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UN plastics negotiations and the challenge of reintegrating the planet's boundaries

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International negotiations for a global treaty to end plastic pollution, held from August 5 to 14, 2025, in Geneva, ended in failure. Many see this setback as the result of a poorly conducted process, using a method that led to confusion and mutual mistrust; the lack of effective leadership in conducting the work was also noted. The climate of weakened multilateralism, coupled with the absence of a shared vision of the common good among states—such as the one that had emerged during the negotiations of the Montreal Protocol¹ or the Basel Convention at the end of the last century—also played a significant role. How can we reexamine the deeper causes of this failure and the options that may still be open?

Indeed, the method chosen to conduct the work—relying on contact groups encouraged to accumulate individual contributions rather than articulate shared visions resulted, even at the Geneva meeting that was meant to be conclusive, in a proliferation of draft texts heavily marked by amendments and brackets. This embodies the “talking law” syndrome, as pointed out on several occasions in France by the Council of State: these texts could in no way serve as a basis for seeking agreement, but on the contrary prolonged the accumulation and staging of disagreements. In short, the process as it was conceived led to an increase in dissent rather than a search for compromise.

However, the causes of this failure certainly cannot be reduced to deficient environmental diplomacy.

Planetary boundaries in international law?

In this case, it was nothing less than an innovative approach to international environmental law, giving operational expression to the concept of “planetary boundaries” or “*Doughnut Economics*”² which is intended to be a renewed illustration of the vision of sustainable development.

Since 2015, plastic pollution has been one of the nine planetary boundaries described in the work of Johan Rockström and his teams. It is listed among the “new entities introduced into the biosphere” and shows a high level of exceedance of planetary boundaries.³

The OECD's work has shown⁴ that the rate of production of primary plastic and plastic products is unsustainable. Neither circular economy methods nor waste management systems, including recycling, even if improved in the medium term, are capable of stemming, reducing, or eliminating plastic pollution by 2040. This is all the more true since plastic particles are released into the environment not only when plastic waste leaks into nature but throughout the entire product life cycle. This has consequences for human and ecosystem health that remain impossible to fully quantify today.

With plastic production projected to rise from 475 million tons (Mt) in 2020 to 736 Mt in 2040, the volume of poorly managed waste would increase from 81 Mt to 119 Mt, while annual leaks into the environment would grow from 20 to 30 Mt.

The OECD therefore recommends that we start reducing plastic production now. In addition, there are growing questions about the effectiveness of recycling and its harmful effects on the environment, which can only make a limited contribution to reducing final pollution.

Limiting production: a formidable economic governance issue

Building on this foundation—and on the ambitious mandate of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), which covers the entire life cycle of plastics—the High Ambition Coalition, led by African, European, Latin American, and Pacific countries, has promoted a strong vision for the scope of the treaty's future principles, rules, and requirements. It calls for the establishment of targets to control plastic production and use, as well as for the monitoring of additives through lists of undesirable substances.

This position was opposed by a group of “Like-Minded Countries” led by Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Iran, with the support of the Arab region group, hydrocarbon-producing countries, and now the United States. It wanted to limit the scope of the treaty to the design of plastic products and waste management, while accompanying it with financial measures for developing countries.

China, India, and Brazil tried to play a conciliatory role, but without success. It is also unlikely that they would agree to a separate treaty under the coalition's leadership—a solution sometimes suggested by NGOs as a way out of the deadlock, but one that would exclude far too many countries.

In a way, the plastics treaty is a repeat, on a large scale, of the difficulties faced by the Climate Convention when it seeks to address fossil fuel issues. It took more than 30 years for the term to finally be mentioned in a COP declaration. Addressing the issues of plastic production and use in a binding treaty was not a given for producing countries. The same will be true in the future for all the economic components of the transition, and the virtuous

countries of today will not necessarily be those of tomorrow.

This gives pause for thought about international governance that could be adapted to reintegrating the economy within the limits of the planet. It is clear that many countries are not willing to negotiate such issues within an environmental framework such as the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) or multilateral environmental agreements. Others are beginning to raise the idea of compensation for loss of production.

Moreover, controlling plastic production and use as envisioned in the treaty entails shifts in national economic governance, which in recent decades has been oriented more toward liberalization than planning. Most states lack the instruments required for production planning, and many are reluctant to adopt them. The plastics challenge thus adds to other transition issues—such as the transformations needed in agriculture to reduce energy and water demand—highlighting the need for innovation in governance for transitions.

From this perspective, France has shown the way with the creation of the General Secretariat for Ecological Planning. These governance reforms must now be implemented at the international level. The meager achievements of the High-Level Political Forum, the meeting of the UN's central platform for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, however show that the task will not be easy. The transition cannot be led by environmental bodies alone, but an integrated approach, including economic, health, and social issues, has yet to be developed when it comes to the United Nations.

What next for the plastics negotiations?

As for the next steps in the plastics negotiations, it can at least be argued that continuing the work of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) using the methods employed in Busan (in November 2024) and Geneva (in August 2025) can only lead to the same result.

With a view to the next UNEA, scheduled for December 2025, some countries would be prepared to reformulate the mandate, or at least to clarify, if not the scope, then at least the content of the processes. But others are concerned in advance about the risks associated with returning to the UNEA.

Until now, the prevailing temptation has been to produce a very ambitious treaty in terms of scope and obligations. This has made the discussion complex and endless, without any conclusion being reached.

Would it not be preferable to distinguish between what belongs to international law and what derives from political decision-making? From this perspective, the Convention on Biological Diversity offers a useful precedent: it combines a clear legal framework with multi-year action plans that establish political objectives—such as those introduced under the Kunming-Montreal agreement.

In the case of plastics, issues such as sustainable production levels, product design, how to implement the circular economy, producer responsibility, and others could be addressed by the COPs and translated into national plans. However, specific measures should be taken to deal with problematic substances incorporated into plastic products. These could be the subject of annexes to the treaty or be addressed in cooperation with chemical conventions, as requested by a number of countries concerned about avoiding duplication of forums.

In any case, these lists must be established not only for environmental and health reasons, but also for the sake of harmonizing international standards.

Financing issues have become increasingly important for developing countries, with a critical approach to the Global Environment Facility leading them to call for the creation of a fund specific to the treaty. One amendment even stipulates that the application of the treaty by developing countries would be conditional on obtaining funds financed by developed countries.

In short, returning to the UNEP to take note of the current stage of negotiations, extend and adjust the mandate seems to be a perilous but unavoidable path.

But the most difficult task remains: rebuilding a community of objectives among countries, restoring a capacity for listening and dialogue, bringing together those with different visions to engage in dialogue and build acceptable compromises, bearing in mind that a treaty develops its effects over time and that it is now important to create a framework for future negotiations.

We would like to conclude with the words of Professor Miriam Diamond, a member of the Earth Commission⁵: "The discussions in Geneva have failed, but the urgency has not diminished," or with those of Inger Andersen, Executive Director of UNEP, concluding the Geneva discussions: "The work will not stop because plastic pollution will not stop. People want a treaty," as if the need for an agreement will automatically be imposed by the facts.

Indeed, the risk of ultimate failure is now very high. In the short term, the United Nations has a duty to put forward concrete options and clarifications to enable more effective diplomacy. The future of the plastics treaty rests largely in its hands.

1

See Richard Eliot Benedick "Ozone Diplomacy : New Directions in Safeguarding the planet". Harvard University Press, 1988

2

Kate Raworth, "Doughnut Economics", Penguin Book, 2022

3

Linn Persson and al, "Outside the safe Operating space of the Planetary Boundary for Novel Entities", Environ. Sci. technol. 2022

4

Cf » Global Plastics Outlook » OCDE, 2022

5

<https://earthcommission.org>

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