Global treaty on plastic waste

Negotiators and observers from 175 countries including India are currently meeting in Ottawa to thrash out a planet-saving treaty on plastic waste. Here's why such a treaty matters, and why it is not going to be easy

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PLASTIC WASTE is everywhere, from the peak of Mount Everest to the floor of the Pacific Ocean, in the bodies of animals and birds, and in human blood and breast milk.

Last week, thousands of negotiators and observers from 175 countries arrived in Ottawa, Canada, to begin talks on the first global treaty to curb plastics pollution. India is also a part of the talks, and is represented by a senior official from the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change.

Scheduled to run till April 29, this is the fourth round of negotiations since 2022, when the UN Environmental Assembly agreed to develop a legally binding treaty on plastics pollution by the end of 2024. The final round of negotiations will take place in in South Korea in November.

The proposed plastics treaty could be the most important environmental accord since the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, in which nations agreed to cut greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

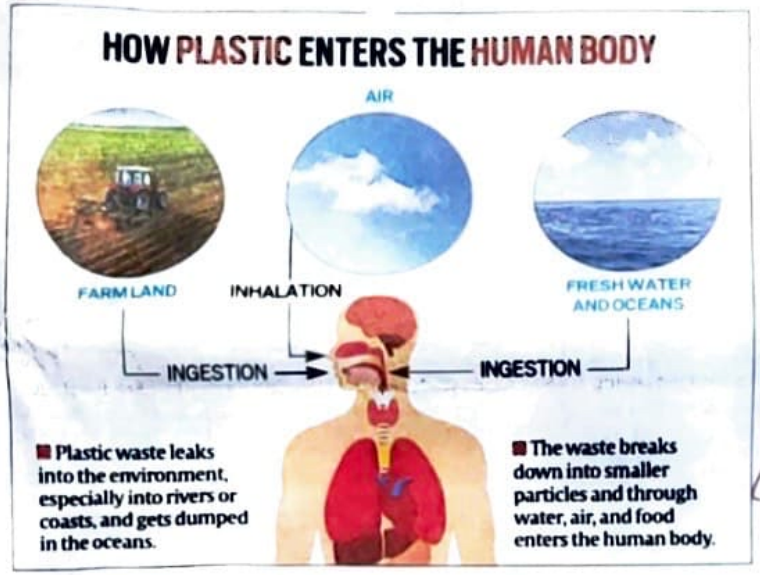
Why is a global plastic treaty needed?

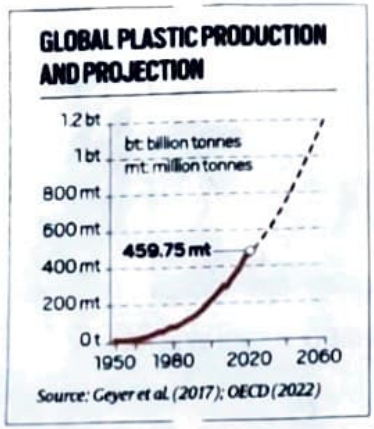
Since the 1950s, plastic production across the world has skyrocketed. It increased from just 2 million tonnes in 1950 to more than 450 million tonnes in 2019. If left unchecked, production could double by 2050, and triple by 2060.

Although plastic is a cheap and versatile material, with a wide variety of applications, its widespread use has led to a crisis. As plastic takes anywhere from 20 to 500 years to decompose, and less than 10% has been recycled till now, nearly 6 billion tonnes of the material now pollute the planet, according to a 2023 study published by *The Lancet*. Around 400 million tonnes of plastic waste is generated annually, a figure that is expected to jump by 62% between 2024 and 2050.

Much of this plastic waste leaks into the environment, especially into rivers and oceans, where it breaks down into smaller particles such as microplastics (pieces smaller than 0.5 mm in diameter) and nanoplastic (pieces that are just 100 nanometres or smaller). Plastic contains more than 16,000 chemicals that can harm ecosystems and living organisms, including humans – the chemicals are known to disturb the body's hormone systems, and cause cancer, diabetes, reproductive disorders, etc.

Plastic production and disposal are also contributing to climate change. According to a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in 2019, plastics generated 1.8 billion tonnes of GHG emissions – which was 3.4% of global emissions. Roughly 90% of these emissions came from the production of plastic, which is made from chemicals sourced from fossil fuels. If current trends continue, emissions from plastic production could grow 20% by 2050, a recent report by Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in the United States said.





What can the plastics treaty entail?

While none of the treaty's details are final yet, experts believe that it can go beyond just putting a cap on plastic production in United Nations member states.

It could, for example, lay out guidelines on how rich nations should help poorer ones meet their plastic reduction targets.

It could also ban "particular types of plastic, plastic products, and chemical additives used in plastics, and set legally binding targets for recycling and recycled content used in consumer goods," said a report by Grist magazine.

The treaty could mandate the testing of certain chemicals in plastics.

It could also contain some details on a just transition for waste pickers and workers in developing countries who depend on the plastic industry for their livelihoods.

What could be the potential roadblocks to such a treaty?

An ambitious agreement is far from guaranteed. Some of the biggest oil and gas producing countries, as well as fossil fuel and chemical industry groups, have been lobbying to narrow the scope of the treaty to focus only on plastic waste and recycling.

As a result, treaty negotiations have been deeply polarising so far. Since the first round of talks in Uruguay in November 2022, oil-producing nations like Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Iraq have opposed plastic production caps, and have used a range of delaying tactics such as arguing over procedural matters, to derail constructive dialogue.

Countries are yet to decide if the plastic treaty would be agreed upon by consensus or through a majority vote, according to a report published in the journal *Nature*. Consensus would mean that a single country could veto the treaty, and prevent it from getting passed.

On the other end, there is a coalition of around 65 nations – known as the "High-Ambition Coalition" – which seeks to tackle plastic production. The coalition, which includes African nations and most of the European Union, also wants to end plastic pollution by 2040, phase out "problematic" single-use plastics, and ban certain chemical additives that could carry health risks.

The US has not joined the HAC. While it has said it wants to end plastic pollution by 2040, unlike the HAC, it advocates that countries should take voluntary steps to end plastic pollution. "The underlying reason why the US is not ambitious is we are a fossil gas country," US Senator Jeff Merkley (Democrat from Oregon) told the *Associated Press*.

Fossil-fuel and chemical corporations have also been working to water down the treaty, and have sent a record number of lobbyists to the negotiations in Ottawa. According to a recent analysis by the Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL), 196 lobbyists registered for the talks, a 37% increase from the 143 lobbyists registered in the previous round of the negotiations in Kenya last November.

"99% of plastics are derived from fossil fuels, and the fossil fuel industry continues to clutch at plastics and petrochemicals as a lifeline. The chemical and fossil fuel industries oppose cuts to plastic production, falsely claiming that the plastics crisis is not a plastic problem, but a waste problem," the analysis said.

It is due to such roadblocks that the previous three rounds of negotiations failed to make significant progress towards finalising the treaty.

1. **Analyze the impact of plastic waste on marine ecosystems, and discuss the measures taken by the government and other stakeholders to reduce plastic pollution. Discuss the opportunities and challenges in promoting sustainable alternatives to single-use plastics**

2. Plastic pollution is a major environmental challenge in India. Critically examine the effectiveness of the policies implemented to tackle this issue. Suggest further steps for sustainable plastic waste management.

3. Critically examine the need for a Global Plastic Treaty. Discuss the key challenges and potential benefits of such a treaty for India. (250 words)

4. What are the potential provisions of a Global Plastic Treaty? How can India ensure that its interests are addressed in the ongoing negotiations? (250 words)

28 April.

Global treaty On Plastic Waste

- Recently, 175 countries at Ottawa, Canada begin talks on 1st global treaty to curb plastic Pollution

→ NEED FOR GLOBAL PLASTIC TREATY:

- Since 1950, Plastic Product across world increases from 2 mn tonnes (1950) → 450 mn tonnes (2019) double/tripled by 2050-60
- Plastic takes 20-500 yr to decompose & less than 10% has recycled yet.
- 400 mn tonnes plastic waste generate annually. It is Expected to jump 62% by 2024-2050.

→ Treaty should focus on:
- Recycle
- Ban on particular plastic product / chemical additive.

→ HOW PLASTIC AFFECT:

* In form of 'Microplastic' in rivers & oceans and 'Nanoplastic'

Impact on → Humans, Organisms, Environment

- In Humans, it affect by chemicals and disturb Body's Hormone System & Causes - Cancer, reproductive disorder, etc.

* climate change:- According to OECD, In 2019, plastic generated 1.8 bn tonn of GHG Emission.

Out of 90%, these Emission came from product of Plastic made of fossil fuels.

→ HOW PLASTIC ENTERS HUMAN BODY:

INGESTION ← Farmland
INHALATION ← AIR
INGESTION ← fresh water.

→ Countries way forward:
- Coalition of 65 nations — "High Ambition Coalition" tackle plastic production.
- 99% of plastic arises from fossil fuels.