GWMUN
Background Guide

March 2026

Model United Nations offers students a chance to partake in a simulation of the UN, exploring contemporary world issues related to security, economics, human rights, health and the environment. The focus of this year's conference will be on the environment with future conferences expanding into new topics. Model UN not only fosters global citizenship but also develops important skills such as leadership, teamwork, public speaking and negotiation. The information below will help prepare you for your participation in this year's conference.

2026 Topic: Addressing Global Plastic Pollution – Negotiating a Legally Binding International Instrument

GWMUN 2026 Committee: United Nations Environment Program (UNEP)

1. Introduction to the Topic

Plastic is one of the most transformative inventions of the modern era. Since its mass production began in the 1950s, plastic has become ubiquitous in daily life due to its durability, versatility, and low cost. Global plastic production has skyrocketed from 2 million metric tons in 1950 to over 460 million metric tons today, and this trajectory continues upward. However, the very qualities that make plastic valuable—its durability and resistance to degradation—also make it a profound environmental threat. Approximately 9.2 billion metric tons of plastic have been produced to date, of which only 9% has been recycled, 12% incinerated, and a staggering 79% has accumulated in landfills or the natural environment. Each year, an estimated 11 million metric tons of plastic waste enters the ocean—equivalent to dumping one garbage truck of plastic into the ocean every minute. Plastic pollution is no longer merely an aesthetic or waste management issue. It has become a planetary crisis with environmental, economic, and human health dimensions. Microplastics (particles smaller than 5mm) have been found everywhere: from the deepest ocean trenches to Arctic ice, from drinking water to human blood, placentas, and breast milk. The economic costs are estimated at over $13 billion annually in damage to marine ecosystems, fisheries, tourism, and clean-up efforts. Unlike climate change or biodiversity loss, plastic pollution has a unique characteristic: it is solvable. There are known technologies, alternatives, and policy approaches that can dramatically reduce plastic leakage into the environment. What has been missing is a coordinated global framework to mandate action, hold actors accountable, and mobilize resources.

This is why, in March 2022, at the resumed fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (https://www.unep.org/environmentassembly/) (UNEA-5.2), 175 nations adopted a historic resolution to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment. The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) was established, with a mandate to complete a draft global agreement by the end of 2024.

There have been two additional UNEA meetings to add to the work developed by the UNEA 5.

****As delegates of the UNEP, your task is to continue this work. Your committee will negotiate the provisions of this instrument, balancing environmental ambition with economic realities,**

and national circumstances with global responsibilities through drafting resolutions and debate with other representative countries.

2. Key Definitions and Scope

Understanding the following terms is essential for meaningful negotiation:

- Primary plastics: Plastics manufactured in their original form (pellets, powders, etc.)
- Secondary plastics: Plastics derived from recycling processes
- Microplastics: Plastic particles smaller than 5mm, either manufactured (e.g.,microbeads) or resulting from degradation
- Macroplastics: Larger plastic items such as bottles, bags, fishing gear, and packaging
- Single-use plastics: Plastic products designed to be used once before disposal
- Plastic polymers: Long-chain molecules that form the basis of plastics (e.g., polyethylene, polypropylene, PET)
- Chemical additives: Substances added to plastics to enhance properties (plasticizers, flame retardants, stabilizers), many of which are toxic
- Circular economy: An economic model focused on designing out waste, keeping materials in use, and regenerating natural systems
- Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) : A policy approach requiring producers to take responsibility for the entire lifecycle of their products, including post-consumer management
- Just transition: Ensuring that the shift to a plastic-free economy creates decent work opportunities and leaves no one behind

3. Historical Background and Current International Framework

3.1 Early Awareness (1970s–2000s)

Plastic pollution first gained attention in the 1970s with the discovery of the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch" – a vast accumulation of marine debris in the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre. However, for decades, plastic was viewed primarily as a litter or waste management issue at the national or local level.

The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal (1989) was the first international treaty relevant to plastic waste, but it initially focused on hazardous wastes, with plastic considered non-hazardous and largely unregulated.

3.2 Growing Scientific Evidence (2000s–2010s)

The 2000s saw an explosion of scientific research documenting the ubiquity and impacts of plastic pollution. Key findings included:

- 2004: Term "microplastics" coined by marine biologist Richard Thompson
- 2010s: Studies documenting microplastics in seafood, tap water, and bottled water
- 2016: First study finding microplastics in human placentas
- Ongoing: Research on toxicological effects of plastic additives and adsorbed pollutants

3.3 The Basel Convention Plastic Waste Amendments (2019)

In 2019, parties to the Basel Convention adopted amendments to bring mixed and contaminated plastic wastes under the prior informed consent procedure. This meant that countries exporting such wastes must obtain consent from importing countries before shipment. This was a significant step

in preventing developed countries from dumping plastic waste on developing nations with inadequate management capacity.

3.4 Regional and Voluntary Initiatives

Multiple regional agreements and voluntary initiatives emerged:

- Honolulu Strategy (2011): A global framework for preventing marine debris
- G7 Ocean Plastics Charter (2018): Committed signatories to make all plastics reusable, recyclable, or recoverable by 2030
- EU Single-Use Plastics Directive (2019): Bans certain single-use plastic items and sets collection targets
- UN Environment Program's Clean Seas Campaign (2017): Engages governments, businesses, and citizens in reducing marine litter
- Various national bans: Over 127 countries have enacted some form of plastic ban or levy

3.5 The Road to a Global Treaty

The push for a global legally binding instrument gained momentum through several UNEA resolutions:

- UNEA Resolution 1/6 (2014): "Marine plastic debris and microplastics" – called for improved knowledge and action
- UNEA Resolution 2/11 (2016): Established an Ad Hoc Open-Ended Expert Group on marine litter and microplastics
- UNEA Resolution 3/7 (2017): Recognized the need for a comprehensive global response
- UNEA Resolution 4/6 (2019): Noted that "voluntary and national efforts have not been sufficient" and called for further analysis of options

UNEA Resolution 5/14 (March 2022) was the breakthrough. Titled "End plastic pollution: Towards an international legally binding instrument" it:

- Decided to establish an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC)
- Mandated the INC to develop a legally binding instrument based on a comprehensive approach addressing the full lifecycle of plastics
- Set an ambitious timeline: complete negotiations by the end of 2024
- Established an Open-Ended Working Group to prepare for INC sessions

3.6 Current Status of INC Negotiations

As of early 2026, the INC has held multiple sessions:

- INC-1 (Punta del Este, Uruguay, November 2022): Procedural matters, exchange of views
- INC-2 (Paris, France, May-June 2023): Began substantive discussions on the instrument's objectives and core obligations
- INC-3 (Nairobi, Kenya, November 2023): Advanced discussions on the zero draft
- INC-4 (Ottawa, Canada, April 2024): Continued negotiations on the revised draft
- INC-5 (Busan, South Korea, November 2024): Attempted to finalize the treaty but significant divergences remained
- INC-5.2 (Expected 2025): Additional session planned to resolve outstanding issues

****The negotiations have revealed deep divisions on several fundamental questions, which your committee will continue to address.**

4. Key Controversies and Divisions

4.1 Scope: Full Lifecycle vs. Waste Management Only

**** In this section you will find the issues that will need to be addressed through your resolutions and committee debates**

The debate: Should the treaty address plastics at every stage (production, design, use, disposal), or focus primarily on waste management?

****Please consider the specific situation of your country and how it would impact perspectives in this debate**

Viewpoint 1: Proponents of full lifecycle approach (mostly developed countries, environmental NGOs)
argue:
- Addressing waste alone is insufficient; production is projected to triple by 2060
- Design determines recyclability and toxicity
- Chemical additives pose risks throughout the lifecycle
- The UNEA mandate explicitly calls for a "comprehensive approach addressing the full lifecycle"

Viewpoint 2: Proponents of waste-focused approach (some producer countries, petrochemical exporters) argue:
- Waste management is the most urgent problem
- Production restrictions interfere with economic development
- Plastics provide essential benefits (food safety, medical supplies, lightweight transport)

4.2 Production Caps and Reduction Targets

The debate: Should the treaty include binding targets to reduce plastic production?

Viewpoint 1: Ambition coalition (Rwanda, Peru, EU members, Pacific island states) advocates:
- Global binding targets to reduce virgin plastic production
- Phase-down of problematic polymers
- Linkage to Paris Agreement-style nationally determined contributions

Viewpoint 2: Like-minded group (primarily oil and petrochemical producers including Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iran, China initially) argues:
- Production caps are outside the mandate
- Focus should be on recycling and circularity
- Differentiated responsibilities based on national circumstances

4.3 Chemical Regulation and Transparency

The debate: Should the treaty regulate chemicals used in plastics?

Viewpoint 1: Proponents (EU, many developed countries, health advocates) argue:
- Over 13,000 chemicals are associated with plastics, many hazardous
- Lack of transparency prevents safe recycling

- The treaty should include a mechanism to identify and phase out harmful chemicals

Viewpoint 2: Opponents (chemical industry, some producer countries) argue:
- Chemicals are already regulated by other treaties (Rotterdam, Stockholm Conventions)
- Regulation would be technically complex and costly
- Intellectual property concerns regarding proprietary chemical formulations

4.4 Product Design Standards
The debate: Should the treaty mandate minimum design requirements?

Viewpoint 1: Proponents argue:
- Design determines recyclability
- Standards would create a level playing field
- Examples include requirements for recycled content, bans on problematic polymers, design-for-recyclability criteria

Viewpoint 2: Opponents argue:
- Design standards interfere with innovation
- One-size-fits-all approaches ignore different waste management contexts
- Voluntary industry standards are sufficient

4.5 Finance and Means of Implementation
The debate: How should implementation be financed, particularly for developing countries?
Key questions:
- Should there be a dedicated multilateral fund (like the Montreal Protocol's Multilateral Fund or the Global Environment Facility)?
- Should producers pay through extended producer responsibility schemes?
- What role for private finance and blended finance?
- Should there be a plastic fee or tax at the global level?

4.6 Just Transition
The debate: How to address social and economic impacts of transitioning away from plastics?

Key considerations:
- Workers in plastics production and waste management need support
- Informal waste pickers (an estimated 20 million globally, mostly in developing countries) must be integrated, not displaced
- Developing countries need technology transfer and capacity building

5. Positions of Key Stakeholders
**** With this information, you will develop your countries' viewpoint, consider allies, and draft resolutions that create achievable compromises**

5.1 Member State Groups

Group/Country Key Positions Strategic Interests

Viewpoint 1: High Ambition Coalition Binding global targets Environmental leadership; (led by Rwanda and Norway, over 50 countries including EU members, Canada, Peru, Switzerland, UK) across full lifecycle; production caps; chemical regulation; strong finance mechanism level playing field for domestic industry; innovation opportunities

Viewpoint 2: Like-Minded Group (Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iran, Bahrain, Cuba, China initially; positions evolving) Focus on waste management; oppose production caps; emphasize national circumstances; resist mandatory targets Protect petrochemical industry; avoid constraints on development; national sovereignty

Viewpoint 3: African Group (diverse, but many aligned with HAC) Strong ambition; just transition critical; finance and technology transfer essential; concern about waste dumping. Address waste imports; protect informal sector; access to finance

Viewpoint 4: Small Island Developing States (Fiji, Maldives, Samoa, etc.) Highest ambition; survival issue due to marine pollution impacts; demand urgent action. Protect marine ecosystems; address loss and damage; access to finance

Viewpoint 5: Latin American and Caribbean Group (mixed: Peru, Chile, Colombia ambitious; Brazil, Mexico more cautious) Support full lifecycle approach; emphasize circular economy; regional cooperation. Balance environmental protection with industrial development

Viewpoint 6: United States Support ambitious treaty; prefer national action plans over binding global targets; strong on design and recycling; evolving position. Leadership role; protect innovation; align with domestic policy shifts

Viewpoint 7: China Initially aligned with LMG; shifting toward more constructive engagement; supports circular economy; cautious on binding targets World's largest producer and consumer; massive domestic waste challenge; economic transition

Viewpoint 8: India Supports ambitious treaty with common but differentiated responsibilities; strong on just transition; opposed bans on single-use plastics. Large informal sector; development needs; domestic bans already in place

Viewpoint 9: Japan Supports circular economy approach; promotes material recycling; cautious on binding production caps. Advanced recycling technology; resource efficiency focus

Viewpoint 10: Republic of Korea Ambitious on circular economy; host of INC-5; bridge builder Leadership role; domestic green deal

5.2 Non-State Actors

**** You will utilize the information in this section while drafting resolutions so that voting countries can take into consideration how committee decisions might impact their private sector both domestically and internationally. Additionally, you will want to consider how private interests might impact state sovereignty**

Viewpoint 1: Actor Group Key Positions Influence Business Coalition for a Global Plastics Treaty (over 100 businesses including Nestlé, PepsiCo, Unilever) Support ambitious treaty with harmonized rules; level playing field; enable circular economy Significant; industry voices matter. Plastics industry - Resist mandatory targets; Lobbying power in associations (some) emphasize recycling; voluntary action; chemical regulation concerns producer countries

Viewpoint 2: Environmental NGOs (WWF, Greenpeace, GAIA,CIEL)
Push for highest ambition; production caps; chemical regulation; zero waste solutions
Research, advocacy, public pressure

Viewpoint 3: Waste picker organizations (Global Alliance of Waste Pickers)
Recognition; integration; just transition; protection from displacement
Moral authority; grassroots legitimacy

6. Questions to Consider

Utilizing all preceding information, consider each question below in the drafting of your resolution(s). These questions should also guide committee debate so that a consensus vote can be reached.

Scope and Approach
1. Should the treaty address the full lifecycle of plastics, or focus on waste management? Why?
2. How can the treaty balance environmental ambition with economic development needs?

Targets and Obligations
3. Should there be global binding targets to reduce virgin plastic production? If so, by how much and by when?
4. What products or polymers should be phased out or restricted?
5. Should the treaty include requirements for minimum recycled content in new products?

Chemicals and Design
6. How should the treaty address hazardous chemicals in plastics?
7. Should there be global design standards to ensure recyclability?

Implementation and Finance
8. What financing mechanism should support implementation, particularly for developing countries?
9. How should the treaty address technology transfer and capacity building?
10. What role should Extended Producer Responsibility play?

Just Transition
11. How can the treaty protect and integrate informal waste workers?
12. How should the treaty address impacts on workers in plastics production?

Monitoring and Compliance
13. What monitoring and reporting mechanisms are needed?
14. How should compliance be ensured?

7. Resources for Further Research

****You will utilize the relevant sources below to further your understanding of both the topic and your countries' past position and voting records. As the relevance is different for each representative country, you will need to determine the usefulness of each specific source and then engage appropriately with the materials**

Official Documents
- UNEA Resolution 5/14: "End plastic pollution: Towards an international legally binding instrument"
- INC session reports and zero draft (available at UNEP website)
- Basel Convention Plastic Waste Amendments

Reports and Data
- OECD (2022): "Global Plastics Outlook: Policy Scenarios to 2060"
- UNEP (2021): "From Pollution to Solution: A global assessment of marine litter and plastic pollution"
- Pew Charitable Trusts and SYSTEMIQ (2020): "Breaking the Plastic Wave"
- GRID-Arendal and UNEP: Various reports on plastic pollution
- Ellen MacArthur Foundation: Reports on circular economy for plastics

Scientific Literature
- Jambeck et al. (2015): "Plastic waste inputs from land into the ocean"
- Geyer et al. (2017): "Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made"
- Recent studies on microplastics in human tissues and environmental compartments

Stakeholder Positions
- High Ambition Coalition statements and declarations
- Business Coalition for a Global Plastics Treaty publications
- Industry association position papers
- NGO reports and policy briefs

8. Glossary of Key Terms

**** To create shared, consistent language for resolutions and debates, utilize the terminology below**

Additives Chemicals - added to plastics to enhance properties (stabilizers, plasticizers, flame

retardants)
Circular economy - Economic system aimed at eliminating waste through continuous use of resources
Downstream Waste - management phase of the plastics lifecycle
Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) -Policy requiring producers to take responsibility for end-of-life management of their products
Incineration - Burning of waste, with or without energy recovery
Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) - Body established by UNEA to negotiate the plastics treaty
Leakage - Movement of plastic waste from managed systems into the environment
Lifecycle approach - Consideration of all stages from extraction to disposal
Marine litter - Any persistent manufactured material discarded in the marine environment
Microplastics - Plastic particles smaller than 5mm
Midstream - Use phase of the plastics lifecycle
Pellet - Raw plastic material in small bead-like form used for manufacturing
Polymer - Large molecule composed of repeating subunits, basis of all plastics
Primary plastic - Virgin plastic produced directly from raw materials
Recycling - Process of converting waste into reusable material
Single-use plastic - Plastic item designed to be used once before disposal
Upstream - Production and design phase of the plastics lifecycle
Waste picker - Person who salvages recyclable materials from waste

This background guide is prepared by the GWMUN 2026 Academic Team for the United Nations Environment Program. It is intended to provide a foundation for delegate research and preparation. Delegates are expected to conduct additional research on their assigned countries' specific positions and to consult primary sources referenced herein.

Good luck, and may your negotiations bring us closer to a planet free of plastic pollution!