

## Introduction

Plastics are ubiquitous in today's world. The widespread use of plastics means plastic pollution comes from various sectors and industries, all of which use the material for bespoke applications with varying levels of risk when it comes to emissions into the environment, and all of which require tailored interventions to mitigate these risks. This is because the alternatives, trade-offs, and solutions inherently vary depending on the industries, markets, contexts, and applications in which they are used.

The new International Legally Binding Instrument (ILBI) on plastic pollution is considering whether to set out dedicated programmes of work for major industrial sectors in which plastics are used, as well as designing globally legally binding measures that address plastics at the material level (e.g. to phase down overall plastic production and phase out polymers and chemicals of concern). At the third session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC-3), Norway proposed the inclusion of dedicated programmes of work for the sectors with the highest usage of plastics, including packaging, fisheries and aquaculture, agriculture and textiles.<sup>1</sup> It's submission also sets out for additional sectors, like transportation, healthcare and construction, to be adopted at a later date.

The diverse uses of plastics will require varying considerations and governance, making sector-specific programmes – both for the sectors outlined in Norway's proposal and those proposed by other countries at INC-4, such as Kenya's proposal to include electronics<sup>2</sup> – a valuable tool to engage relevant stakeholders, coordinate global strategies and develop interventions that are appropriate for the different contexts.

### Plastics usage in identified sectors:

**Packaging:** Approximately 141 million tonnes of plastic packaging is produced globally per year, generating 40 per cent of total plastic waste – more than the next four biggest industrial sectors combined. Of this, 85 per cent is either landfilled or mismanaged, exacerbating environmental harm.<sup>3</sup> The lack of recyclability, combined with the presence of toxic chemicals in plastic packaging, poses significant risks to both the environment and public health.

**Fisheries and aquaculture:** Abandoned, lost, or otherwise discarded fishing and aquaculture gear makes up between 75-86 per cent of the macroplastic in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch<sup>4</sup> and contributes 27 per cent of beach litter in Europe.<sup>5</sup> Ghost gear entangles 66 per cent of marine mammals, 50 per cent of seabirds and all sea turtle species, posing severe threats to marine ecosystems, navigation safety and coastal livelihoods – making this one of the deadliest forms of marine plastic pollution.<sup>6</sup>

**Agriculture:** Agricultural supply chains use 12.5 million tonnes of plastic products every year, accounting for 3.5 per cent of global plastic production.<sup>7</sup> Leakage of this plastic into the environment causes physical, chemical, and biological harm to soil, terrestrial, aquatic, and marine life, ecosystems, and human health.<sup>8</sup>

**Textiles:** Plastics, particularly synthetic fibres like polyester, nylon, and acrylic, now constitute about 69 per cent of global textile production.<sup>9</sup> In 2015, textile production generated 42 million tonnes of plastic waste. Due to their low recyclability, textiles are often incinerated or discarded with other solid waste. Between 16–35 per cent of the 14 million tonnes of microplastics released into the marine environment annually are from synthetic textiles.<sup>10</sup>

# What is a dedicated programme of work?

A dedicated programme of work is an initiative undertaken by the Conference of the Parties to develop and implement a comprehensive sector strategy to support implementation of the treaty. It is a way to operationalise the many calls for a sectoral approach in the ILBI.

These programmes can be viewed as working horizontally across the substantive measures in the treaty (e.g. product design, waste management, extended producer responsibility, etc.) and its implementation elements (e.g. capacity-building, technology transfer, finance, national plans, etc.), aligning them toward a common objective while identifying and promoting complementary actions to be taken at the national level and by stakeholders and other international bodies and frameworks.

Each sector presents unique considerations, stakeholders and opportunities. For example, the fisheries and aquaculture sectors involve different regulatory frameworks and actors than the packaging or textiles sectors. Thus, programmes would be unique in their ability to reflect the specific nature of each sector, incorporating research, development, technical analyses and assessments to guide strategy formation and avoiding piecemeal approaches. By embedding dedicated programmes within the ILBI's framework, key sectors can be addressed with tailored strategies and interventions.

To engage all these relevant stakeholders, part of the mandate for dedicated programmes of work should be to create a multistakeholder action agenda to be approved by the Conference of the Parties (CoP). Agendas are a way to bridge engagement with stakeholders across the value chain by setting out clear and dedicated responsibilities, mobilising resources and addressing the overarching mandate from the CoP. The ILBI should help facilitate the requisite engagement with other relevant international and regional governance, as well as from participants with subject matter knowledge.

While these programmes may at first be tasked to produce initial strategy, guidance or recommendations to populate future ILBI Annexes, the programmes could be utilised on an ongoing basis. For example, to assist the CoP in developing a continuous review of the implementation for their sector through recommendations for updating the strategy, addressing specific operational decisions that can be taken by the CoP for the implementation of the ILBI and advising the CoP on issues relating to the means of implementation and capacity-building based on identified needs of different regions, groups of stakeholders or otherwise.

Moreover, the dedicated programmes of work can play a critical role in promoting transparency, disclosure and cooperation amongst stakeholders, in particular galvanising momentum to advance and operationalise solutions before they become legally binding – in other words, motivating industry to get ahead of oncoming regulation and thus making the process of implementation smoother and more effective in meeting the overall objectives.

As an implementation tool, dedicated programmes of work can help identify key areas within their sector that require funding, capacity-building, technology transfer or other resources. These programmes can also play a vital role in connecting sector-specific needs with available resources—for example, pairing grants aimed at innovating alternative materials with researchers within the programme. This ensures that financial and technical support is effectively aligned with the sector's most pressing needs, facilitating collaborative problem-solving.

Critically, to work across the lifecycle, and not minimise its scope, the authority to establish a dedicated programme of work should be a standalone provision within the ILBI. This will give dedicated programmes of work the flexibility and authority needed to drive comprehensive, sector-specific solutions across the entire plastics lifecycle, ensuring the ILBI's goals are met at every stage—from production to end-of-life management. To ensure the programmes can operate effectively, the treaty must also provide a solid foundation for robust policy tools to be agreed upon in the future, including the authority to (i) ban problematic plastics, (ii) set product design standards, (iii) issue global policy guidance, (iv) direct resources strategically and (v) regulate harmful polymers and chemicals.

# How this plays out once established

At the first meeting of the CoP, the governing body should adopt a mandate for each dedicated programme of work for the sectors identified as the most urgent; EIA suggests Norway's proposal to first prioritise packaging, fisheries and aquaculture, agriculture, and textiles.

Other future sectors identified include wastewater, healthcare, construction, electronics and transport; however, as new information becomes available, the CoP must be empowered to initiate new sectoral programmes that we may not yet be aware of.

Relevant stakeholders must be identified for participation and, where appropriate, financing utilised to facilitate the adoption of a multistakeholder action agenda. From there, stakeholders work toward the development of a comprehensive global strategy to ensure the reduction and sustainable use of plastics, identifying a package of policies and actions for this sector. Taking agriculture as an example, collaboration with the FAO could help identify the relevant stakeholders across the supply chain, including farmers, farm workers, governmental bodies, agricultural businesses, consumers, retailers, producers, recyclers, non-governmental organisations, research institutions and financial agencies that have knowledge to facilitate this process. These stakeholders could complement and build on existing international work, such as the development of a Voluntary Code of Conduct on agricultural plastics and the adopted Voluntary Guidelines for the Marking of Fishing Gear.

Potential policies and actions for the agriculture strategy are extensive, they can include initiatives to increase the collection and recycling of agricultural plastics that are often burned, like mulch films, greenhouse covers and irrigation pipes. Incentivising buy-back programmes for farmers and promoting convenient collection points close to agricultural areas that work with recycling facilities capable of handling contaminated or mixed agriplastics. It could also cover the phasing out of harmful polymers applied directly to the environment, for example through mulch or in slow-release fertiliser, and single-use or short-lived plastic products. Additionally, product design standards could be developed, such as minimum mulching film thickness, product labelling and marking, or genuinely sustainable alternatives.

The dedicated programme on agriculture would report these findings through the Secretariat back to the parties for adoption at the CoP into the appropriate Annexes or taken as decisions to guide domestic and regional legislation and encourage actions in other international instruments. Specific questions or recommendations could also be raised for other subsidiary bodies, such as scientific and technical bodies. Reviews of decisions taken by the CoP could then take place to ensure the most effective implementation, avoid problem-shifting and adapt to new data and technologies. Implementation would be periodically reviewed and, where appropriate, revised and supplemented and additional means of implementation provided.

## Conclusion

The ILBI text must clarify the roles of various sectors and how to achieve the sectoral approach through enabling, empowering, facilitative, and implementation-oriented language.

**The Action Agenda** is a crucial supporting instrument for fostering momentum and mobilising stakeholders. Overarching mandatory upstream measures to reduce consumption and ban problematic plastics are essential to ending plastic pollution. However, a sectoral approach through dedicated programmes of work will play an imperative role in creating guidance to intervene across the lifecycle of plastics, ending plastic pollution.

These programmes can leverage existing efforts, such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's Global Design Rules for packaging, engage with stakeholders, foster sectoral accountability, operationalise existing commitments, and promote decisive action.

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