UNEP has served as a neutral convener of Member States, civil society, the private sector and UN agencies to address humanity's most pressing environmental challenges. Today, UNEP hosts the United Nations Environment Assembly, the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment, with a universal membership of all 193 United Nations Member States. Through robust science, global coordination and powerful advocacy and guided by its mission to inform, enable, and inspire, UNEP supports nations worldwide in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and improving their quality of life while safeguarding the environment for future generations.

On this occasion, the committee will focus on the following debate:

"Global governance on plastic pollution and the transition to a circular economy"

The treaty debate centers on balancing immediate industrial production with long-term ecological resilience. Major plastic-producing nations view manufacturing as a vital economic engine and oppose mandatory production caps, advocating instead for voluntary national plans focused on waste management and recycling. Conversely, the High-Ambition Coalition (co-chaired by Rwanda and Norway) and Small Island Developing States demand legally binding global rules, single-use plastic bans, toxic chemical phase-outs, and manufacturer funding for waste cleanup.

Developing nations, bearing a disproportionate burden from imported and ocean-borne waste, argue that wealthier, high-consuming countries must establish a dedicated international fund for waste infrastructure, technology transfer, and legal protections and fair wages for the 20 million informal waste pickers worldwide. Serving as a neutral convener, UNEP challenges delegates to look beyond short-term commercial interests and negotiate cross-border consensus on design standards, supply-chain transparency, financial mechanisms, and labor protections to safeguard planetary health while supporting sustainable development.

Topic “A”: Global governance on plastic pollution and the transition to a circular economy

Plastic pollution represents one of the most severe environmental, economic, and public health crises of the 21st century. Global plastic production has surged exponentially over recent decades and it is now exceeding 460 million metric tons annually; driven by heavy industrial demand and widespread reliance on single-use applications (OECD, 2022).

Fewer than 10% of all plastics are successfully recycled (UNEP, 2023), because of this, hundreds of millions of tons accumulate annually; 49% of them end up in municipal landfills, 22% of them end up in open dumpsites and natural ecosystems, and 19% of them end up incinerated (OECD, 2022). In aquatic environments, macroplastics fragment into hazardous microplastics and nanoplastics, contaminating food webs, disrupting marine biodiversity, and penetrating human drinking water supplies and food systems; they represent at least 85% of total marine waste (UNEP, 2021).

Addressing this global threatening issue requires shifting from a traditional linear economic model that follows a take - make - dispose cycle toward a systemic circular economy (UNEP, 2021). A true circular economy moves past end-of-life cleanup by re-engineering products from the point of design. It prioritizes absolute plastic reduction, the systematic phase-out of toxic chemical additives, high-value reuse and refill systems,
extended product lifespans, and environmentally sound, closed-loop recycling mechanisms that retain material value without degrading ecosystem health (OECD, 2022).

Plastic pollution moves across borders and oceans. One country cannot fix the issue on its own; therefore, nations must cooperate by making joint agreements and international laws to address the matter; by setting worldwide standards, governments could force factories to make better packaging and ensure that plastic is safely recycled instead of becoming litter. This is global governance. Organizations like UNEP help guide these global talks.

History of the topic

For decades, plastic waste has been treated almost exclusively as a localized municipal solid waste issue rather than a coordinated global challenge. Early international legal instruments focused primarily on maritime pollution or toxic waste trade rather than addressing the structural, land-based root causes of plastic pollution.

Developed by the International Maritime Organization in 1973 and modified by a 1978 protocol, the MARPOL Convention is the main international treaty to prevent marine pollution from ships during routine operations and accidents. Its goal is to stop oil, sewage, garbage, and air pollution from damaging the world's oceans and seas (IMO, 2019). The Convention is composed of 6 annexes.

- Annex I: Controls oil pollution by limiting oil discharges and setting rules for tanker design.
- Annex II: Regulates noxious liquid substances carried in bulk.
- Annex III: Prevents pollution from harmful substances carried in packaged form.
- Annex IV: Controls sewage discharge from ships.
- ***Annex V: Bans the disposal of most garbage, especially plastics, into the sea.***
- Annex VI (added in 1978): Limits air pollution, including sulfur oxides, nitrogen oxides, and greenhouse gas emissions.

The Basel Convention (1989) is an international treaty designed to reduce the movement of hazardous waste between nations and prevent wealthy countries from dumping toxic waste on developing nations. In order to achieve this, the Convention was updated via the 2019 Plastic Waste Amendments and it now establishes that shipments of hazardous waste across borders require notice and explicit written consent from the receiving and transit countries. It also requires countries to manage and dispose of waste as close to where it was generated as possible. The treaty covers toxic, poisonous, explosive, corrosive, flammable, ecotoxic, and infectious wastes, as well as expanded rules on plastic and electronic waste. Lastly, the Basel Convention has a nearly universal membership with over 190 participating parties, operating under the UNEP (United States Department of State, 2021).

Despite these agreements and efforts, the exponential growth of plastic production rapidly outpaced local municipal capabilities. Recognizing that fragmented, downstream interventions were failing, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), governing body of the UNEP, made history in March 2022 by adopting Resolution 5/14, titled *"End plastic pollution: Towards an international legally binding instrument."* This mandate established the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) with the task of negotiating a global treaty (UNEP, 2023).

In its flagship report Turning off the Tap, the UNEP outlines a comprehensive roadmap to cut global plastic pollution by 80% by 2040, while creating a circular economy. Said roadmap consists of three indispensable, interconnected market shifts:

A. Reuse: Promotion of refillable and reusable packaging models (such as bulk dispensers or return systems) to cut single-use plastic demand. Expanding these systems could reduce global plastic production by up to 30% by 2040.
B. Recycle: Making recycling profitable and effective by ensuring products are actually designed to be recycled. This requires the plastics and petrochemical industries to stop using toxic chemicals that prevent recycling, end fossil fuel subsidies, and expand high-quality recycling facilities.
C. Reorient and diversify: Shift market offerings toward sustainable material alternatives. This means replacing short-lived single-use packaging, sachets, and wrappers with sustainable alternative materials, such as paper, wood, algae, and certified compostable materials; while ensuring these alternatives do not cause secondary environmental harm.

Discussion of the topic

Plastic-producing nations and major manufacturing economies view plastic production as a vital driver of national economic growth, jobs, and commercial trade. For these nations, imposing mandatory global limits on overall plastic production or limiting raw plastic manufacturing poses an immediate risk for their national revenues and supply chains, even as unmanaged plastic waste severely damages global marine ecosystems, kills marine life and threatens public health (OECD, 2022).

The High-ambition Nations Coalition and Small Island Developing States, co-chaired by Rwanda and Norway, and supported by over 65 Member States demand legally binding global rules to ban single-use plastics, eliminate toxic chemicals added to plastic packaging, and force manufacturers to pay for global waste cleanup. Conversely, major plastic-producing nations advocate for voluntary, non-binding national plans that allow each country to set its own domestic rules without facing international enforcement, mandatory reduction targets, or universal plastic bans (Environmental Justice Foundation, 2025).

International consumer brands, packaging companies, and retail conglomerates leverage their massive economic footprint to push for solutions that focus on public litter cleanups, local recycling programs, and voluntary eco-labeling rather than cutting down their overall plastic consumption. Opponents highlight that municipal recycling systems worldwide cannot keep pace with the overwhelming flood of single-use plastic produced daily, leaving
local communities overwhelmed and shifting the massive financial cost of plastic waste management onto municipal taxpayers (UNEP, 2023).

Developing nations and island nations bear a disproportionate burden from imported plastic waste and ocean litter washed onto their shores, despite producing a fraction of the world's plastic. As a result of this, developing nations argue that wealthier countries that are also the ones that overly consume plastic must create a dedicated international fund to pay for modern waste processing infrastructure, transfer non-plastic material technologies, and guarantee legal protections, safety equipment, and fair wages for the estimated 20 million informal waste pickers who collect plastic on the frontlines worldwide (UNEP, 2022).

The UNEP continues to serve as the vital and neutral convener facilitating all the high-stakes multilateral negotiations. While Member States remain sharply divided between legally binding plastic pollution caps and flexible waste management strategies, the objective of this committee is clear: the delegates must look beyond short-term commercial and national interests in order to build a functional, balanced governance framework.

Guiding Questions

1. How can UN Member States reconcile the rift between nations demanding mandatory global limits on plastic production and those favoring downstream waste management?
2. What regulatory mechanisms can effectively hold petrochemical producers and multinational consumer brands accountable for the full lifecycle costs of plastic waste?
3. How can international governance frameworks mandate the elimination and transparent reporting of toxic chemical additives used in plastic manufacturing?
4. Through what financial architectures should high-income, high-consuming nations fund modern waste processing infrastructure and technology transfers in developing countries?
5. How can a global plastics treaty establish legal protections, safety standards, and fair wages for the estimated 20 million informal waste pickers worldwide?
6. What policy tools can prevent wealthy, high-income nations from exporting plastic waste to developing states that lack adequate processing capacity?
7. In what ways can national government ministries (such as Environment, Trade, Industry, and Health) improve cross-sectoral coordination to enforce plastic containment policies?
8. What economic strategies and market incentives can developing nations employ to transition from single-use plastics to sustainable, non-plastic alternative materials?
9. How can standardized Life-Cycle Assessments (LCAs) be implemented internationally to evaluate the ecological safety of alternative materials before scaling them up?
10. What measures can be taken to ensure that non-plastic alternative materials (such as paper, wood, or algae) do not cause secondary environmental harm?
11. How can municipal governments be supported financially when local waste processing infrastructure is overwhelmed by the global influx of single-use packaging?

List of Participants

- United States of America
- People's Republic of China
- Republic of Indonesia
- United Mexican States
- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- Federal Republic of Germany
- Republic of Maldives
- Kingdom of Norway
- Republic of Rwanda
- Republic of Kenya
- Republic of India
- Federative Republic of Brazil
- Kingdom of Thailand
- Republic of South Africa
- Arab Republic of Egypt
- State of Japan
- Republic of Colombia
- Hellenic Republic
- Tuvalu
- United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

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