

Plastics Crisis: What global treaty negotiations in Geneva mean for our future

The Geneva summit on the Global Plastics Treaty has ended, but with production set to triple by 2050, can governments, businesses, and communities move from words to action?

These are hashtags floating around the internet on all the social media accounts of thinktanks, Not-for-Profits, Agencies, Confederation of Industries, Government departments, etc. Yet, they account for a fraction of the plastics, microplastic and nanoplastic particles (MNPs) floating around our air, water, soil, bloodstreams, brains, breastmilk, liver, colon, heart, placenta, uterus, spleen and semen.

“Plastics cost us \$3.74 trillion in health-related costs each year, and our governments and economies are bearing the hidden brunt of the magnitude of this and how it will impact our future,” quotes a Centre for International Environmental Law report. The leading Lancet journal chose to highlight in its latest edition a study pertaining to plastics as an outcome of medical waste.

The Global Plastics Treaty/INC – 5.2 at Geneva was in the news for the wrong reasons. Rather than persuading 179 countries and industry lobbyists to find a solution and way forward, the tactic of distraction, delay, and dragging the process over 10 days may have caused more damage. With plastic production set to triple by 2050, how can polluters be held accountable for the damage they cause to the planet and human lives?

The need to push for a global phaseout, a binding global treaty to end plastic pollution for people and nature, should be the top priority.

Ending plastic pollution

The High Seas Treaty is an avenue to help end plastic pollution. In 2025, at least 60 ratifications must be made for this Treaty to enable us to protect 2/3 of our oceans for future generations. The planet Earth is predominantly covered with oceans, and all the plastic is ending up in our ocean beds, causing great damage to the marine ecosystem. Indigenous communities, known for their deep connections to maritime life and the oceans, have been strongly advocating for conservation efforts. It is time to hear their voices and use their help in protecting and managing our marine ecosystems.

Materiality matters

The fossil fuel industry and businesses that use plastics in manufacturing their end-products have been reorienting their business approach to devise alternatives. The choice of an alternative weighs heavily on the triple bottom line of any business – profits, profits, profits, rather than people, planet, and profits.

Are businesses, especially those that have been around for more than 5-6 decades, consistently reaping profits and willing to adopt the Purpose, People, and Planet approach to invest in a sustainable future? Even if every country on that negotiating table identifies 1-2 legacy businesses that can do this in their own region, it can create a ripple effect that can inspire and motivate others to follow suit.

The factor that should motivate business leaders in this direction should be the impacts of plastic on human health and the logic of not being able to have a healthy workforce in the next few years, owing to health disruption, terminal illnesses, having to care for younger children and older parents and a host of factors including uncertainties in the external ecosystem.

Young people have championed environmental causes at every COP summit, asking tough questions. Yet their concerns and views remain on the fringes. This Plastic Treaty Summit should have served as a wake-up call to countries and organisations eager to capitalise on their Youth demographics. Excluding the youth and their concerns from this context and discussion will result in a skewed outcome. As consumers of products--whether it is food, cosmetics, beverages, services or technological innovations--the youth have the potential to influence these choices; they are vociferously doing it in their own measured ways, choosing to communicate and express this through the platforms and channels they are most comfortable with.

Are we on those channels listening in?

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