

A Series of Governance Papers by Stakeholder Forum, Focusing on the Sustainable Development Goals and the Triple Planetary Crisis

Plastics Paper 2: Norway's Funding Cutoff Is a Wake-Up Call for the Plastics Treaty Negotiations

By Craig Boljkovac

Norway's reported decision to review and place on hold aspects of its funding to the United Nations Environment Programme should be understood as more than a budgetary matter. It is a political signal. It is also a warning that the global plastics treaty negotiations may now be approaching the point at which governments must decide whether the present UNEP process can still deliver the treaty they promised, or whether a different pathway is required.

There should be no misunderstanding. Norway has been one of the strongest supporters of an ambitious global plastics treaty. It co-leads, with Rwanda, the High Ambition Coalition. It has also been the largest listed contributor to the INC process, with UNEP's donor table showing more than USD 7.2 million in contributions received from Norway as of 25 March 2026. Its apparent decision to pause or review funding, therefore, cannot be dismissed as marginal. It comes from a country that has invested politically and financially in the process and that has consistently positioned itself on the side of ambition.

That is precisely why the signal matters. If Norway is now forcing a moment of reflection, it may be doing the negotiations a service. A process that cannot conclude, cannot decide, and cannot distinguish between genuine compromise and procedural obstruction needs more than another round of careful facilitation. It needs political clarity.

The original mandate was not ambiguous. In March 2022, the United Nations Environment Assembly agreed to develop an international, legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment, addressing the full lifecycle of plastics, with the aim of completing the work by the end of 2024. That deadline has passed. The fifth session in Busan did not produce a treaty. The resumed fifth session in Geneva did not produce a treaty. INC-5.3 in February 2026 was essentially an organizational session, including the election of a new Chair. We are now looking toward INC-5.4, possibly at the end of 2026 or in early 2027.

At some point, the numbering itself approaches the point of absurdity. INC-5.4 is not a normal negotiating milestone. It is the fourth attempt to complete the fifth session of a process that was supposed to conclude in 2024. This is not multilateral patience. It is clearly a form of procedural dysfunction.

None of this is intended as disrespect toward Ambassador Julio Cordano of Chile, the newly elected Chair of the INC. On the contrary, he has taken on one of the most difficult environmental negotiations in recent memory. He inherited a fractured process, an

absurdly complicated text, deeply polarized delegations, and an increasingly visible divide between countries seeking a full-lifecycle treaty and those seeking a narrower waste-management instrument. This is despite his stated and admirable determination to get the treaty “over the line.”

The difficulty, however, is that all indications suggest that the Chair is pursuing a highly neutral, process-oriented path. That is understandable. A Chair in this setting is expected to maintain confidence across the room, including among delegations whose positions are far apart. But neutrality is not the same as progress. At a certain point, a too-neutral process can become a shield for those who prefer no outcome, or only the weakest possible outcome. And his treatment of observers, despite recent indications that he will take their views more fully into consideration, still leaves much to be desired in a UN system that contends to be as broadly inclusive as possible.

The gap between the Like-Minded countries and the High Ambition Coalition is not a drafting problem. It is a political problem. One group of countries wants an agreement that addresses the full lifecycle of plastics, including production, design, hazardous chemicals, products, trade, waste, finance, and implementation. Another group seeks to confine the treaty largely to downstream waste management, recycling, and national discretion. These are not merely different textual preferences. They are different theories of the treaty. The mandate for the negotiations clearly states that the former, not the latter, is what should be pursued.

If the process continues to treat these positions as equally bridgeable, it will continue to reward delay. Consensus can be a tool for legitimacy. But in this process, it is increasingly at risk of becoming a veto mechanism for the least ambitious actors. The result is predictable: more informal consultations, more revised texts, more late-night sessions, more statements of disappointment, and still no treaty.

This is why Norway’s move deserves, at minimum, a measure of credit. It has introduced a hard political question into a process that has become too comfortable with postponement. If countries are serious about concluding a meaningful treaty within UNEP, they should do so now. Not after another “informal” round. Not after another partial session. Not after INC-5.5 or INC-5.6. Now.

But if they are not prepared to do so, then high-ambition countries should begin preparing an alternative. The obvious precedent is the Ottawa Process on anti-personnel landmines. When the established disarmament machinery could not deliver a comprehensive ban, a coalition of like-minded governments, supported by civil society and international organizations, moved outside the blocked forum and negotiated a treaty among those prepared to act. The Mine Ban Treaty was opened for signature in Ottawa in December 1997 and was later (after agreement was reached) brought back into the broader UN treaty system.

That example is important because it shows that moving outside a blocked UN process is not necessarily anti-UN. It can be pro-multilateralism. The Ottawa Process did not reject international law; it created it. It did not wait for the least ambitious actors to become ready. It allowed the most ambitious actors to move first and then invited others to join.

A plastics “Ottawa Process” would not need to start from zero. The UNEP negotiations have already generated years of technical work, draft text, legal options, coalition positions,

scientific input and stakeholder engagement. A like-minded process could take the strongest elements from that work and use them as the basis for an agreed treaty text. Participation could be open to all states, but on the basis of a minimum level of ambition: full lifecycle coverage; legally binding obligations; controls on problematic products and chemicals of concern; a necessary focus on supply chains; credible implementation financing; and reporting and review mechanisms.

The next stage should therefore be framed as a final test. INC-5.4 should be treated as the last credible opportunity for the UNEP process to produce a treaty that reflects the mandate adopted in 2022. If that session produces only another procedural continuation, or a weak agreement stripped of lifecycle measures, production-related provisions, and meaningful controls on chemicals and products, then high-ambition countries should move immediately toward an Ottawa-style diplomatic track.

The plastics crisis is not waiting for the INC process to resolve its internal contradictions. Plastic production continues to grow, in accordance with targets set by like-minded countries. Waste continues to leak into rivers, oceans, soils and food systems. Communities continue to bear the health and environmental costs. The purpose of the negotiations was to respond to that reality, not to create an indefinite process for describing it.

Norway's funding decision may therefore prove useful if it forces governments to confront the obvious. Either the UNEP negotiations now become serious, political and outcome-oriented, or the countries that are serious about ending plastic pollution should create a pathway of their own.

That would not be a failure of multilateralism. It may be the only way left to save it.

The Author

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ABOUT STAKEHOLDER FORUM

[Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future](#) (SF) is a not-for-profit international organisation working to advance sustainable development at all levels. For more than 25 years, SF has been a bridge between stakeholders of all kinds and the international intergovernmental forums where sustainable development, and in particular the environment and issues related to its good governance, are debated, global goals are established, and strategies are mapped out. Our work aims to enhance open, accountable, and participatory decision-making and good governance for sustainable development through the continuous involvement and participation of stakeholders in these forums, and in the action that flows from their work.

To this end, we work with a diversity of stakeholders globally on international policy development and advocacy; stakeholder engagement and consultation; media and communications, and capacity building - all with the ultimate objective of promoting progressive outcomes on sustainable development through an open and participatory approach. In consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 1996, SF also works with the United Nations Environment Programme

(UNEP) under an MOU to expand the engagement and participation of the Major Groups and other Stakeholders in the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and HLPF processes.

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