

Plastic solution: Beyond the Global Plastics Treaty

The Hindu

Paper - III
(Environment and Ecology)

The Global Plastics Treaty, an ambitious initiative involving at least 175 United Nations member nations to eliminate the use of plastics, concluded its fourth round of negotiations recently. The goal is to finalise a legal document by the end of 2024 with timelines by when countries must agree to curb plastic production, eliminate its uses that create wastage, ban certain chemicals used in its production and set targets for recycling. Unfortunately, an agreement is not in sight. There is yet another round of negotiations scheduled in Busan, South Korea this November. The primary hurdles are economic. Oil producing and refining countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United States, Russia, India and Iran are reluctant about hard deadlines to eliminate plastic production. A coalition of African countries, supported by several European nations, is in favour of a year, around 2040, to ensure that a timeline for reduction is in effect. There is also disagreement on whether contentious elements in the treaty should be decided on by a vote or consensus — the latter implying that every country has a veto. India's opinion, other than being uncomfortable with binding targets, is that a legally binding instrument to end the plastic pollution must also address "... availability, accessibility, affordability of alternatives including cost implications and specifying arrangements... for capacity building and technical assistance, technology transfer, and financial assistance". This language — and India is not the only proponent — is reminiscent of the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibility' enshrined in climate talks. Under this, countries must have a

What are the Global Initiatives Related to Plastic?

- UNEP Plastics Initiative** : It aims to end global plastic pollution by reducing the flow of virgin plastics and promoting the transition to a circular economy. It focuses on innovation, reduction, and reuse of plastics. The strategic goals include reducing the size of the problem, designing for circularity, ensuring circularity in practice, and managing plastic waste. By 2027, the initiative aims to improve plastics policies in 45 countries, engage 500 private sector actors in circular solutions, and involve 50 financial institutions in supporting the transition.
- Global Tourism Plastics Initiative** : It aims to unite tourism stakeholders to fight plastic pollution. Led by the UN Environment and United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the initiative supports organisations in reducing plastic waste and improving plastic use in their operations. It is developing commitments for the private sector, destinations, and associations to implement by 2025.
- Circular Plastic Economy** : In 2015, the EU created a Circular Economy Action Plan which later consisted of the European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy. This approach helps limit the amount of plastic waste by creating more of a "circular" method of reusing products and straying from single-use plastics.
- Ban Plastic** : Several countries have implemented bans on plastic products. In 2002, Bangladesh was the first country to ban thin plastic bags. China implemented a ban on plastic bags in 2020 with phased implementation. In the US, 12 states have banned single-use plastic bags. The European Union implemented the Directive on Single-Use Plastics in July 2021, which bans certain single-use plastics for which alternatives are available, including plates, cutlery, straws, balloon sticks, cotton buds, expanded polystyrene containers, and oxo-degradable plastic products.

What are the Indian Initiatives Related to Plastic?

- Plastic Waste Management (Amendment) Rules, 2024
- The Plastics Manufacture and Usage (Amendment) Rules (2003)
- UNDP India's Plastic Waste Management Program (2018-2024).
- EPR Portal by Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).
- India Plastics Pact
- Project REPLAN

common target but those more privileged must support others and take on stricter targets themselves.

In the year that the plastics treaty was mooted, in 2022, India brought into effect the Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules (2021) that banned 19 categories of “single-use” plastics. It, however, does not include plastic bottles — even those less than 200 ml — and multi-layered packaging boxes (as in milk cartons). Moreover, even the ban on single-use plastic items is not uniformly enforced nationally, with several outlets continuing to retail these goods. The global distribution of the plastic pollution is unequal with Brazil, China, India and the U.S. responsible for 60% of plastic waste, according to a report by the non-profit EA Earth Action. Much like how transitioning away from fossil fuel invites its own challenges, plastic pollution cannot be ended by merely signing treaties. There needs to be much greater investment in alternative products and making them affordable before realistic targets are decided upon.

Expected Question for Prelims

Que. Consider the following statements in the context of the Global Plastics Pact-

1. The United Nations Environment Assembly has decided to create a binding treaty on plastic pollution by the end of 2024.
2. Recently, the fourth round of talks was held in Ottawa, Canada to discuss the global plastic treaty.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- | | |
|------------------|---------------------|
| (a) Only 1 | (b) Only 2 |
| (c) Both 1 and 2 | (d) Neither 1 nor 2 |

Answer : C

Mains Expected Question & Format

Que.: Highlight the importance of a legally binding global plastics treaty? What are the obstacles to the treaty?

Answer's Approach:

- ❖ Explain the Global Plastics Treaty in the first part of the answer.
- ❖ In the second part, mention the importance of the Global Plastics Treaty and the obstacles present in its path.
- ❖ Finally give a conclusion giving suggestions.

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.