



Mapping UN Efforts on Plastic Pollution

About this Document

This document provides a basic analysis of data collected from UN entities on their activities supporting countries to address plastic pollution. It feeds into a Common Offer by the UN system with regard to its support towards a plastic pollution-free planet. The document has been prepared by the Core Working Group on Plastic Pollution under the UN Environment Management Group.

I. Background and method

On 1 September 2021, the UN Senior Management Group (SMG) met to discuss 'Multilateral Solutions to Marine Litter and Plastics Pollution'. The UN Secretary-General stressed the need for a system change approach with the participation of all actors and sectors, asking UNEP to lead a dedicated working group to harness the power of the UN to ensure urgent, decisive, and effective action to address the plastic pollution crisis across the life cycle. The UN Core Working Group on Plastic Pollution (CWG) was established within the UN Environment Management Group (EMG) to strengthen collaboration in the UN system in moving towards a plastic pollution-free planet.

In 2020/2021, more than 40 UN entities provided information on their work supporting Member States in reducing and addressing marine litter, including plastics and microplastics,¹ the summary of which is delivered in the UN synthesis report (2022) "[Addressing marine litter and](#)

[microplastics: UN system-wide contributions - A Synthesis Report by the United Nations Environment Management Group](#)". This comprehensive mapping served as a basis for the 2022/2023 mapping exercise of UN efforts on plastic pollution. In addition, initiatives stored in the Global Partnership on Plastic Pollution and Marine Litter (GPML) [Digital Platform](#), were included in the analysis.

To complement this existing data, in November 2022, the CWG launched a survey (available [here](#)) to collect additional information on UN efforts on plastic pollution. The survey was circulated to 51 UN entities, all members of the EMG. This document provides an analysis of the collected information, accessible in an online dashboard ([EMG Plastic Activities Application](#)).

II. Insights from the Mapping of UN Efforts on Plastic Pollution

The mapping detected **a total of 194 plastic-related activities, including projects and initiatives, from 23 UN entities covering 167 countries.** While this is not a comprehensive overview of UN projects on plastic pollution, it represents a significant sample.

To note:

- The activities identified vary in terms of size and type including small-sized projects, large programmes, reports and brochures, information campaigns, etc.

¹ In 2019, through resolution UNEP/EA.4/Res.6 (Annex I), the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) invited the United Nations (UN) Environment Management Group (EMG) to engage in and contribute to the work of the ad hoc open-ended expert group on marine litter and

microplastics (AHEG) by providing, inter alia, a mapping of all relevant UN agencies, programmes, initiatives and other sources of expertise relating to marine litter, including plastic litter and microplastics.

- Respondents were asked to categorize their activities according to the part of the plastic life cycle the respective activities address. As a result of these self-assessments, the same kind of activities may have been categorized differently, impacting the statistics. E.g. efforts addressing solid waste management may have been placed in both upstream and downstream categories.
- Some initiatives that had been identified using existing data sources (i.e., EMG marine litter report and the GPML Digital Platform), were left uncategorized by the UN entities in the dashboard. This meant that these initiatives could not be included in the analysis, leading to an exclusion of possibly relevant data.

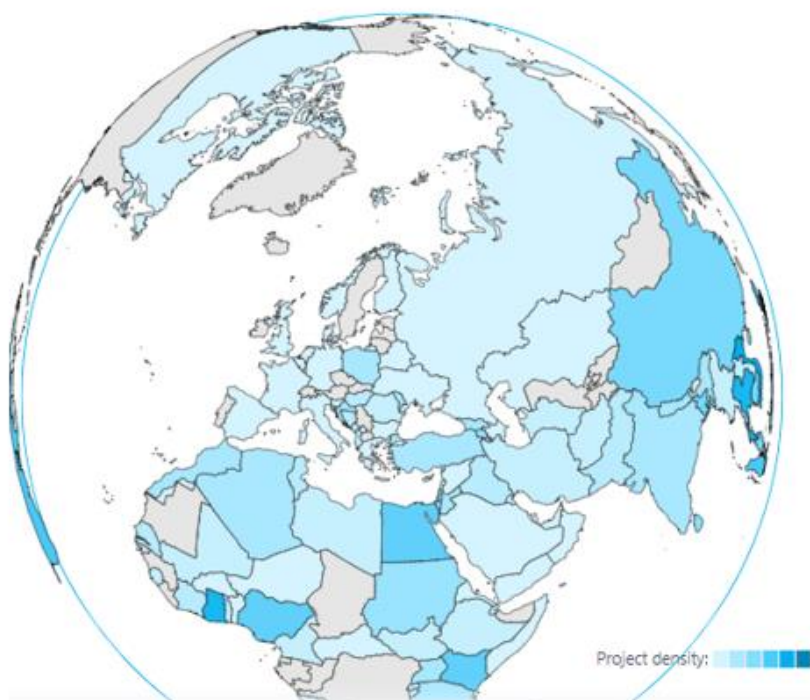
Furthermore, recognizing that not all UN entities provided information about their activities, the results of this analysis should be considered indicative.

The following section summarizes main insights drawn from the information submitted.

Where and with whom is the UN working on plastic pollution?

The UN has actively supported countries addressing plastic pollution over the past ten years. Many actions, approaches, frameworks and plans have been developed and implemented and various international instruments and processes are of relevance.

Figure 1. Geographical coverage of reported UN projects



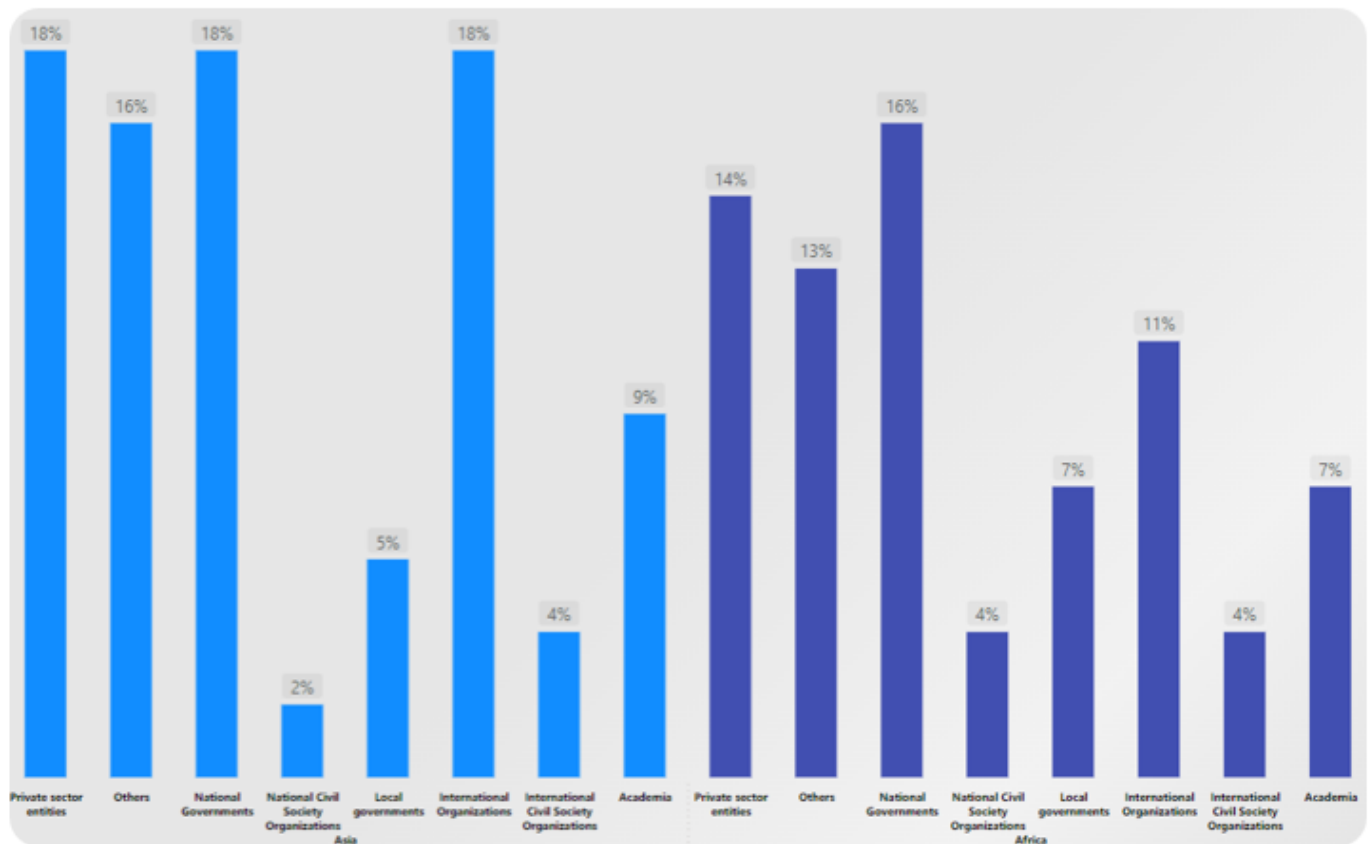
Projects by Continents



While UN entities' efforts cover all regions, the **many reported activities are implemented in Asia and Africa** (Figure 1). Examples from Africa include the pilot project programme of the Basel Convention Plastic Waste Partnership: [Strengthening knowledge and capacity to prevent and reduce releases of plastic waste in Malawi and Zimbabwe](#); and a project funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) on [establishing a circular economy framework for the plastics sector in Ghana](#). Examples from Asia include a regional project addressing plastic waste leakage from cities in Asia and the Pacific led by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) ("[Closing the loop](#)"); and the Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution ([SMEP](#)) programme by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) with the commissioned study to map manufacturing pollution in Africa and Asia, focusing on case studies in Bangladesh, Kenya and Nepal. The World Bank's PROBLUE Program funds multiple projects on plastic pollution around the world, including in Asia, e.g. [Vietnam: Plastic Pollution Diagnostics](#).

The mapping identified 296 different stakeholders² involved in UN activities on plastics across all regions, with very active engagement of universities, NGOs, private sector entities, national governments, and international organizations. Priorities and partners vary across regions. The data shows for example, that activities in Asia are mostly implemented in cooperation with international organizations, national governments, and the private sector, whereas non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are more involved in activities in Africa (Figure 2).

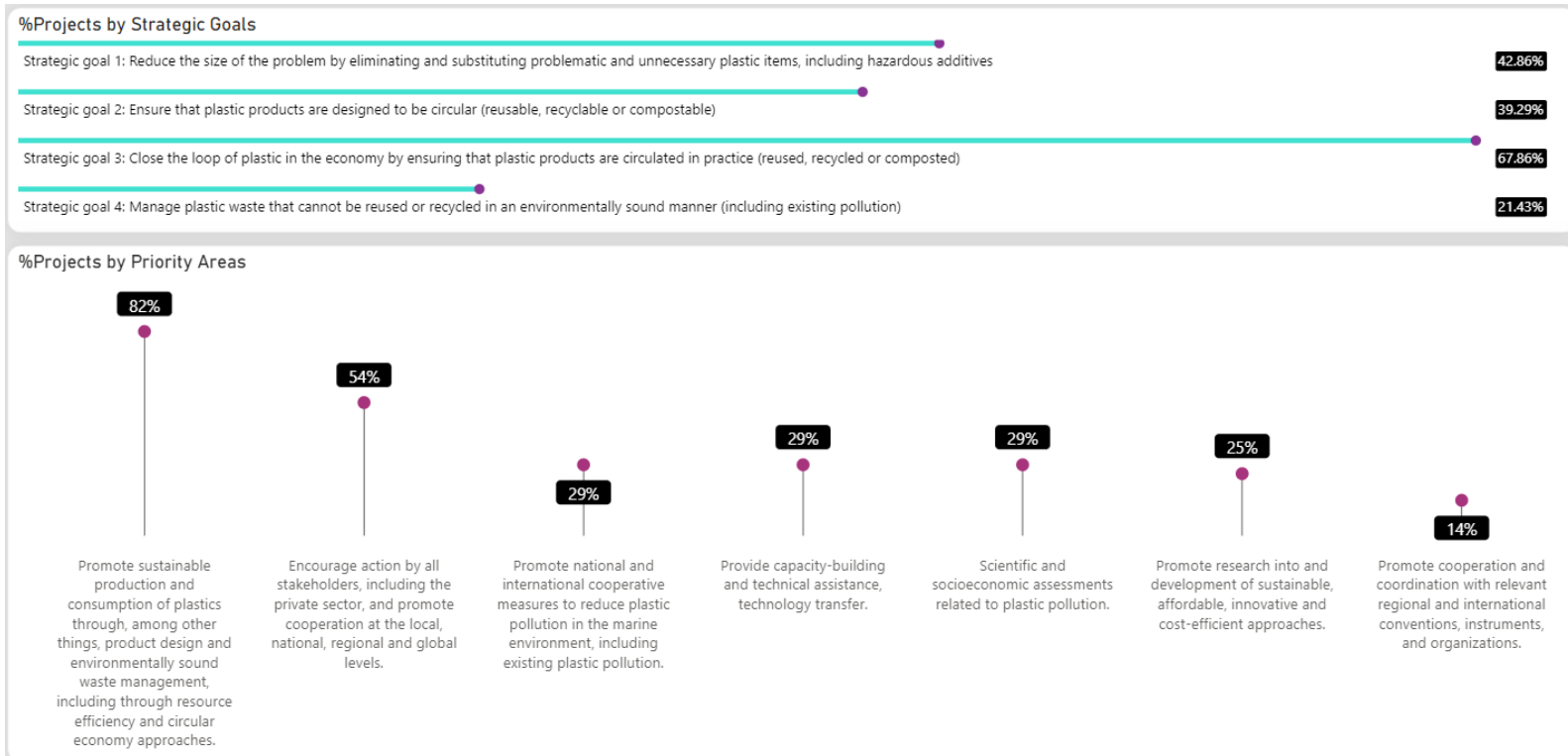
Figure 2. Stakeholders in Asia and Africa working with the UN on plastic pollution



²The full list of names can be accessed in the dashboard by going to the 'Funding partners and Stakeholders' tab, clicking on 'stakeholders' and then on the corresponding stakeholder category bar (e.g. others, private sector entities, national governments, etc.).

Only 18 out of a total of 194 reported activities received funding from the private sector. These projects are within the less than USD 1 million and USD 1-10 million budget ranges and focus mostly on waste management and recycling. The private sector is actively contributing as a stakeholder in 50 of the reported activities, most of which focus on the circular economy of plastics (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Priority areas of UN activities on plastic pollution with private sector stakeholder



The analysed sample indicates that **formal interagency collaboration is limited** as only 29 out of the total 194 activities or 15% of all reported activities are being implemented with the contribution of more than one UN agency. An example of global interagency collaboration is the GloLitter Partnerships by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), with the participation of other UN entities such as the UN Global Compact. Other examples include the Global Partnership on Plastic Pollution and Marine Litter (GPML), the Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP), the Basel Convention's Plastic Waste Partnership, and UN-Habitat's Waste Wise Cities programme on municipal solid waste. Given the growing recognition of the role that circular economy plays in addressing the plastics problem, new collaborative initiatives are being launched such as the Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency (GACERE) with the participation of **UNEP** and **UNIDO**.

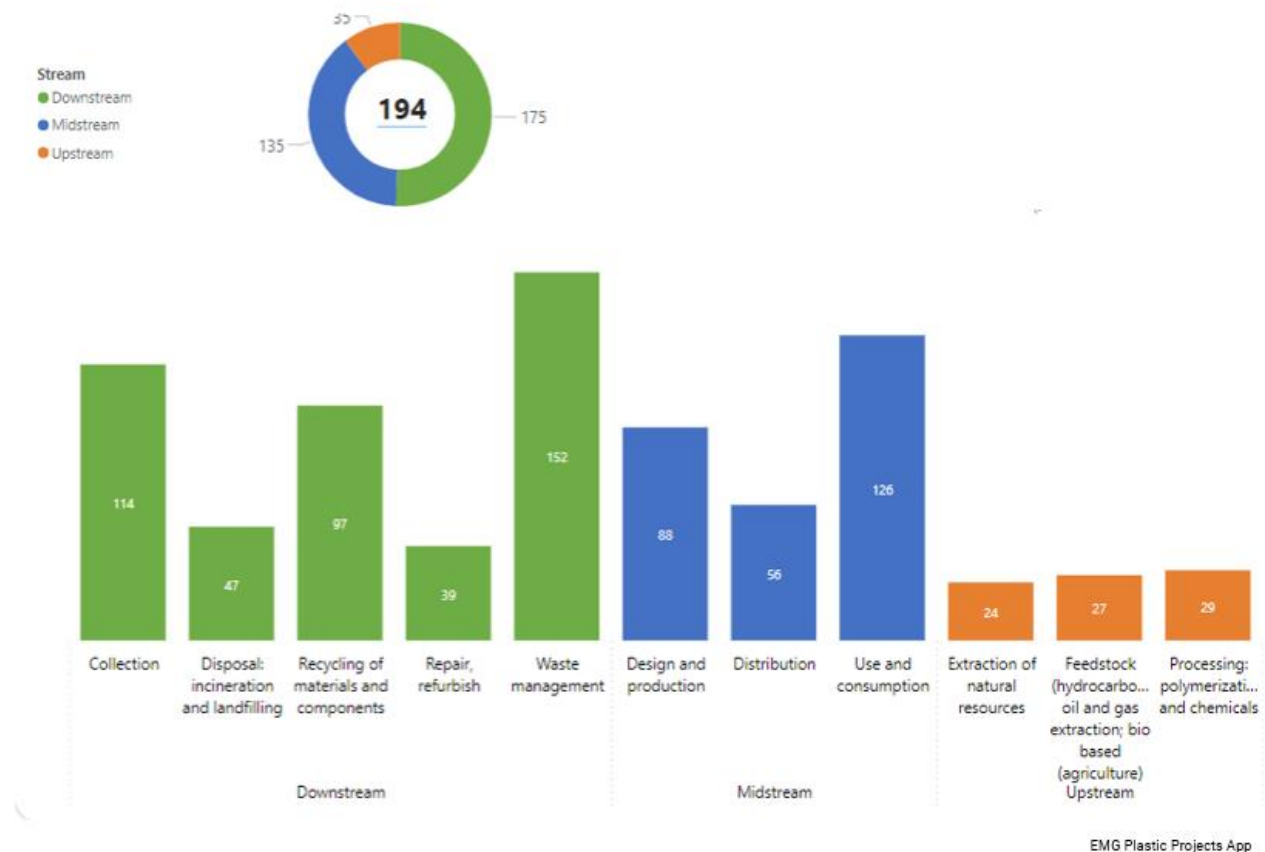
Most of the reported UN activities on plastic pollution (around 60 %) are below USD 1 million, where 29% of the activities fall between the USD 1 million and USD 10 million range and very few are above the USD 10 million mark. Three activities were reported in the USD 11 to 100 million range and one activity was reported above USD 100 million.

How is the UN supporting Member States along the lifecycle stages of plastics?

In February 2022, Member States at the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) adopted a decision to convene an intergovernmental negotiating committee to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, based on a 'comprehensive approach that addresses the full life cycle of plastic'³.

According to the data submitted by UN entities, **most of the attention is focused on downstream and midstream stages of the life cycle**, particularly on waste management, use and consumption and collection (Figure 4). An estimated 90% of the activities cover downstream stages (waste management), while 70% also cover midstream stages (design, production, consumption), and Examples of downstream initiatives include: the [GloLitter Partnerships](#) by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and FAO; the [UN-Habitat's Waste Wise Cities programme](#) on municipal solid waste; [NUTEC Plastics](#) by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Examples of midstream initiatives.: Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution Programme ([SPREP](#)) by UNCTAD, and the Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency ([GACERE](#)) with the participation of UNEP and UNIDO. 18% of the reported initiatives cover upstream stages. Upstream projects are being implemented, for instance, to unlock innovation in processing of raw materials and low or non-chemical development of products.

Figure 4. UN Projects along the lifecycle stages of plastics



What kind of solutions are promoted?

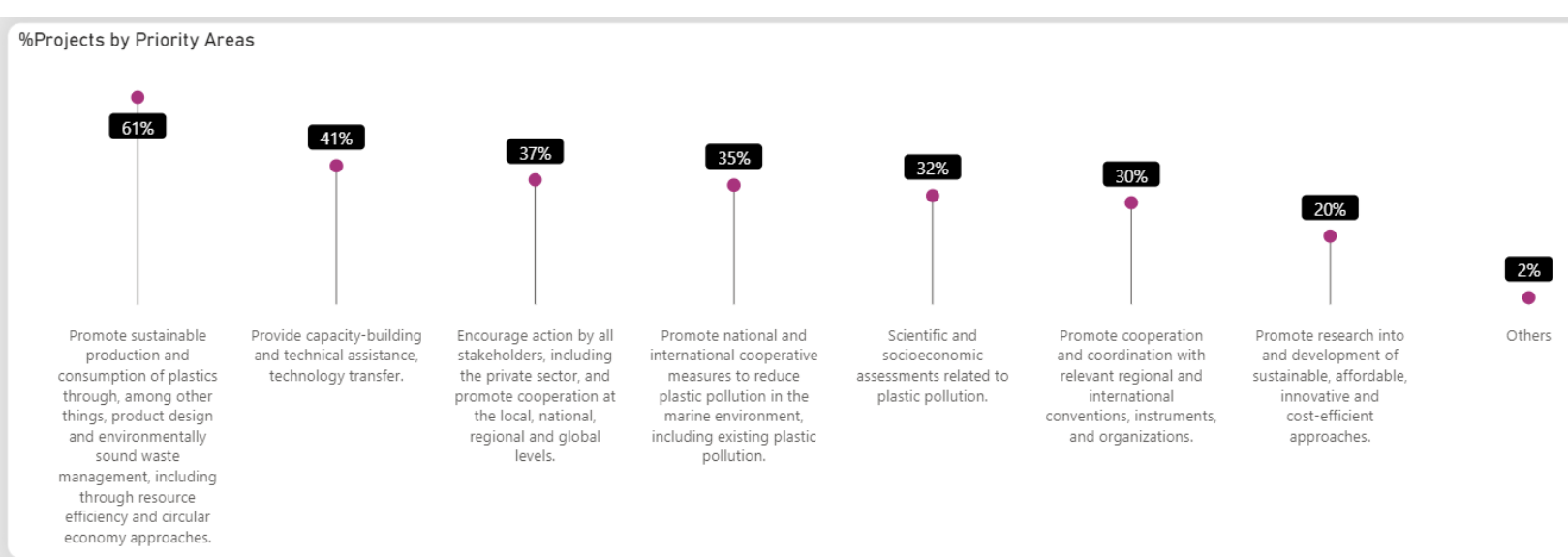
³ UNEP/PP/OEWG/1/INF/1

Priority areas of action

UNEA resolution 5/14 entitled 'End plastic pollution: towards an international legally binding instrument' (available [here](#)) outlined priority areas of action for Member States to address plastic pollution, including:

- Promotion of sustainable production and consumption (SCP) of plastics through, among other things, product design and environmentally sound waste management, including through resource efficiency and circular economy approaches.
- Promotion of national and international cooperative measures to reduce plastic pollution in the marine environment, including existing plastic pollution.
- Development of scientific and socioeconomic assessments related to plastic pollution.
- Increase of knowledge through awareness-raising, education, and information exchange
- Promotion of cooperation and coordination with relevant regional and international conventions, instruments, and organizations.
- Encourage action by all stakeholders, including the private sector, and promote cooperation at the local, national, regional, and global levels.
- Provide capacity-building and technical assistance, technology transfer and financial assistance
- Promote research and development of sustainable, affordable, innovative, and cost-efficient approaches.

Figure 5. UN activities by priority areas of action identified in UNEP/EA.5/Res.14



Across these priority areas, **promoting SCP of plastics** ⁴is the main priority area of action among the reported UN activities. Other priority areas are evenly covered except for research and development of sustainable, affordable, innovative, and cost-efficient approaches. (Figure 5).

The Plastics Science paper (UNEP/PP/INC.1/7) submitted to the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution (INC) (available [here](#)) proposed four strategic goals to support a systems change to address plastic pollution:

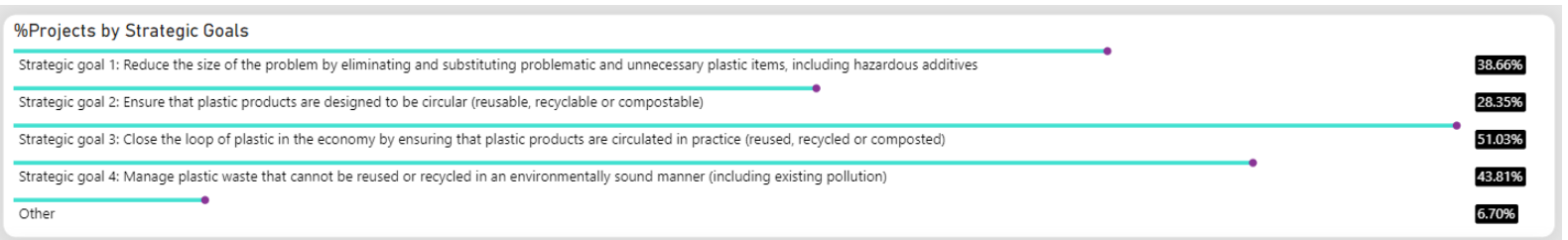
1. Reduce the size of the problem by eliminating and substituting problematic and unnecessary plastic items.

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2. Design circular plastic products (reusable, recyclable or compostable).
3. Close the loop of plastic in the economy by ensuring that plastic products are circulated in practice (reused, recycled, or composted).
4. Manage plastic waste that cannot be reused or recycled in an environmentally sound manner.

While the UN is working on all these strategic goals, **most of the reported UN activities focus on closing the loop of plastics in the economy (recycling, reusing, composting) and on managing plastic waste at the end of the lifecycle.** Less attention has been paid to reducing the size of the problem or designing circular products (Figure 6).

Figure 6. UN activities by strategic goal outlined in the Plastics Science paper (UNEP/PP/INC.1/7)



Solutions and priority areas in addressing plastic pollution within the UN vary by entity. Solutions and priorities promoted by the UN also vary by region. Activities in Asia and Africa, as reported in this mapping, are focused on promoting SCP in plastics, aiming mostly at closing the loop on plastic and reducing the size of the plastic problem. For example, the [IAEA's NUTEC Plastics](#) component on plastic waste recycling, deploys and combines different approaches to polymers reutilization and recycling in Asia and the Pacific through radiation modification for the production of industrial goods, with four pilot countries including: the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. In the North and South American regions, building capacity, providing technical assistance, and transferring technology are a priority across UN activities and managing waste is the most covered strategic goal. For example, the Caribbean sub-regional office of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC) conducted a study on the "Economic Implications of the Ban of Single-Use Plastics on the Economies of the Caribbean", with a case study of Trinidad and Tobago, that sought to obtain data on alternatives to single-use plastics. More information per region, per country and per UN entity can be obtained in the 'Priority areas and Goals tab of the [EMG Plastic Activities Application](#).

III. Conclusions

The UN has emerged as multidisciplinary voice in the plastics discourse, producing innovative scientific knowledge to raise awareness about the environmental and human challenges of plastic pollution; mobilizing local, regional, and global actors in the supply chain from both the public and private sector; and supporting intergovernmental discussions to put in place effective solutions..

As countries move closer to a binding legal instrument, the UN would benefit from strengthening its internal coordination and external cooperation with key agents of change. Focusing on a shared and cohered set of goals can help deliver greater impact in tackling plastic pollution together. A defined set of strategic goals could guide UN action focusing on the design and implementation of solutions along all stages of the lifecycle of plastics, and on the development of enabling conditions for these to be implemented.

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Going forward, the UN system may consider the following:

- Build UN expert groups of internally available technical expertise around strategic goals. The expert groups could build tailored information to inform specific discussions in the INC and other processes as needed.
- Convene these expert groups to discuss successes and challenges at local, national, regional, and/or global scale; and how efforts could be further connected in the implementation of existing and future activities.