

## Fourth Meeting of the Ad-hoc Open-ended Expert Group on Marine Litter and Microplastics: 9-13 November 2020

The scourge of marine plastic litter and microplastics is a growing concern the world over. Plastic litter is present everywhere on Earth, and the world is grappling with how best to eradicate it. With many countries around the world still under restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, delegates attending the fourth meeting of the ad-hoc open-ended expert group on marine litter and microplastics (AHEG-4) convened online.

Their key focus was to discuss and agree on a Chair's Summary to inform the fifth meeting of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) on how best to tackle marine litter and microplastics. Delegates first considered the Secretariat's efforts to strengthen the scientific and technological knowledge and enhance coordination and cooperation through a multi-stakeholder platform. The group welcomed the mapping of existing instruments, measures, initiatives, and approaches on marine litter, as well as their assessment on sources, pathways, and hazards.

They also addressed progress on addressing the problem, discussing the results of a stocktaking exercise of ongoing activities conducted by the Secretariat, as well as an inventory of available technical and financial resources available for ongoing work to address the scourge of marine plastics and microplastics. Delegates engaged in a vibrant analysis of the effectiveness of various ongoing response. The group also discussed submissions related to potential response options for future action, with some also referring to the entire range of response options identified by the AHEG at previous sessions, consisting of 20 options.

In their consideration of the Chair's Summary, they engaged in robust discussions on how to reflect what seemed like an emerging convergence around the need for a new global treaty. While many supported calls for the document to signal to the Assembly that the time has come to establish an intergovernmental negotiating committee to begin talks on a new treaty, others differed. In the end, they agreed to the Chair's summary, which was hailed as a neutral and factual document, containing a non-exhaustive list of response options to marine litter and microplastics. They annexed the summary to the report of the meeting, which will be presented to delegates at UNEA-5. This meeting concluded the AHEG's work, with the experts having completed the mandate accorded to them by UNEA.

AHEG-4 convened virtually from 9-13 November 2020, meeting between 1:00-5:30 pm (+3 UTC) each day. Over 493 participants registered for the meeting.

## A Brief History of the Expert Group

Global concerns about the growing amount of litter in the marine environment have been on the rise for a number of years. In response, UNEA established an ad-hoc open-ended expert group on marine litter and microplastics in 2017.

### Origins of the AHEG

In 2017, UNEA-3 adopted resolution 3/7 on marine litter and microplastics. The resolution recalled two previous UNEA resolutions on marine plastic debris and microplastics (1/6) and marine plastic litter and microplastics (2/11), and mandated the Expert Group to:

- explore all barriers to combating marine litter and microplastics, including challenges related to resources in developing countries;
- identify the range of national, regional, and international response options, including actions and innovative approaches, and voluntary and legally binding governance strategies and approaches;
- identify environmental, social, and economic costs and benefits of different response options;
- examine the feasibility and effectiveness of different response options; and
- identify potential options for continued work for consideration by UNEA.

### In this Issue

A Brief History of the Expert Group . . . . .	1
Report of the Meeting . . . . .	2
Progress on UNEA Resolution 4/6 on Marine Litter and Microplastics . . . . .	2
Consideration of Paragraph 7 of UNEA Resolution 4/6 . . . . .	3
Potential Response Options . . . . .	6
Preparations for UNEA-5: AHEG Chair's Summary. . . . .	8
Adoption of the Meeting Report. . . . .	9
Closure of the Meeting . . . . .	9
A Brief Analysis of the Meeting . . . . .	10
Upcoming Meetings . . . . .	11
Glossary . . . . .	11

At the same time, other intergovernmental bodies are also conducting work related to marine litter and microplastics, including the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal; the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management; and various Regional Seas Programmes and Conventions. There are also numerous voluntary initiatives on marine litter, and several public-private partnerships to address land-based sources of marine pollution.

A high-level UN Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG 14) (conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development), also known as the UN Ocean Conference, discussed marine litter among other threats to ocean biodiversity in June 2017. This conference contributed to the follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) by providing inputs to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

### Key Turning Points

**AHEG-1:** At the first meeting of the AHEG in Nairobi, Kenya, in May 2018, delegates exchanged views on the barriers to combating marine litter and microplastics, discussing the need to prioritize the most significant barriers; and considered the work of the existing mechanisms addressing this issue. At this meeting, participants also raised the option of establishing a new global governance structure.

**AHEG-2:** During the second meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland, in December 2018, the group held two workshops to better understand elements related to information and monitoring, and governance.

**UNEA-4:** At its fourth session held in Nairobi, Kenya, in March 2019, UNEA extended the AHEG's mandate until UNEA-5, requesting the experts to, *inter alia*:

- take stock of existing activities and action by governments, regional and global instruments, international organizations, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and other relevant contributors to reduce marine plastic litter and microplastics with the aim of the long-term elimination of discharge into the oceans;
- identify technical and financial resources or mechanisms for supporting countries in addressing marine plastic litter and microplastics;
- encourage partnerships that undertake activities such as the development of source inventories, the improvement of waste management, awareness-raising, and the promotion of innovation in relation to the prevention of marine litter, including plastic litter and microplastics; and
- analyze the effectiveness of existing and potential response options and activities relating to marine litter and microplastics at all levels to determine the contribution they make to solving the global problem.

**AHEG-3:** At its third meeting held in Bangkok, Thailand, in December 2019, the AHEG requested the Secretariat to carry out a stocktaking exercise through a survey and other submissions about ongoing work on marine litter and microplastics, and ensure that the stocktake was taken into account in an effectiveness analysis of the response options. They also requested the Secretariat to produce reports on the financial and technical resources and mechanisms working to address the issue, and on partnerships. The group also agreed to hold two more meetings to finalize their mandate before UNEA-5.

In 2020, the group was supposed to have met twice, but due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the UNEA Bureau decided to hold only one meeting.

### Report of the Meeting

On Monday, Susan Gardner, Director, Ecosystems Division, UNEP, opened the meeting. She proposed, and delegates agreed, to elect Satoru Iino (Japan) as Chair of the meeting. Chair Iino welcomed participants, noting that the large number of delegates in attendance was an indication of the growing interest around marine litter and microplastics.

In his opening video address, UNEA President Sveinung Rotevatn, Minister of Climate and the Environment of Norway, noted that personal protective equipment (PPE) made of plastic is a further burden on already overburdened waste management systems. Highlighting that the fifth session of UNEA will be held in two sessions (February 2021 and February 2022), Rotevatn stressed the importance of the expert group's report to spur the world into decisive action on marine litter and microplastics.

Gardner underscored the impacts of COVID-19 on the AHEG, noting that the expert group had been scheduled to meet twice before UNEA-5, in Peru and Rwanda, but now would only meet once online. She highlighted the World Health Organization's estimates that 90 million plastic masks are used and disposed of each day in the fight against COVID-19, but expressed hope that the expert group could meet the attendant plastic waste challenges associated with the pandemic. She stressed the importance of collaboration, noting UNEP's work in this area through the Clean Seas Campaign and the Regional Seas Programme.

**Organizational Matters:** Delegates adopted the agenda (UNEP/AHEG/4/1 and Add.1) and the organization of work (UNEP/AHEG/4/INF/1) without amendment. Vice-Chair Pernilla Ahrlin (Sweden) stepped in as Chair periodically during the meeting, in response to technical glitches.

Noting the calls from the European Union (EU), Norway, Switzerland, and the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) to allocate sufficient time to the discussion on response measures on Tuesday, Chair Iino informed delegates that a full day's session for these deliberations was allocated.

On Wednesday, Chair Iino informed the meeting that the day's session would be dedicated mostly to discussions on response measures. These discussions would be closed early on Thursday, after which delegates would discuss the draft AHEG Chair's Summary. He said that the AHEG Chair's Summary would be revised to reflect both written submissions and discussions during the week and be reissued on Friday. He also noted that the final meeting report would be circulated to delegations two weeks after the closure of the meeting to allow for factual corrections. Chair Iino stated that the meeting report would only reflect oral interventions made during the week.

### Progress on UNEA Resolution 4/6 on Marine Litter and Microplastics

**Sources, pathways and hazards of litter:** On Monday, the Secretariat presented on the draft assessment on sources, pathways, and hazards of litter, including plastic litter and microplastics (UNEP/AHEG/4/INF/3). The assessment noted that plastics are the largest, most harmful, and most persistent fraction of marine litter and the estimated annual loss in value to marine ecosystem services ranges from USD 500 to 2500 billion. She outlined the major pathways for plastics' entry into the marine environment and its ensuing ecological and human

health impacts, and stressed that there is an urgent need for a more comprehensive risk assessment framework that is supported by high-quality and holistic monitoring studies to convey the toxicological risks of microplastics.

In the ensuing discussion, Chile underlined that each continent and region has specific challenges and different socio-economic realities that change over time where marine litter is concerned, and recommended discontinuing the current aggregated approach for combating marine litter and evolving to a model based on the most recent findings and developments that cater to specific regional exigencies and challenges.

**Digital multi-stakeholder platform:** On Monday, the Secretariat introduced the document on the establishment of a digital multi-stakeholder platform for marine litter and microplastics (UNEP/AHEG/4/INF/4). She provided the rationale for this platform, emphasizing the need to integrate data and information from multiple sources and connect different stakeholders and inform policies. The data strategy will offer a single authoritative point of entry, maintain open data access, and ensure quality data standards. It will also work in a phased approach, first addressing SDG 14, then looking at complementary data addressing other SDGs.

Chile proposed that the platform also include awareness-raising video clips, which could be shared on social media. Japan and Switzerland underlined the need for multi-stakeholder participation in the establishment of the platform. Switzerland highlighted potential risks related to the proposed platform, including the lack of quality control, which could render it a greenwashing platform, and the absence of a tool to measure impact. In response, the Secretariat noted that work was underway to set up a peer-review mechanism to address quality control concerns.

**Entity mapping:** On Monday, the Secretariat introduced the provisional mapping of all UN agencies, programmes, initiatives, and other sources of expertise relating to marine litter, including plastic litter and microplastics (UNEP/AHEG/4/INF/5). She highlighted that to conduct the mapping exercise, the Environment Management Group interagency task team on marine litter and microplastics has been established. She drew attention to ongoing projects at global, regional, transnational, national, and sub-national levels, highlighting work in sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia. She informed delegates that the projects address legislation, knowledge and science, capacity building, and awareness raising. Finally, she noted that the report would be available for comments before being presented at UNEA-5. The Center for Oceanic Awareness, Research, and Education (COARE) called for the mapping report to include the Basel Convention, as well as regional action plans such as the Bamako Convention.

**Single-Use Plastic Pollution:** On Monday, the Secretariat presented an update on measures to implement UNEA resolution 4/9 to address single-use plastic pollution. She highlighted efforts under the UNEP Lifecycle Initiative, drawing attention to the lesson that the “issue is not just plastic, but how we use it.” She underscored the importance of a system overhaul to address single-use plastics.

**Basel Convention:** On Monday, Rolph Payet, Executive Secretary, Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions, highlighted the amendment to the Basel Convention to include plastic waste. He noted that this amendment will come into force in January 2021 and will promote recycling and the environmentally sound management of plastic. Payet also

highlighted the Basel Partnership on Plastic Waste, which is bringing together states, industry, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and others to combat plastic waste. Finally, he pointed to information on plastics in healthcare and medical waste, noting medical waste has increased tremendously due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Regional Seas:** On Monday, Kerstin Stendhal, Chief, Ecosystems Division Ecosystems Integration Branch, UNEP, presented on the Regional Seas Programme, which supports more than 140 countries in their efforts to conserve, protect, and sustainably manage marine and coastal areas. She highlighted the regional and international collaborations that are vital to achieve SDG target 14.1 (prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution).

**SAICM:** On Wednesday, Brenda Koekkoek, Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) Secretariat, noted that some plastics contain chemicals that are harmful to human health, therefore efforts should be made to exclude toxic chemicals at the design phase. She added that SAICM: supports a toxic-free circular economy; incorporates SDG target 12.4 (environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle); and is working with stakeholders to streamline its work on plastic pollution, which will feed into the 2021 International Conference on Chemicals Management.

Chair Iino summarized the discussions, noting: the focus on science-based approaches to guide action on marine litter and microplastics, and the need for multi-faceted solutions to the challenge.

The Philippines asked for further clarification on the Secretariat’s presentation on the sources, pathways, and hazards of litter, and how the monetary valuation of marine litter damage was estimated. The delegate also added that in addition to the presentation of the evidence of marine litter and plastic pollution in the environment, the AHEG must develop clear recommendations on how to minimize the problem.

Malaysia requested the Secretariat of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions to provide more information on how it will address marine litter and plastic pollution. The Chair assured Malaysia, and others who may have missed the presentation provided by Executive Secretary Payet due to technical issues, that a transcript will be made available and should sufficiently answer this question.

Delegates took note of the information.

### **Consideration of Paragraph 7 of UNEA Resolution 4/6**

Delegates considered items related to UNEA’s requests for the AHEG to, *inter alia*:

- take stock of existing activities and action by governments, regional and global instruments, international organizations, the private sector, NGOs, and other relevant contributors to reduce marine plastic litter and microplastics with the aim of the long-term elimination of discharge into the oceans;
- identify technical and financial resources or mechanisms for supporting countries in addressing marine plastic litter and microplastics;
- encourage partnerships that undertake activities such as the development of source inventories, the improvement of waste management, awareness-raising and the promotion of innovation in relation to the prevention of marine litter, including plastic litter and microplastics; and

- analyze the effectiveness of existing and potential response options and activities with regard to marine litter and microplastics at all levels to determine the contribution they make to solving the global problem.

**Stocktaking:** On Tuesday, Vice Chair Ahrlin noted that the supporting documents were the summary and report of the stocktake of existing activities and action towards the long-term elimination of discharges into the oceans to reduce marine plastic litter and microplastics (UNEP/AHEG/4/2 and INF/6).

The Secretariat presented on the stocktaking survey, describing that the results were derived from 220 submissions received between December 2019 and July 2020. She highlighted that the survey and narrative submissions had been analyzed and disaggregated by the types of actions being implemented, which include legislation, technology deployment, working with people, and monitoring and analysis.

Vice Chair Ahrlin described that most ongoing actions are targeted at working with people through awareness raising and education campaigns. She highlighted that only a few survey responses related to legislative action. On the types of litter being addressed, she informed delegates that most actions related to addressing large plastic debris. Discussing the 66 narrative submissions received, she explained that almost half contained information on plastic product bans, and that many were related to measures to prevent plastic waste such as waste management, extended producer responsibility schemes, capacity-building efforts, and circular economy efforts. Finally, she stated that the stocktaking survey would be open for submissions until December 2020, after which it will be updated for the next meeting of the UN Environment Assembly.

The Secretariat also presented two products developed for stakeholders to better visualize the results of the stocktaking exercise. She described an online repository containing all the narratives and survey submissions, as well as an interactive dashboard containing all the actions reported in the surveys.

The EU, with Chile, Japan, Kenya, Rwanda, Colombia, and the Philippines, found that the results of the stocktake demonstrate that most actions and activities are at the national and subnational level; and, with Switzerland, concluded that most were also downstream actions (like awareness raising and education), noting previous calls for a greater emphasis on global action and upstream measures. The EU welcomed the finding that there is presently enough knowledge on plastics to enable action, in line with the precautionary principle. Lauding the Secretariat for using the G-20 Action Plan on Marine Litter framework in the stocktaking exercise, Japan, with others, stressed that the choice of measures to address marine litter and microplastics is the responsibility of the individual countries. The US noted that the stocktaking strayed from its mandate when it identified areas for greatest transformational potential, stressing the rights of countries to choose actions best suited to their circumstances.

Switzerland highlighted the dearth of legislative work being carried out and highlighted that the downstream measures executed at national and sub-national levels may not be sufficient to meet the challenge. Costa Rica stressed that transformational changes should not continue to support failed past practices, underlining the need for a new agreement addressing the full lifecycle of plastics.

Chile, Japan, Kenya, Rwanda, Colombia, and the Philippines called for a more holistic approach to address the entire life cycle of plastics.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) made an urgent call for action on marine litter and plastic pollution as the situation is getting worse. She added that although this is a transboundary issue, there is no global treaty that regulates this problem.

CIEL underlined that the 2020 Global Biodiversity Outlook report projects that plastic pollution will increase by 2.6 times of 2016 levels by 2040, urging the scaling up of efforts and an examination of the role of the automation and food and beverage industries in contributing to marine litter and plastic pollution.

China said that a number of its activities were not reflected on the platform, with the Secretariat stating that countries can report on activities until December 2020, after which it will verify the data and make the information available at UNEA-5 and/or other meetings.

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), on behalf of Pacific Island States, pointed out that the group was disadvantaged by this meeting due to time zone differences and connectivity issues. Like Kenya, the FSM noted that despite its own national efforts to combat marine litter and pollution, the Pacific Island States are adversely impacted by the plastic usage and disposal of other countries. They called for global cooperation.

The Republic of Korea highlighted national efforts to cooperate with the private sector to reduce plastic packaging and encourage recycling.

Informing delegates of his country's ban on the production of single-use plastics, Togo emphasized the importance of awareness raising and education on the plastic waste cycle and on recycling.

Indonesia called for more regular future stocktaking exercises, based on national reports.

New Zealand said that the balance between global and national efforts in the stocktake was realistic and encouraged the implementation of more upstream measures. Welfare Togo reminded delegates that the stocktaking exercise was to paint a picture of the ongoing status quo actions and activities and called on them not to take decisions based on the stocktaking exercise.

Chair Iino summarized the deliberations and closed the discussions on this item.

**Identification of technical and financial resources or mechanisms:** On Monday, the Secretariat presented the document on the identification of technical and financial resources or mechanisms for supporting countries in addressing marine plastic litter and microplastics (UNEP/AHEG/4/3) and the report on the inventory of technical and financial resources or mechanisms for supporting countries in addressing marine plastic litter and microplastics (UNEP/AHEG/4/INF/7).

On the inventory of financial resources to combat marine litter and microplastics, the Secretariat noted that most of the resources identified were targeted to the Asia-Pacific region, noting the need for resources to also be allocated to other regions, and for better donor coordination. She added that the bulk of the financing was from public coffers, highlighting the importance of greater private sector financing. She drew attention to the opportunities for innovative financing to address marine litter and microplastics, including through blue bonds, public-private partnerships, and blended finance.

Chile stressed that any instrument to address marine litter needs to tackle the issue at its source and called for environmental education to be a key subject at all levels of education. Japan and the Philippines underlined the need for private sector input, particularly on upstream issues in the plastic lifecycle. Calling to internalize environmental costs as much as possible, the EU

supported the inclusion of taxes, levies, and fees as financial resources to address plastic pollution. He further stressed the need for preventative measures and underlined that standard approaches to waste management could be tailored to meet the needs of individual countries.

CIEL, Norway, the Philippines, Japan, and Mexico called attention to a potential discrepancy between downstream and upstream resources, further noting that more efforts should be advanced in upstream activities to achieve a better equilibrium.

Canada said that the AHEG-4 report must take greater account of the impacts of marine litter on gender, and women in particular.

CIEL highlighted the need to employ a more holistic approach to tackling marine litter and plastics pollution by better understanding the land-based and sea-based activities that contribute to this problem and how it can be effectively reflected in meeting documents. CIEL additionally stated that there is a limitation in funding and consideration of the role of traditional knowledge in combating marine litter and plastic pollution, and the impacts of both issues on Indigenous populations should be further explored.

The US underlined that the Secretariat and the AHEG should not overstep the UNEA mandate by being overly prescriptive regarding the actions to be taken by Member States to address marine litter and microplastics. She said that the AHEG should provide information and allow Member States, considering their individual challenges and circumstances, to determine which actions to take.

Peru asserted the importance of enhancing certification practices and called on the AHEG to consider the circular economy, which addresses the life cycle of products, prohibiting those that increase waste.

**Partnerships:** On Tuesday, the Secretariat introduced the document containing the initial case studies on partnerships that undertake activities in relation to the prevention of marine litter, including plastic litter and microplastics (UNEP/AHEG/4/INF/8). She noted that an examination of the stocktake data revealed that most of the ongoing work is undertaken through partnerships. The Secretariat also observed that the main partnerships are between governments and NGOs and highlighted the role played by public administrations in managing these partnerships.

Chile highlighted the work carried out by Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and its roadmap for marine debris. He noted that this report emphasizes public-private partnerships, capacity building, and the promotion of the circular economy, which are all best practices that the AHEG could draw from.

Mexico added that it is essential to create mechanisms to deploy resources properly to deal with the challenges caused by marine litter and plastic pollution and to do so swiftly to make progress leading up UNEA-5.

In response to the momentum building for more focus on upstream activities, the UK said that there are a number of public-private partnerships that look at both upstream and downstream activities, including the Global Plastic Action Partnership as well as the Wrap Plastics Pact. The US and the World Plastics Council (WPC) drew attention to additional partnerships supporting efforts to address marine plastic pollution, including Circulate Capital, and the Alliance to End Plastic Waste.

Chair Iino summarized the discussions and delegates took note of them.

**Effectiveness analysis:** On Tuesday, Vice-Chair Ahrlin invited the Secretariat to present the documents. The Secretariat introduced the summary of the effectiveness of existing and potential response options and activities on marine litter and microplastics at all levels to determine the contribution in solving the global problem (UNEP/AHEG/4/4) and the analysis of the effectiveness of existing and potential response options and activities on marine litter and microplastics at all levels to determine the contribution in solving the global problem and selected case studies (UNEP/AHEG/4/INF/9).

The presentation contained issues regarding identifying response option archetypes, barriers, and enabling conditions. The methodology included pilot studies, the stocktake survey, and suggestions and considerations from the expert group. She described the potential response options analyzed, including: strengthening the existing international framework; strengthening regional frameworks; ensuring and enhancing global design standards; establishing a new international framework; and strengthening national microplastics strategies.

The Secretariat drew upon existing response options such as Regional Marine Litter Action Plans that would conduct end-of-life monitoring of plastics and national marine litter action plans that would analyze both end-of-life phases and some upstream activities.

Japan and the US underscored the rights of states to choose the responses best suited to their circumstances, with the US expressing disappointment at the prescriptive language used in some sections of the analysis. The US also referenced the assumptions made about the multilateral environmental agreements carrying out related work, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and stressed that it would be inappropriate for the AHEG to impose actions on those bodies. Canada called for considering voluntary initiatives like the Global Plastics Action Platform and the G7 initiative on plastic pollution, and noted that certain archetypes should be considered as elements of response options and not stand-alone options.

Chile suggested ranking the response options to better judge effectiveness in the short- and long-term. WWF, with CIEL, noted that failure of “highly mature” existing instruments points to the need for a novel approach to address the issue, specifically through a new legally binding agreement on plastic pollution. Peru called for a new global framework to address the entire lifecycle of plastic. The EU said that a global agreement could provide coherence and address upstream concerns, stating that uncoordinated national measures are not sufficient to address the challenge.

Malaysia stressed the need for widespread behavior change through comprehensive education and awareness campaigns at the global level, preferring to work within existing frameworks. The Philippines urged basing the response options on the existing assessments. Kiribati underlined the need for traditional knowledge and Indigenous perspectives in the assessments.

Reflecting on the fact that under business-as-usual models, the flow of plastic into the ocean is set to triple by 2040, the UK stated that the international community needs to either strengthen existing arrangements or develop a new agreement to effectively tackle the issue. Highlighting that gaps and challenges to addressing marine litter still remain, Singapore welcomed the idea of a global arrangement, including circular economy approaches, and the participation of the private sector; and pointed to the role of UNEA in charting the way forward.

Calling for a harmonized monitoring plan to support action on marine litter, Iran highlighted its challenges to addressing marine litter including limited finances, capacity, and examples of best practice. The India Water Foundation underscored the need for global and transboundary measures to address marine plastic pollution, noting the growing volumes of plastic waste leaking in the ocean.

Chair Iino summarized the discussions, noting the need to distinguish the response options in the Chair's Summary, but also reminding delegates to be mindful that the options are intertwined.

### **Potential Response Options**

This item was discussed on Wednesday and Thursday, in response to UNEA's request in resolution 3/7 (10.d) to consider and identify response options for continued work on marine litter and microplastics.

Norway presented the Nordic Council's proposal on possible elements of a global agreement to prevent plastic pollution, explaining that the proposed agreement would address the entire plastic lifecycle, build on the work of regional seas processes, and promote the "3R" waste hierarchy. She highlighted that the global agreement would help guide national action plans, including through enhancing national plastics sustainability standards.

Japan presented progress on action being taken under the auspices of the Group of 20 countries (G20). He outlined the Osaka Blue Ocean Vision, which aims to reduce additional pollution by marine plastic litter to zero by 2050. He discussed the G20 Implementation Framework for Actions on Marine Plastic Litter, which is a combination of voluntary actions by members as well as information sharing and updating members on relevant policies, plans, and measures with peer learning. He acknowledged that 19 out of 25 member countries of the G20 have not yet reported on action plans at the national level but those countries are in the process of developing plans and strategies.

The Pew Charitable Trusts presented findings that the current commitments to combat marine litter will only reduce plastic leakage into the ocean by 7% and explained how a system change will be economically beneficial to the global economy, creating jobs, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

WWF presented the business case for a new UN treaty on plastic pollution. She outlined key challenges, emphasizing that voluntary initiatives cannot be a stand-alone solution for marine plastic waste; the scope of existing regulations are limited; basic reporting methods and systems are missing; and targeted interventions are needed. A UN treaty, WWF maintained, would introduce policy coordination, harmonized standards, and funding mechanisms supported by both governments and industry.

The Secretariat then presented the documents related to the identification of, and submissions on, potential options for continued work for consideration by UNEA (UNEP/AHEG/4/5 and INF/10). She noted that the 20 response options presented encapsulated the range of views to address this issue, including, targeted actions and commitments that are specific, measurable, and time bound.

CIEL noted that, together with the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) and GAIA, it has published a report based on UNEA proceedings and the past three expert meetings. The June 2020 report, "A Convention on Plastic Pollution," is based

on four pillars: monitoring and reporting; plastic pollution prevention; coordination among stakeholders; and financial and technical support.

Canada reminded delegates of the response options already on the table from previous meetings of the AHEG, and drew attention to the Ocean Plastics Charter, noting that duplication of efforts should be avoided. He supported considering the entire life cycle of plastics, promoting a multi-stakeholder approach, and grounding actions on sound evidence.

Underlining that plastic pollution is a global problem requiring a global response, The Gambia, for the African Group, supported a new global agreement with: a shared vision and clear goal to eliminate all discharge of plastic into the marine environment; clear, measurable reduction targets; a global action plan to guide national action plans; monitoring and reporting mechanisms; means of implementation, including adequate and sustainable financial support, technology, and capacity building; and a scientific body to inform decision making.

Chile called on the next UNEA meeting to take measures to increase action on marine plastic pollution, stating that action should consider gender and different country circumstances, and should also include discussions on finance, technology, and science.

Highlighting that current measures are insufficient to meet the plastic pollution challenge, Norway underlined the need for a global agreement, which would include: a shared global goal; a common approach to national plastic action plans governing the lifecycle on plastic; a mechanism to harmonize reporting; a mechanism for technology support and capacity building; and a scientific body.

Reminding delegates of the importance of a solid foundation from which to address marine litter and microplastics, China underscored the urgent need for more studies to determine the volume of plastic pollution flowing into the marine environment, noting that the current study on which most research is based is outdated.

Mexico opined that the response options are not mutually exclusive and stated that a new framework to address marine litter could be either legally binding or voluntary, strengthen cross-cutting measures and/or lead to a circular economy system. He proposed the creation of a plastic products' tracking system, a transparency mechanism throughout the plastics value chain, and a monitoring system.

FSM reiterated the challenges faced by Pacific Island States in participating in the meeting due to time zone differences as well as connectivity issues. She drew attention to the vulnerabilities that the island states experience due to the plastic usage of other countries. FSM further pointed out that island states are running out of landfill space to discard this waste and advocated for, *inter alia*: a global legal framework to combat plastic pollution; sharing of best practices; reduction of plastic production; detoxification of the material supply chain; and a coordination mechanism to align efforts.

The Philippines also supported a global legal agreement that would: set a vision and objective for eliminating plastics from the environment; enhance sustainable production and consumption practices; harmonize reporting and monitoring of efforts to combat plastic pollution; include financial and technical support to achieve goals; and establish a science-policy interface to ground actions in robust evidence.

The Dominican Republic cautioned against duplication of efforts and suggested a response where national and regional efforts to specific challenges are drafted and shared amongst the global community.

The WPC stated its support for a global legal framework on this issue, which should: enable a circular economy; include a transparent data collecting method; and promote the scale-up of regional efforts.

The Major Group for Children and Youth advised on the importance to move away from a throw-away culture and promote a circular economy, looking at all stages of plastic production. They welcomed the proposal of a global legal framework and the digital platform that was presented by the Secretariat earlier in the week.

The Republic of Korea acknowledged that marine litter and plastic pollution is a transboundary issue, which demands a pan-governmental response. He accordingly highlighted the work of APEC member countries to implement the APEC Roadmap on Marine Debris.

The EU supported calls for a new global agreement building on existing instruments to avoid duplication, and addressing upstream concerns, noting that it should include: common visions and measurable goals; a focus on the whole plastic lifecycle, including addressing product design and recycling; a transparency mechanism; extended producer responsibility measures; harmonized reporting and monitoring; and a financial mechanism. She called on UNEA to mandate an intergovernmental negotiating committee on this issue.

Iran called for complementary response options at the national, regional, and global levels to ensure long-term measures.

Japan supported, *inter alia*: a shared, common, global long-term vision pointing to the Osaka Blue Ocean Vision as an example; strengthening existing frameworks, including by expanding the G20 mechanism on marine litter; enhancing the science-policy interface; and the participation of industry and the public in considering a lifecycle approach for plastics.

Sri Lanka stressed the importance of addressing the sources of plastic production; welcomed a new global agreement, but highlighted the need for support for all countries to effectively implement it; and stressed the lack of affordable alternatives to plastics.

The UK noted that the response options presented and discussed are not mutually supportive.

Malaysia called for: discussions with industry to improve product standards to meet country requirements; a holistic and inclusive gap analysis for all existing frameworks to identify the gaps; and including, in any new agreement, overarching principles including common but differentiated responsibilities, the precautionary principle, and the polluter pays principle.

Calling for a negotiating mandate from UNEA, WWF reiterated that existing approaches are fragmented, stressing the urgency for a new legally binding agreement to coordinate all existing initiatives with: clear, measurable targets; accurate reporting; common definitions; adequate resources; and monitoring measures.

The US preferred strengthening the Global Platform on Marine Litter, as well as other options that could be tailored to support national and regional actions, particularly non-governmental actions. He preferred a combination of existing options differing in size and scope, encompassing regional, national, sub-national, and local level actions, and including NGOs, business, and philanthropic organizations.

Switzerland stated that there is a global coordination problem with gaps in knowledge, policy, technology, financing, and awareness, suggesting that a global architecture for combating this issue should be multi-layered with both voluntary and legally binding commitments and must look at the entire life cycle of plastics, and include harmonized reporting, mitigation and capacity-building measures.

Rwanda observed a number of convergences from the current discussions such as: the need to address the full life cycle of plastics, including upstream production; global monitoring and reporting on activities to measure progress; action plans tailored to national and regional circumstances with built-in technical and financial support via an established fund; and an international coordination mechanism that aligns national and regional activities.

Sweden supported the establishment of a global legal framework that would take into account a number of the recommendations from the Nordic Council proposal.

Peru added that a global framework should support circular economy proposals and said that the incorporation of certification and awareness-raising measures are important components of the plastic pollution fight.

The EIA underscored that the need for a global legally binding agreement has become increasingly apparent, suggesting that lessons should be taken from the work on climate change and biodiversity loss where legal frameworks were essential in steering change.

Spain underlined that now is the time to adopt a global treaty that complements national and regional efforts.

China drew attention to the fact that this issue concerns different sectors and raises different issues, therefore there cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution. He suggested that there are different response options for national and regional activities to combat marine litter and plastic pollution but all efforts should look at the entire life cycle of plastics.

Portugal commended the voluntary efforts to address this problem and engagement of civil society. She added that political will is needed to mobilize action towards a global framework and failure to do so will lead to future generations holding us accountable for our inaction.

Speaking as Co-Chair of the Global Partnership on Marine Litter (GPML), the International Maritime Organization stated the need to improve multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral coordination, and pointed to the GPML digital platform, which she suggested will facilitate coordination through its “match making” functionality.

Guinea and Slovenia supported the development of a new international agreement, with Guinea noting that it could facilitate the creation of a waste management sector that could generate wealth and jobs.

WWF highlighted growing support for the development of a new treaty on plastic pollution, pointing to a petition signed by two million people supporting a new treaty, and called on the AHEG to reflect this support in its outcome document.

Morocco drew attention to the fact that most of the response measures identified address the end-of-life of plastics, calling for a clear global vision, including through a global framework, and within the context of a circular economy to strengthen action.

Kuwait underlined the importance of regional and global strategies to address marine litter, noting that each country will address the situation differently. She called for more data and

studies to frame the marine litter challenge, and also called for supporting alternatives to plastic and an increase in global awareness.

Stating that international efforts should only guide national actions, Japan suggested an objective analysis of the existing processes and arrangements, stressing that it is each country's responsibility to counter the flow of plastics into the ocean. Mexico underlined the need to remember that 80% of marine plastics come from land-based sources, and called for strengthening inter-regional cooperation.

France supported the development of a new global agreement, saying that it could allow for greater coordination; and highlighted that UNEA-5 should pave the way for negotiations of this agreement. Togo supported a new global agreement that could buttress national measures. Supporting a global agreement on plastic pollution to protect the common heritage of the Earth, Kenya shared that after its plastic carrier-bag ban in 2017, plastic bag manufacturers relocated to other countries to the detriment of the environment.

Chair Iino summarized the discussions, noting the shared long-term vision for combating marine litter and microplastics. He said national action plans had been discussed extensively, stating that they should cover the entire lifecycle of plastics, which includes product design, consumption, and individual behavioral patterns. He also highlighted discussions around regional and inter-regional cooperation, the establishment of a scientific advisory panel, and the need to build on existing multi-stakeholder engagement to support decision-making. He pointed to discussions on various existing frameworks, and drew attention to calls for a global agreement that could be either legally binding or voluntary. He further noted that there was interest in calling for a negotiating mandate for a global agreement.

In response, CIEL pointed out that the summary appears to give equal weight to each option. Chair Iino maintained that the report attempted to cover all substantive discussion points in a concise manner. GAIA underscored the need to emphasize the numerous calls for a new global agreement.

### ***Preparations for UNEA-5: AHEG Chair's Summary***

On Thursday, participants considered a zero draft of the Chair's summary based on their inputs during the various stages of the AHEG. The summary is expected to be annexed to the meeting report as well as to the report by the UNEP Executive Director to UNEA-5, in fulfilment of the AHEG mandate described in UNEA resolution 4/6.

Stressing that this is not a negotiating process, Chair Iino explained that the draft summary was prepared in close consultation with the Bureau and the Secretariat and includes sections addressing: a review of the current situation; potential national, regional, and international response options; and potential options for continued work for UNEA's consideration.

Switzerland noted that the Chair's summary and meeting report should highlight the number of interventions converging around or dissenting on any issue under discussion. He called for the Bureau to remain involved in the preparation of the outcome document, adding that the document should: reflect the results of the stocktaking report that activities are currently focused on downstream issues and not on prevention; distinguish between the functions of proposed actions, and their form, which could be an umbrella framework; and reflect the numerous calls for UNEA to mandate an intergovernmental negotiating committee.

Supporting Switzerland, Norway, with Colombia and others, stressed that the document should summarize the response options and also reflect convergence on any other issue underlining the need not "to hide the majority view." She suggested that the document capture the AHEG's discussions and reflect the recommendation to develop a new global agreement and the need for UNEA to mandate an intergovernmental negotiating committee. This was supported by the African Group, the EU, Kenya, Slovenia, Spain, Portugal, Peru, Palau for the Pacific Small Island Developing States, Guinea, France, Chile, CIEL, WWF, and COARE.

Canada, New Zealand, Japan, and the US supported the Chair's summary, with Canada noting that it was in line with the AHEG mandate to generate a range of options for UNEA-5. He suggested that the list of potential response options should also include a reference to the Ocean Plastics Charter as an existing initiative. Noting that the group had not endorsed any response option, the Republic of Korea suggested that the neutral summary also include the APEC Roadmap on Marine Debris. Kenya noted that several voluntary initiatives cited are exclusive.

The US underscored that the Chair's summary "belongs to the Chair," reiterating that this was not a negotiating process nor a policy debate, and called for leaving policy decisions to UNEA. He suggested that the document present all response measures discussed on an equal basis, recalling the mandate of the group. He stressed that there had been no debate on a binding agreement or an intergovernmental negotiating committee.

Noting that her country did not support a global agreement, Saudi Arabia suggested that the summary should reflect that some countries did not back certain options.

Welfare Togo, dissenting from the African Group position, underlined that the strongest option may not be a global treaty, preferring strengthening existing measures. He stated that treaty negotiations are expensive and harmful to the climate with demand on travel for meetings and explained that their outcome and implementation are not guaranteed.

Mexico suggested that the document should reflect the urgent measures required to reduce the plastic leaking into the ocean, and include the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples. Malaysia supported reflecting the overall view of the meeting, but, with Iran, prioritized strengthening existing measures. The Dominican Republic supported strengthening regional coordination, as well as a global agreement on plastic pollution that does not duplicate existing efforts. Supporting a neutral Chair's summary, Trinidad and Tobago called attention to the Caribbean Community's St. John Declaration, which calls for a global agreement to address plastics and microplastic pollution.

EIA, for GAIA, COARE, OceanCare, and CIEL, underscored that 50% of the world support a new global agreement to coordinate and drive the solutions to plastic pollution, and called for a reference to calls for an intergovernmental negotiating conference.

The International Council of Chemical Associations reiterated its support for a global agreement based on a transparent governance model building upon existing voluntary measures. The Environment and Social Development Organization supported a global treaty.

Japan noted that the degree of support for any response option would be noted in the meeting report, further noting divergence on whether any new agreement would be legally binding. Norway reiterated that only the Chair's summary can reflect the convergence backed by many experts on a new global agreement.

China suggested including the need for education, information, and capacity building.

The UK requested clarification on whether there would be further meetings of the AHEG in the lead-up to the substantive session of UNEA-5 in 2022 to discuss outstanding concerns.

On Friday, Chair Iino introduced his revised draft summary prepared in conjunction with the Bureau and the Secretariat. He highlighted that under potential options for future work, he had revised the information under each response option. Chair Iino also explained that he had added new language to stress the urgent need for action on marine litter and microplastics, to welcome UNEP's offer of support for any further action in the run-up to UNEA-5, and to express the experts' commitment to continue to work to address this issue. Switzerland, the EU, Republic of Korea, Canada, and New Zealand supported the revised summary. Norway accepted the revised Chair's summary, although she noted that it does not reflect the strong calls for work to begin on a global agreement.

FSM reiterated calls for an international agreement on plastic pollution. Venezuela underlined the need to enhance financial and technical resources and build capacity and political will to address this issue. China called to reflect that, due to technical challenges of the meeting platform, namely with interpretation, delegates faced difficulty in following the meeting deliberations. He also added that the report should state that the AHEG completed its mandate. Saudi Arabia emphasized that the report should not include any directive on a legally binding agreement as this should be left to UNEA.

CIEL said that a binding agreement should be inclusive of soft and hard commitments. Argentina highlighted the need to ensure the sustainability of objectives and the financial and technical assistance that developing countries will require to meet targets. She also noted that the GRULAC Environment Ministers will meet in January 2021 and will discuss how the region can increase cooperation in this area. The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme requested that the report focus on the call for a global agreement and recognize the value of Indigenous science and knowledge in this arena. The African Group supported the development of a global agreement and that an international response will need technical and financial assistance in place for developing countries so that they can meet their obligations. Peru commended the balanced view of AHEG captured in the meeting report and noted its interest to see the issue of marine litter and plastic pollution being addressed with both preventative and mitigation solutions.

The US noted that the summary belonged to the Chair, requesting clarification on the nature of additional meetings of the expert group. Brazil called for clarification on the role of the Committee of Permanent Representatives regarding any additional preparatory work on this issue in the lead up to UNEA-5. Jorge Laguna-Celis, Secretary of Governing Bodies, UNEP, outlined the role of the Committee of Permanent Representatives, including to contribute to the preparation of the UNEA agenda, and provide advice to UNEA on policy matters.

Chair Iino noted that, due to time constraints, he would close discussions on this item, reminding the experts that this summary will be annexed to both the UNEP Executive Director's report to UNEA and to the AHEG meeting report.

**Final Outcome:** The revised Chair's Summary contains four sections: an introduction; a review of the current situation; potential national, regional, and international response options;

and potential options for continued work for consideration by UNEA-5.

The options for continued work contain sections on:

- developing a global common vision, including examples of shared visions like SDG 14.1 (prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution by 2025), the Osaka Blue Ocean Vision, the Ocean Plastics Charter, and UNEA Resolution 3/7 on the long-term elimination of discharge of litter and microplastics to the ocean;
- developing and enhancing national action plans and their implementation, covering the lifecycle of plastic, as the basic framework that grounds countermeasures on marine plastic litter;
- strengthening regional and international cooperation to facilitate national actions, including enhancing financial and technical assistance, capacity building, technology transfer, and sharing best practice;
- developing and enhancing a scientific basis, especially with regard to monitoring, source inventories, and impact assessment;
- facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement in support of decision-making processes and implementation of actions to address marine litter;
- strengthening existing instruments, frameworks, partnerships, and actions such as the GPML, ongoing work under the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, the G20 implementation framework, and the Ocean Plastics Charter;
- developing a new global agreement, framework or other form of instrument, which could be legally binding or contain non-legally binding elements, to provide a legal framework to facilitate national responses for those countries with limited resources and capacities; and
- enhancing a coordination framework amongst existing instruments and between existing and future instruments to enhance collaboration and avoid duplication of existing efforts towards a common vision.

### ***Adoption of the Meeting Report***

Delegates provisionally adopted the meeting report (UNEP/AHEG/4/L.1), noting that it will be complemented by the Chair's Summary. Chair Iino informed delegates that a draft of the full report of the meeting would be circulated to delegations in two weeks for factual corrections, entrusting the finalization of the meeting report to Rapporteur Karen Watson (Guyana). He also noted that all written submissions would remain uploaded on the PaperSmart portal for future reference.

### ***Closure of the Meeting***

On Friday, UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen thanked the experts for their work and for completing the mandate set out for them by UNEA, and offered any further support as necessary. She noted that the issue of marine litter and microplastics is a prominent part of the pollution and waste focus area under the agency's medium-term strategy, underscoring the need to address the entire lifecycle including sustainable consumption patterns and product design. Andersen stated that the momentum built on this issue needs to be maintained and pointed to UNEP's commitment to enhancing the Global Partnership on Marine Litter and engaging the global community through an innovative multi-stakeholder digital platform on marine litter and microplastics.

Several delegations thanked Chair Iino, the Secretariat, and the Bureau for their work in the organization of and leadership during the meeting.

The Philippines, Guinea, Switzerland, and WWF reiterated calls to initiate an intergovernmental negotiating conference towards a global agreement. Indonesia highlighted the importance of considering national circumstances for any new measures. The Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights called for a rights-based approach to the entire lifecycle of plastics to prioritize protection of the most vulnerable groups in society, and welcomed calls for a single, global, legally binding agreement. The United Arab Emirates called for a global agreement on marine litter and microplastics.

Susan Gardner, UNEP, expressed hope for the road ahead for marine litter and microplastics. Thanking the experts and Secretariat for their efforts to conclude the mandate of the group, Chair Iino closed the meeting at 5:02 pm (UTC+3).

### **A Brief Analysis of the Meeting**

The British playwright Tom Stoppard once observed, “We cross our bridges as we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and the presumption that once our eyes watered.” The main task of the fourth and final meeting of the ad-hoc open-ended expert group on marine litter and microplastics (AHEG-4), was to cross that final bridge, demonstrating progress towards confronting this persistent form of pollution.

Delegates began deliberations in a virtual format with full acknowledgement of the elephant in the room: COVID-19. Just a few short years ago, this expert group first gathered following a seemingly strong global current and commitment to eliminate marine litter and plastic pollution. Civil society mobilized, swiftly raising public awareness on this issue, businesses and philanthropic organizations, without reservation, dedicated sizeable sums of money to mitigate the problem, and government forums at the highest levels ensured it was included on their agendas.

But just as COVID-19 has challenged the norms of daily life, it has also affected the challenge of marine litter and plastic pollution. This analysis discusses the work of the AHEG to assess existing action to address this issue. It also examines the calls for a new global agreement and considers other paths to address this multi-layer problem.

### ***Staying Afloat?***

Having to cancel their planned in-person meeting and meet online was the most obvious effect of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps more damagingly, the pandemic has significantly impacted the efforts to slow down the use of single-use plastics. With a surge in the use and disposal of plastic-containing personal protective equipment (PPE), many countries have also seen an increase in the use of disposable packaging by the food and beverage industry to ensure the safety of consumer products. Supermarket fruit and vegetable aisles are again filled with plastic and coffee shops are exclusively using disposable cups and plastic lids.

At the outset of the meeting, as technical challenges with the online platform competed with the progression of the discussion, some wondered if the momentum around this issue had lost its place on the global agenda, unable to compete with a ground-shattering pandemic. Across time zones and dependent on technology to cooperate while simultaneously managing multi-

language interpretation, the marine litter and plastic pollution problem suddenly encountered a new type of challenge. However, members of the AHEG rose above these technical challenges, as participants understood that there were no other options available if they were to solve the marine litter crisis.

And how to solve the crisis was the heart of the matter. Indeed, how to solve marine plastic pollution appeared to mean something different to each participant. Some did not view the AHEG as a policy-making body, while a seeming majority agreed that it was time for the AHEG to make a definitive recommendation to the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) that a global, legally binding agreement was the only way forward. Many believed that the status quo is no longer an option since it lacks the coordination and the regulation needed to truly eliminate this problem.

This definitive recommendation may have seemed like the most effective way to ensure the problem of marine litter and microplastics does not fall off the global agenda, but as discussions evolved, participants soon realized that this raises as many questions as it does answers.

### ***To Agree or Not to Agree?***

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) prompted many to pause and reflect when she spoke on behalf of the Pacific Small Island Developing States to describe how plastics that were neither produced nor consumed in their islands continually show up on their shores in volumes so high that the islands are running out of landfill space. The AHEG dedicated time to reviewing ongoing efforts to address this transboundary problem. In a preliminary stocktaking exercise of ongoing actions and activities related to marine litter and microplastics, the Secretariat found, among other things, that current actions are mostly performed at the national and sub-national level, and they are focused overwhelmingly on awareness-raising activities and beach-clean-ups. Governments, civil society, and NGOs alike concluded that these “downstream efforts” will not be enough to counter the flow of litter into the ocean. Almost unanimously, delegates agreed that “upstream activities” related to pollution prevention are going to be key to addressing this challenge. Many reiterated previous calls for more concerted efforts from science and industry to create preventative measures and alternatives to plastic that would bolster downstream activities, ensuring a life-cycle approach to the problem at a national and perhaps regional level. Several delegates also promoted a circular economy approach as vital to the mitigation of this problem, heeding calls to end the “throw-away culture.” Many delegations went further still, calling for a new global agreement on plastic pollution as the ultimate solution to this transboundary problem. They even outlined the elements of that agreement, such as that it should have a scientific advisory panel, a financial mechanism, and technology transfer support.

Support for this agreement, led by Norway, the African Group, Switzerland, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), continued to gain momentum during the meeting, especially as several non-state participants registered their support. In fact, at first many assumed that this was the majority position, and therefore the recommendation of the AHEG. But there were dissenting views from others, including the US, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Canada. Their main point of contention was the AHEG’s mandate, which called on the group to furnish UNEA with a range of options to respond to the challenge of marine litter and microplastics. They also wanted to ensure recognition of the numerous other initiatives addressing the issue, including at the regional level.

Japan and Canada variously pointed to initiatives under the G7 and the G20, while China, Malaysia, and others pointed to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation as a regional forum already working to stem the flow of pollution into the marine environment. Harkening back to the mandate, however, the US held the view that the role of the AHEG was to inform UNEA, not take policy decisions like calling for a global agreement.

### *The Devil is in the Details*

As discussions progressed, fissures began to emerge around the notion of a new agreement. There was no real consensus among those calling for this new agreement about whether it would be legally binding or not; nor was there consensus on its scope. On this latter point, it was intriguing to hear what delegations thought the new agreement would cover: some thought it should address marine litter and microplastics, others plastic pollution, with a few ambitiously calling for a plastics treaty. Looking back at the evolution of the AHEG, some believed that the main response options first presented in May 2018 do not seem too far away from the concluding opinions of the AHEG's final meeting in November 2020. If agreed, a global agreement could certainly increase obligations in numerous ways, but one of the main drawbacks may be the glacial pace of negotiating multilateral agreements. However, for countries experiencing the worst of the marine plastics scourge, a global treaty may seem like the only way to stem the tide of litter flowing onto their shores.

The idea of a global environmental agreement is by no means a novel idea. The world seems to be swimming in global agreements. But the question many have asked is "Are these agreements actually effective?" As the AHEG completed its mandate, it has left the question on the way forward up to UNEA. To address this transboundary crisis, UNEA needs to draw lessons from other processes to determine the efficacy of a global agreement. What would be the hurdles or chances for implementation? Or, perhaps more dauntingly, as some queried, would an agreement increase the overall ambition to address the issue, or limit it to the lowest common denominator?

### *Onward and Upward to UNEA-5*

The virtual format of AHEG-4 saw a unique shift in representation with many NGOs participating in numbers normally witnessed in pre-COVID circumstances, facilitated by the ease of joining a virtual meeting. Consequently, their voices and presence were as palpable as those of governments. This perhaps underlined the reality that the issue of marine litter and microplastics is an area of public concern and mainstream interest that cannot be silenced or pushed to the side.

UNEA-5, which is expected to meet virtually in February 2021, will not only have to debate the decision on whether or not to endorse a global agreement, but will also have to think strategically about how to engage all the different actors into streamlined action. It will, no doubt, need to ask the hard questions, like which of the response options presented will move the needle to most significantly to reduce the flow of litter into the marine environment. Finally, it will have to overcome continued challenges that COVID-19 presents and demonstrate in a meaningful way that it remains committed in its leadership to end marine litter and microplastics on behalf of silent sufferers and the planet. COVID-19 has rattled many long-held truths, but even it cannot rattle the interminable nature of plastics and all that comes with it.

### Upcoming Meetings

**G20 Leaders' Summit 2020:** The 15th meeting of Group of Twenty (G20) was originally scheduled to take place in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, but now the event will be held virtually. This event marks the first time that Saudi Arabia will hold the Presidency of the G20. The Saudi Arabian Presidency has selected the theme "Realizing Opportunities of the 21st Century For All." The three key agenda items to be addressed under this theme are: "Empowering People, by creating the conditions in which all people—especially women and youth—can live, work and thrive"; "Safeguarding the Planet, by fostering collective efforts to protect our global commons"; and "Shaping New Frontiers, by adopting long-term and bold strategies to share benefits of innovation and technological advancement." **dates:** 21-22 November 2020 **location:** virtual **www:** <https://g20.org/en/>

**Ocean and Climate Change Dialogue:** The Ocean and Climate Change Dialogue will consider how to strengthen adaptation and mitigation action in the context of the ocean and climate change. The Dialogue will be convened by the Chair of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) in response to the request by the 25th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC. **dates:** 2-3 December 2020 **location:** virtual **www:** <https://unfccc.int/event/ocean-and-climate-change-dialogue-to-consider-how-to-strengthen-adaptation-and-mitigation-action>

**Fifth Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) Part I:** The fifth session of UNEA is expected to adopt a "two-step" approach that will convene virtually in February 2021 with a revised and streamlined agenda. This session will be complemented by a second component in the form of a resumed UNEA-5 to be held in person in Nairobi in February 2022 in a format to be defined and agreed upon. **dates:** 22-26 February 2021 (TBC) **location:** virtual **contact:** UNEP **www:** <http://web.unep.org/environmentassembly/>

For additional meetings, see <http://sdg.iisd.org>

### Glossary

AHEG	Ad-hoc open-ended expert group
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
CIEL	Center for International Environmental Law
COARE	Center for Oceanic Awareness, Research, and Education
EIA	Environmental Investigation Agency
FSM	Federated States of Micronesia
GPML	Global Partnership on Marine Litter
PPE	Personal protective equipment
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNEA	UN Environment Assembly
WPC	World Plastics Council
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature