



UN Common Offer to support the transition towards a plastic pollution-free planet

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I. Preface

In September 2021, the United Nations Senior Management Group (SMG) met to discuss 'Multilateral Solutions to Marine Litter and Plastics Pollution'. The UN Secretary-General noted the need for a system change approach with the participation of all actors and sectors. He requested the Executive Director of UNEP to lead a working group to unite efforts across the UN system on solutions to the challenges posed by plastic pollution. An interagency Core Working Group on Plastic Pollution was established within the UN Environment Management Group (EMG) to respond to the Secretary-General's call.

As a result of this interagency effort, in this Common Offer, the UN System describes the different ways in which it supports the transition towards a plastic pollution-free planet and how it fosters coherence in global and regional responses to address plastic pollution.

II. Promoting sustainable solutions to the challenge of plastic pollution

Over the past 10 years, the UN has emerged as a multidisciplinary voice in the plastics discourse with extensive reach around the globe producing 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.

The UN system develops and promotes the implementation of solutions to plastic pollution at all stages of the plastic lifecycle and possesses significant expertise across a range of relevant disciplines. More than 40 UN entities support Member States in providing solutions to the plastics challenge.¹ Their contributions can be divided into three main categories:

- i. **Governance:** Supporting the development of regulatory frameworks, policies, strategies and action plans at global, regional, national and sub-national/ local (e.g. city) levels;
- ii. **Technical assistance:** Providing technical assistance to Member States through assessments; guidance and tools; mapping and monitoring; collaboration on technology and innovation; capacity-building and training; financing; and
- iii. **Stakeholder engagement:** Advancing solutions in various sectors, raising awareness, and providing guidance and recommendations in joint efforts with stakeholders including industry and businesses.¹

¹ "Addressing marine litter and microplastics: UN system-wide contributions - A Synthesis Report by the United Nations Environment Management Group": https://unemg.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/UNEP_EMG-REPORT_Marine-Litter-Microplastics-220317-05-Small-web.pdf

UN system efforts are particularly concentrated at the downstream and midstream stages of the life cycle, particularly focused on waste management (including hazardous waste/contaminated plastic, use and consumption of plastic products; collection and recycling; and destruction, including elimination of single-use plastics as well as alternatives and substitutes). UN entities are increasingly engaging in research and development, developing the scientific basis for addressing the plastics challenge and reviewing socio-economic considerations (such as health, labour and human rights).

i. Tackling plastic pollution through governance

To tackle the issue of plastic pollution globally, in 2022, the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5.2), agreed to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment. The instrument will take a comprehensive approach towards plastic pollution, addressing the full life cycle of plastic.² The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) was established to develop the instrument, with the ambition to complete the negotiations by the end of 2024. Three of five INCs have taken place so far with INC-3 concluding in November 2023 in Nairobi at the UNEP headquarters. A diplomatic conference of plenipotentiaries upon completion of negotiations by the intergovernmental negotiating committee, for the purpose of adopting the instrument and opening it for signature is expected to be convened in 2023.

Other central instruments include the Basel Convention strengthening the control of transboundary movements of plastic waste; and the Action Plan on preventing marine plastic litter from entering the oceans through ship-based activities (IMO). The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) develops non-binding “soft law” instruments such as International Voluntary Codes of Conduct and Voluntary Guidelines that can be used by governments as a basis for developing their national legislation. A Voluntary Code of Conduct on the sustainable use of plastics in agriculture is expected to be finalized in 2024.

Plastic pollution touches on three pillars of the planetary crisis of biodiversity, climate and pollution. Tackling the issue of plastic pollution will also contribute to reducing GHG emissions and achieving the objectives of the Paris Agreement, and to reducing biodiversity loss and achieving the objectives of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, as pollution is one of the five main drivers of biodiversity loss.

At the regional level, the Regional Seas Programmes' Action Plans and protocols on pollution provide guidance on national and regional actions on addressing marine litter and microplastics with waste management as a strategic priority.

ii. Providing technical assistance

The UN offers support to countries in addressing plastic pollution and implementing related international agreements in many different ways, promoting a range of measures from nonregulatory means and voluntary behavioral change to restrictions, extended producer responsibility and incentives for innovation.

Technical assistance is offered to Member States, both at the national and sub-national level, through assessments; the development of strategies, action plans, guidance and tools; collaboration on technology and innovation; mapping and monitoring; capacity-building and training; and financing. At the regional level, for example, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) implements technical cooperation projects on solid waste management, including the Closing the Loop initiative to reduce the environmental impact of cities by addressing plastic waste pollution. In the European region, UNEP is co-chair of the United Nations Issue-based Coalition (IBC)

² <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/inc-plastic-pollution>

on Environment and Climate Change for Europe and Central Asia which has a joint programme on Circular economy in the context of Green Transitions, including plastics. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC) implements initiatives on plastics' traceability and the economic implications of single-use plastics. At the national level, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) country offices, supported by GEF and bilateral donors, work on plastic pollution, including marine litter, microplastics, solid waste management and other issues. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is executing the GEF funded project FARM (Financing Agrochemical Reduction and Management) aimed at improving agrochemicals and agricultural plastics reduction and management in Uruguay and Kenya.

The GEF Circular Solutions to Plastic Pollution Integrated Program is a \$107M program aimed to demonstrate and scale upstream and midstream solutions in the food and beverage packaging sector through a Global Platform and 15 National Projects, implemented during 2024-2028. The program is cooperative one, implemented by UNEP, WWF, UNDP and UNIDO.

The UN supports countries with awareness raising, education and trainings, strengthening countries' capacity in areas such as collection and monitoring of data. For example, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) develops and applies nuclear and derived technologies to assess the fate and biological consequence of microplastic particles in the ocean³.

The UN facilitates countries' access to technology and knowledge, to encourage improved design and waste management of plastics. As an example, UNIDO supports Member States in the transition from conventional plastics to more environmentally sustainable alternatives. Circular solutions to plastic pollution are explored through efforts such as UNEP's initiative on Ending Plastic Pollution through Extended Producer Responsibility.

The UN is also supporting countries in addressing transboundary issues related to plastic pollution. As an example, the World Trade Organization (WTO) considers how to improve transparency of plastic trade flows, supply chains and trade policies.

iii. Stakeholder engagement

The UN is working with many stakeholders across all regions, with active engagement of universities, NGOs, private sector entities, national governments, and international organizations. An example of an effective 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; and the Global Partnership on Plastic Pollution and Marine Litter (GPML).⁴

UN entities also lead and implement several plastic-related partnerships such as the Basel Convention Plastic Waste Partnership, and the Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency (GACERE) (UNEP, UNIDO),⁵

A more detailed analysis of activities on plastic pollution undertaken across UN agencies is available in Annex 1.

III. UN walking the talk

The UN addresses plastic pollution in its own operations, implementing the Strategy for Sustainability Management in the UN system 2020–2030 (CEB/2021/2/Add.1)⁶. This is done, i.e. through the adoption of environmental management systems (EMS) and improved resource efficiency in procurement. Other measures include raising staff awareness and the implementation of policies

³ Nuclear Technology for Controlling Plastic Pollution (NUTEC Plastics)

⁴ <https://www.gpmarinelitter.org/>

⁵ <https://www.unep.org/gacere>

⁶ <https://unsceb.org/strategy-sustainability-management-United-nations-system-2020-2030>

banning single use plastics in facilities and operations. The Greening the Blue Report details the UN system's environmental footprint and efforts to reduce it.⁷

IV. Raising ambitions to tackle plastic pollution and Delivering as One

Raising ambitions to support an inclusive and just transition towards a plastic pollution-free planet requires multi-layered collaborative action to reduce the production of plastic wastes and increase circularity. Multiple synergistic system interventions are needed to ensure that plastic is retained in the economy for as long as possible and at its highest economic value.

UN entities are working together for efficient and cost-effective delivery, fostering coherence in global and regional responses to addressing the plastic pollution challenge across the entire life cycle, and sharing information, knowledge and best practices with each other.

New programming such as the GEF Circular Solutions to Plastic Pollution Integrated Program represents a promising model for national level engagement backed by interagency collaboration in the food and beverage packaging sector.

In further developing its offer of support to Member States, the UN system could work to expand existing collaborations, consider priority sectors for engagement, engaging a wide variety of stakeholders and enhancing these stakeholders' capabilities to take action against plastic pollution.

Strengthened interagency collaboration on addressing plastic pollution may take the form of bringing together technical experts within the UN system around the design and implementation of solutions along the different stages of the lifecycle of plastics. These expert groups may inform and support the INC process, support country level readiness to implement a future instrument on plastic pollution as well as other processes on plastic pollution as needed, making sure that approaches, knowledge and tools developed at the global level are brought and adapted to support the work of UN Country Teams and Resident Coordinators.

In view of the expected legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, future UN efforts may aim towards enhancing international cooperation and ensuring consistency among relevant international instruments and organizations as well as increasing support for regulatory action to end plastic pollution.

⁷ <https://www.greeningtheblue.org/reports/greening-blue-report-2022>