MINI-MODEL UN TOOLKIT

UNEA SIMULATION

ANNEX: 4) BRIEFING DOCUMENT FOR STUDENT DELEGATES ON MARINE LITTER AND MICROPLASTICS

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Introduction

PPlastic pollution is one of today's most urgent environmental problems. Millions of tons of plastic enter oceans each year, harming sea life, threatening human health, and disrupting trade. Plastic pollution has reached every part of our planet—it's in the water we drink, the food we eat, and even the air we breathe. Yet, this is a problem we can fix. To address this, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) is negotiating a legally binding treaty to end plastic pollution. Plastics have many benefits—they save energy and make materials last longer—but the way we produce, use, and throw them away must change. Designing products to be reused or recycled instead of discarded is critical to establishing a circular economy for plastics that can lead to cleaner oceans and communities, healthier people, and stronger economies.

What Are Marine Plastic Litter and Microplastics?

Marine plastic litter: bags, bottles, wrappers, fishing gear, and other plastic waste from land-based mismanagement of garbage and recycled goods or sea-based sources.

Microplastics: particles <5 mm, either manufactured (e.g., microbeads) or formed when larger plastics break down. Found in oceans, rivers, soil, drinking water, and even human blood and lungs.

The Scale of the Problem

- Plastic production in 1950 was just 2 million tonnes and in 2025, the world is expected to consume 516 million tonnes of plastics.
- By 2060, annual global plastic consumption is forecast to reach over 1.2 billion tonnes.
- Every year 19-23 million tonnes of plastic waste leaks into aquatic ecosystems, polluting lakes, rivers and seas.
- Around 13 million tonnes of plastics accumulate into the soil annually.
- 800+ marine species are affected; plastics cause entanglement, ingestion, and toxic exposure.
- Microplastics also move up the food chain to humans.

Human and Economic Impacts

- Microplastics and now nanoplastics have been detected in seafood, salt, drinking water, and have been found in human arteries, lungs, brains—and even in breast milk that can harm people's health. Marine plastic pollution causes losses to
- marine ecosystem services by at least US$500 billion to US$2,500 billion each year, not including other social and economic losses like tourism and shipping.

Global Action

- UNEA (2022): launched negotiations with the hope of reaching a global treaty by 2025. 130+ countries have banned or restricted single-use plastics. Basel
- Convention (2021): tightened rules on cross-border plastic waste trade. Cities
- worldwide are improving waste collection and recycling, but recycling alone is not
- enough. It is estimated that only 21% of plastic today is recyclable due to the high cost of collection and sorting, the complexity of different plastic types, and the fact that virgin plastic is often cheaper to produce than recycled plastic. In fact, only 9% of all plastics produced are actually being recycled globally, leaving the great majority of it to end up in landfills and plastic litter on land and in the ocean.

E AND PLASTIC POLLUTION

Trade plays a big role in the plastic crisis. For years, many wealthy countries exported their plastic waste to lower-income countries. Much of it was not recyclable or was mixed with other trash. Many recipient countries lacked strong waste management systems, so plastic ended up in landfills, rivers, etc. For example, in 2018, China stopped accepting most plastic waste imports in its "National Sword" policy. This caused a major shift in the global waste trade. Countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines began receiving more waste.

Trade also affects how plastic products are made, sold, and regulated. Some countries want to ban or limit plastic products, but others see this as a barrier to trade. There are concerns that environmental rules could hurt businesses or disrupt international trade. On the other hand, many groups argue that trade should be used to spread clean technology and promote reusable or compostable products.

The upcoming global plastics treaty could include trade rules, such as banning the trade of hard-to-recycle plastics, creating global standards for packaging and labeling, or requiring companies to take responsibility for the plastic they produce (this is called Extended Producer Responsibility).

PRIORITIES FOR SOLVING THE CRISIS

1. Finalise a strong, enforceable treaty.
2. Cut the production of single-use plastics through better design and materials.
3. Increase support for a circular economy.
4. Expand waste management and recycling globally.
5. Support developing countries with funding, technology, and training.
6. Regulate and reduce microplastics.
7. Align trade rules with sustainability, raise awareness and shift consumer behavior.

You can find more resources on this topic here.