

Background Information

In an increasingly environmentally-focused global society where pollution and waste have become pressing topics of discussion, single-use plastic is a detrimental pollutant and relevant threat to the environment. The use of plastic has been moderately recent in the timeline of human history, with its invention in the later half of the 19th century and production booming only from approximately 1950 onward. Of the roughly 9.2 billion tons of plastic produced overall, over 6.9 billion tons have become waste and 6.3 billion tons were never even recycled.

The disposal of plastic is highly detrimental to ocean life, killing millions of marine creatures annually and affecting a total of nearly 700 species. Most plastics are not biodegradable, and merely break down gradually into smaller particles called microplastics; products such as styrofoam containers and plastic bags can take thousands of years to decompose, and in the meantime contaminate water and soil.

Production of plastics has only increased annually, and 40% of the plastic produced yearly is disposable - much of which is designed to be thrown away mere minutes after obtention. Even more shocking, about half of the total manufactured plastic has been produced within the last 15 years. The production rate of plastics has already surpassed the global capabilities for managing such waste; at the current rates of production and consumption, there will be approximately 12 billion tonnes of plastic waste in landfills and the environment by 2050.

In addition, if the constant increase in plastic production maintains, the plastics industry will likely become accountable for 20% of the global oil consumption. Such large scale waste and pollution makes the issue of single-use plastic waste a pressing concern for the entire international community.

United Nations Involvement

The United Nations has taken a stance to reduce and regulate single-use plastic waste through resolutions and other actions. In 2017, the UN met to discuss ocean life in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and adopted the resolution Our Ocean, Our Future: Call for Action. In the resolution, nations agreed to implement long-term strategies to reduce plastic waste and microplastics - particularly single-use plastics and plastic bags.

SDG 14.1 calls for the reduction and prevention of marine pollution by 2025, and is often referred to in international debate regarding plastic pollution.

In addition, the 3rd UN Environment Assembly at Kenya on December 2017 called for bolstering global governance structures to fight plastic waste. Similarly, at the 4th session of the UN Environment Assembly at Nairobi in March 2019, a non-binding resolution was adopted on products such as plastic bags.

However, attempts to set the elimination date of single-use plastics at 2025 were blocked by nations such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Cuba. While the UN has made progress in reducing plastic waste, there are numerous nations that criticize the organization for its slow-moving progress. Hence, increased UN and state action is necessary as the production and waste of plastics continues to rise.

Bloc Positions

Numerous countries have taken action to reduce the waste of single-use plastic, with each adopting their own specific policies and some taking more regulatory stances than others. 127 nations have adopted their own legislations on reducing plastic bag use; 83 of these nations have adopted a ban on retail services distributing free plastic bags and 51 nations have created legislation to enact target goals for the recycling of plastic bags. In addition, 8 nations have adopted microbead bans - Italy, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, France, Sweden, The Republic of Korea, and the United Kingdom.

However, there are nations that have also rejected UN resolutions to eliminate and reduce single-use plastic waste. China, the United States, and India blocked a 2017 UN proposal on setting specific reduction dates on ocean plastic waste elimination.

Contrarily, the European Union passed a ban in 2018 to prohibit all single-use plastics by 2021; the ban includes comprehensive goals such as a required beverage bottle recycling rate of 90% by 2025 and an objective of reducing plastic products with no current alternatives by 25% by 2025.

Overall, the differing single-use plastic waste policies differ not necessarily by bloc but by individual nation as each state holds differing waste production rates and management solutions.

Questions to Consider

Consider the following questions when writing your Position Papers and Resolutions:

- What regulations has your country adopted in terms of reducing single-use plastic waste? (IE: microbead bans, taxes on the production of plastic bags, solid waste management requirements, recycling regulations)
- How large of a contributor is your country to both the global annual production of plastic and yearly total single-use plastic waste?
- Which detriments of single-use plastic waste does your country view as the most pressing to the international community?
- Are there any UN resolutions or actions regarding the reduction of single-use plastic waste that have been supported or opposed by your country?
- In an increasingly interconnected global society, which solutions to reduce plastic waste does your country believe should be adopted and implemented by every country?

Sources and Useful Links

National Geographic - Basic History

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/06/plastic-planet-waste-pollution-trash-crisis/>

SDG Knowledge Hub - UNEP, WRI Report on Plastics

<https://sdg.iisd.org/news/unep-wri-report-finds-regulations-focus-on-plastic-bags-overlook-microbeads/>

BBC - UN resolution pledges to plastic reduction by 2030

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-47592111>

How the Sustainable Development Goals Can Help Fight 'Plastic Soup'

<https://bthechange.com/how-the-sustainable-development-goals-can-help-fight-plastic-soup-3ce746fc1cba>

The Independent - UN resolution calling for targets to tackle ocean plastic waste rejected by US, China and India

<https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/un-ocean-plastic-waste-resolution-us-china-india-reject-pollution-sea-united-nations-environment-a8095541.html>

UNEP - Single-Use Plastics: Roadmap for Sustainability

https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/25496/singleUsePlastic_sustainability.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1

Forbes - European Union votes to ban single-use plastics by 2021

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/robinandrews/2018/10/25/the-european-union-just-voted-to-ban-single-use-plastics-by-2021/#6ddad9354b4e>

Guide to UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi

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<https://www.dw.com/en/un-resolves-to-end-ocean-plastic-waste/a-41690999>