

How to stop plastic pollution at source



Millions of dollars are being invested in cleaning up plastic from our oceans and beaches.

Image: REUTERS/Johannes P. Christo

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The problem with plastic starts long before it reaches our oceans, rivers and beaches. Plastic waste and pollution are symptoms of a broken system in which we design products without considering what happens to them after they are used. As a result, every minute the equivalent of one truckload of plastic finds its way into the ocean.

People around the world are coming together to demand change. Many are altering how they shop, eat and live day to day. Millions of dollars are being invested in cleaning up plastic from our oceans and beaches. However, all this vital work will be in vain if ever more plastic continues to escape into our environment, be landfilled or burned. Equally, better recycling alone will not solve the issue: we cannot simply recycle or beach-clean our way out of the plastic pollution crisis. We must move upstream and tackle the flood at its source.

If we want to continue enjoying the benefits that plastic can bring without compromising the environment and incurring substantial economic losses, we need to align the entire plastics system around a common vision:

- **Eliminate** the plastic we do not need: the throwaway straws, cutlery, and cups; the unnecessary packaging; and the items that can be replaced with better alternatives.
- **Innovate** so all the plastic we do need is designed to be safely reused, recycled or composted.
- **Circulate** everything we use, making sure the plastic we produce stays in the economy and never becomes waste or pollution.

This is why on 29 October, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, in collaboration with UN Environment, launched the New Plastics Economy Global Commitment. More than 250 signatories, from producers, brands and retailers to investors, recyclers, governments and NGOs have rallied behind it. The commitment is built around the principles of a circular economy - a completely different approach to economic development where waste and pollution are designed out, products and materials are kept in use and natural systems are regenerated.

Central to the commitment is the 'eliminate, innovate, circulate' approach to keep plastic in the economy and out of the environment. By achieving agreement between businesses and policy-makers on tangible, time-bound commitments, it constitutes an unprecedented level of collaboration in the challenge of addressing global plastic pollution. It provides a common vision and charts a course for all stakeholders to follow.

Businesses representing 20% of all plastic packaging produced globally have signed. They include well-known consumer businesses such as Danone, H&M group, L'Oréal, Mars Incorporated, PepsiCo, The Coca-Cola Company and Unilever; major packaging producers such as Amcor; plastics producers including Novamont; and resource management specialists Veolia and SUEZ.

The necessity of bringing together companies from across the global plastic value chain is clear. Equally important when changing an entire system are policy-makers, who set the enabling conditions and incentive structures. Twelve governments have already signed. NGOs and civil society are crucial in building broad-based momentum for solutions. The commitment and its vision of a circular economy for plastic are supported by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and have been endorsed by the World Economic Forum and the Consumer Goods Forum.

Breakthroughs in material science, product design and recycling technology will be critical. Forty universities, institutions and academics have endorsed the commitment and its vision. Financing

these innovations at an early stage, along with providing capital for substantial new infrastructure to collect and reprocess plastic will also be vital. More than a dozen financial institutions managing assets in excess of \$2.5 trillion have endorsed the commitment, and more than \$200 million has been pledged by five venture capital funds to create a circular economy for plastics.

The Global Commitment is designed to be as robust and transparent as possible. All industry and government signatories commit to setting measurable targets to eliminate, innovate and circulate. The targets are underpinned by a set of common definitions to ensure a unified approach. Signatories are required to report annually and publicly on the progress made towards reaching their targets. Indeed, if they fail to do so, their signatory status can be revoked. Targets will be reviewed every 18 months and will become increasingly ambitious over the coming years.

The Global Commitment is just one step on what will be a challenging journey. However, by harnessing the combined power of industry and government, we can turn the tide on plastic pollution, and in the process create long-term resilience and generate new business and economic opportunities.

While the commitment already represents 20% of the global plastic packaging industry, [more businesses and governments need to join](#) and become part of this unstoppable momentum to help create a plastic system that works - one that provides benefits for society, the economy and the environment.

The question is not whether a world without plastic pollution is possible, but what we will do together to make it happen.

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