

G7 OCEAN PLASTICS CHARTER AND G20 OSAKA BLUE OCEAN VISION TOWARD A GLOBAL RESPONSE OPTION TO PLASTIC POLLUTION

Summary

- The G7 Ocean Plastics Charter and the G20 Osaka Blue Ocean Vision can be viewed as essential steppingstones towards a comprehensive and binding global governance framework to address plastic pollution. The building blocks are in place, but further elaboration of essential elements, obligations and commitments across the lifecycle of plastic will provide the cement for success – something that only a binding global agreement on plastic pollution can provide.
- As our knowledge improves, so must our resolve to tackle plastic pollution. What is needed is an adaptive framework that coordinates global action while catalysing national action, one that is responsive to science and national circumstances, with mechanisms and structures in place to operationalise and institutionalise commitments.
- There is growing international support for a global treaty on plastic pollution, not just from countries, regions and civil society organisations, but also progressive industry who see the value in a global agreement. A safe circular economy for plastics requires harmonisation and a level playing field across the global marketplace and necessitates the complicity of a broad range of stakeholders. A patchwork of voluntary commitments by a select few multinationals or countries is no substitute for a global instrument dedicated to uniting the vision and creating the enabling environment for a safe circular economy.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) has adopted successive resolutions highlighting the urgency of the plastic pollution crisis and the need for coordinated global efforts to address the issue. In 2017, this included the formal establishment Ad Hoc Open-Ended Expert Working Group on Marine Litter and Microplastics (AHEG), which has met multiple times to discuss, among other things, an international response option to the plastic pollution crisis.

During AHEG discussions, several Member States have alluded to existing charters and visions as useful frameworks for the implementation of an international response option, particularly the G7 Ocean Plastics Charter and the G20 Osaka Blue Ocean Vision. In this paper, we take a closer look at the commitments and actions contained within those two frameworks and measure them against commonly accepted components of effective global action on plastic pollution, concluding that the G7 Ocean Plastics Charter and the G20 Osaka Blue Ocean Vision are important milestones in the effort to tackle plastic pollution but, in order to fulfil their ambitions, they must be operationalised, institutionalised and supplemented. In other words, the G7 Ocean Plastics Charter and the G20 Osaka Blue Ocean Vision are milestones *and* steppingstones towards a binding global agreement on plastic pollution and their evolution in that direction should be supported in full recognition that more will be required in order to construct an effective global governance framework on plastic pollution.

G7 OCEAN PLASTICS CHARTER

The G7 Ocean Plastics Charter (G7 Charter) was announced in June 2018 by the leaders of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the European Union and has subsequently received support from several other countries and companies.¹ It is separated into five pillars with commitments on:

1. Sustainable design, production and after-use markets
2. Collection, management and other systems and infrastructure
3. Sustainable lifestyles and education
4. Research, innovation and new technologies
5. Coastal and shoreline action

The G7 Charter has several strengths in that it recognises key areas for action throughout the plastics lifecycle, including at production and design phase, with several points of synergy with the visions that have been advanced at AHEG and beyond for a global agreement on plastic pollution.

G20 OSAKA BLUE OCEAN VISION

The G20 Osaka Blue Ocean Vision (OBV) was adopted at the G20 Osaka summit in 2019:

We reiterate that measures to address marine litter, especially marine plastic litter and microplastics, need to be taken nationally and internationally by all countries in partnership with relevant stakeholders. In this regard, we are determined to swiftly take appropriate national actions for the prevention and significant reduction of discharges of plastic litter and microplastics to the oceans. Furthermore, looking ahead beyond those initiatives and existing actions by each member, we share, and call on other members of the international community to also share, as a common global vision, the “Osaka Blue Ocean Vision” that we aim to reduce additional pollution by marine plastic litter to zero by 2050 through a comprehensive life-cycle approach that includes reducing the discharge of mismanaged plastic litter by improved waste management and innovative solutions while recognizing the important role of plastics for society. We also endorse the G20 Implementation Framework for Actions on Marine Plastic Litter.²

The OBV aims to reduce additional pollution by marine plastic litter to zero by 2050 through a comprehensive lifecycle approach with an emphasis on monitoring and scientific assessment. The OBV further endorses the G20 Implementation Framework for Actions on Marine Litter (hereinafter also referred to under “OBV”), which is to be implemented on a voluntary basis and is divided into two sections with subsections listing out voluntary actions:³

- I. Facilitation of Effective Implementation of the Action Plan
 1. *Implementation of actions*
 2. *Information sharing and continued updating*
- II. Collaborative Actions and Outreach of Implementation of the Action Plan
 1. *Promotion of international cooperation*
 2. *Promotion of innovative solutions*
 3. *Sharing scientific information*
 4. *Multi-stakeholder involvement and awareness raising*

In the table below, we take a closer look at the commitments in the G7 Charter and voluntary actions in the OBV, comparing them to the essential elements of any global agreement on plastic pollution.

MONITORING AND REPORTING			
	G7 Ocean Plastics Charter	G20 Osaka Blue Ocean Vision	Treaty
Commitments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess current plastics consumption and levels (4.a) Harmonise science-based monitoring methodologies (4.e) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage ongoing work of GESAMP to strengthen scientific foundations and capacity, including promoting harmonised monitoring and methodologies (II.3) Encourage development of global-scale monitoring using harmonised methodologies (II.3) Encourage scientific communities and relevant experts to explore ways to identify and estimate sources and pathways of plastic pollution to develop global land and sea-based inventories (Section II.3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harmonization at the global level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> definitions methodologies for monitoring and reporting standardised formats Global monitoring and reporting framework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> environmental monitoring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> baselines (e.g. seafloor, seawater, shoreline) indicator species evolution of plastic pollution in the environment national data and inventories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> plastic production, consumption and use plastic waste management and trade land-based and sea-based sources microplastics evolution of circular economy and leakage
Observations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective monitoring and reporting will require a legally binding mechanism. Both the G7 Charter and OBV recognise the need for global-scale monitoring and methodologies in implicit recognition that the current status quo of fragmented data and inconsistent methodologies will persist and continue to hamper plastic pollution assessment and reduction efforts. The next logical step of this recognition is the need for a global monitoring and reporting framework, one that harmonises definitions, methodologies and formats to ensure comparability and enable assessment. “You can’t manage what you can’t measure.” Across the propositions for addressing plastic pollution there is convergence on the need to improve understanding of current trends in plastic consumption, sources and pathways. In a legally binding approach, this is achieved through a global monitoring and reporting framework that establishes baselines on trends across the full lifecycle of plastic, including plastic production and use, as well as the data on waste management and leakage. A complete picture of the evolution of the state of the environment (through environmental monitoring) and progress toward a circular economy and reducing leakage (through national data and inventories) is an essential aspect of any effort to craft policies and measures to combat plastic pollution and measure progress towards shared objectives. In other words, fact-finding is policymaking and good policymaking requires good fact-finding. 			

PLASTIC POLLUTION PREVENTION

	G7 Ocean Plastics Charter	G20 Osaka Blue Ocean Vision	Treaty
Commitments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with industry to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – achieve 100% reusable, recyclable or recoverable plastics by 2030 (1.a) – increase recycled content by at least 50% by 2030 (1.d) – reduce use of microbeads in rinse-off cosmetic and personal care products by 2020 and address other microplastics (1.f) – to recycle and reuse 55% of plastic packaging by 2030 and recover 100% of all plastics by 2040 (2.a) • Reduce the unnecessary use of single-use plastics (1.b) • Use green public procurement to reduce waste and support secondary markets and alternatives (1.c) • Support secondary markets for plastics and develop international incentives, standards or requirements for product stewardship, design and recycled content (1.e) • Increase domestic capacity to manage plastics as a resource, prevent leakage and enable proper management (2.b) • Encourage supply-chain approach to plastic production, including on pellet losses (2.c) • Strengthen measures to prevent marine plastic pollution and standards on labelling (Section 3.a) • Support industry leadership initiatives and fostering knowledge exchange (3.b) • Promote leadership role of women and youth (3.c) • Guide development and use of new innovative plastic materials and alternatives (4.d) • Encourage awareness and beach clean-up campaigns with youth and relevant partners (5.a) • Accelerate targeted investments in clean-up activities in hot spots and priority areas, in particular fishing gear (5.b) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce additional pollution by marine plastic litter to zero by 2050 through a comprehensive life-cycle approach (OBV) • Promote a comprehensive lifecycle approach to prevent marine plastic pollution (I.1) • Invite international organisations to develop policy and tools (II.1) • Encourage voluntary activities by the private sector internationally and explore ways to support and further facilitate such activities (II.2) • Raise awareness globally on the importance of urgent and effective action at all levels to prevent marine plastic pollution, prevent and reduce plastic waste and littering, promote sustainable consumption and production and measures on sea-based sources (II.4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global objectives on the long-term elimination of discharges of plastic and a safe circular economy for plastics • National action plans tailored to local, national and regional circumstances addressing the full lifecycle of plastics from production to disposal, containing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – circular-economy policies and legislation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ targets (<i>e.g.</i> reuse, recycling, separate collection) ▪ market restrictions (<i>e.g.</i> single-use plastics) ▪ waste prevention and management ▪ recycled content and secondary markets ▪ green public procurement – sustainable financing mechanisms and extended producer responsibility – infrastructure investments – transposition of regional and international commitments • Global approaches on microplastics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – intentionally added (<i>e.g.</i> microbeads, fertilizers) – wear and tear (<i>e.g.</i> tyres, textiles) – mismanagement (<i>e.g.</i> pellets) • Harmonisation and standardisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – labelling – product design and additives – certification schemes – voluntary industry standards • Controls on virgin plastic production and use • Remediation and legacy pollution (protocols and guidance) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – beach clean-ups – hot spots – vulnerable ecosystems and species

Observations:

- **Industry cannot do it alone, nor should we set them up for failure.** Although industry must play an important role in reducing plastic pollution and promoting a circular economy for plastics, industry is not an omnipotent monolith that can unilaterally solve this crisis voluntarily with a little encouragement. The solution requires actions from a diverse set of actors across the plastics value chain, including plastic producers and manufacturers, consumer goods companies and retailers, materials recovery facilities and recyclers, among many others. There is a very strong business case for coordinated global action that enables corporate action,⁴ which is why major businesses are explicitly calling for a “UN Treaty on plastic pollution,” one that “aligns businesses and governments behind a shared understanding of the causes of plastic pollution, and a clear approach for addressing them,” including “harmonising regulatory standards, mandating the development of national targets and action plans, defining common metrics and methodologies, and supporting innovation and infrastructure development.”⁵
- **Global action enables national action.** The G7 Charter identifies several actions to be taken at the national level, all which merit inclusion in any national action plan, while recognising the need for international incentives, standards or requirements to support them while the OBV identifies the need for a comprehensive lifecycle approach and the importance of urgent and effective action at all levels. In other words, both the G7 Charter and OBV implicitly underscore the need for global action to enable national action.

COORDINATION			
	G7 Ocean Plastics Charter	G20 Osaka Blue Ocean Vision	Treaty
Commitments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate on research on sources and fate of plastics and impacts on human and marine health (4.f) • Promote research and development of sustainable technologies (4.b) • Promote research, development and use of technologies to remove plastics from wastewater and sewage sludge (4.c) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in international and regional cooperation through relevant instruments, initiatives and programs (II.1) • Facilitate the implementation of G20 member actions in line with G20 Action Plan on Marine Litter, in collaboration with regional seas conventions and other instruments (I.1) • Collaborate with other non-G20 policymakers and other stakeholders, inviting them to take actions (II.4) • Enhance international collaboration to advance innovative solutions taking a lifecycle approach in cooperation with existing international fora and initiatives (II.2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International coordination among secretariats, parties, bodies and observers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – sea-based sources (IMO, FAO) – plastic waste trade (Basel, OECD) – chemicals and additives (SAICM, Stockholm) – biodiversity (CBD, CMS, IWC) – climate change (UNFCCC, IPCC) – agriculture (FAO) • Cross-regional cooperation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – regional seas conventions and programmes – regional fisheries management organizations • Coordinated research and development • Multi-stakeholder platform and knowledge exchange

Observations:

- **Coordination is key.** In both the G7 Charter and OBV, there is broad agreement about the need for collaboration and cooperation. A central function of a treaty is to provide a regular forum to coordinate such collaboration and cooperation, not only among policymakers within the context of the objectives of the agreement, but also across other regional and international instruments and initiatives in order to avoid duplication and redundancy while ensuring a comprehensive approach addressing the full lifecycle of plastics.

TECHNICAL AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT			
	G7 Ocean Plastics Charter	G20 Osaka Blue Ocean Vision	Treaty
Commitments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with local governments and small island and remote communities (2.e) • Support platforms for information sharing (3.d) • Accelerate international action and investments to address hot spots and vulnerable areas (2.d) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voluntary information sharing and updating of policies, plans and measures via multi-stakeholder platform established under the UNEP (I.2) • Encourage international coordination on scientific research, including socio-economic research and research on microplastics, and sharing of scientific knowledge on impacts on human health, biodiversity and ecosystems (II.3) • Promote cooperation among G20 members and other partners in providing technical assistance and capacity-building (II.1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scientific and socio-economic assessment • Implementing and bilateral agencies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – provision of technical assistance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ capacity-building and training ▪ policy development ▪ monitoring and reporting – best practices and knowledge exchanges • Financial resources and mechanism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – funding for enabling activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ capacity-building and training ▪ policy development ▪ monitoring and reporting ▪ institutional strengthening ▪ pilot and demonstration projects – incremental costs
Observations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implementation takes more than ideas and ambition. Under the current status quo the distribution of resources, knowledge and capacity to tackle plastic pollution is inequitable. Previous visions have recognised the urgent need to share information, build scientific and socio-economic knowledge and work with vulnerable stakeholders to target actions, but fail to present a formalised approach to redress the unequal distribution of both the impacts of plastic pollution and the solutions to address it. The treaty would ensure globally coordinated scientific and socio-economic assessment to design approaches for equal and better targeted approaches to share knowledge, build capacity and provide assistance where it is most needed. ▪ Money talks. In its provisional review of financial resources and mechanisms, UN Environment found “little coordination in bilateral funding in overall funding strategies or in project funding at the national level,” leading to redundancies and inefficiencies.⁶ Where multilateral funding is available, many countries encounter challenges in accessing it.⁷ While there is not a lack of funding in the current system for addressing plastic pollution, the current challenge is ensuring financial support is directed equitably and appropriately and with a view to long-term sustainable financing. To put it simply, without a formalised financial mechanism, <i>e.g.</i> a body overseen by a convention secretariat, there is limited chance of creating the mechanism to ensure predictable, sustainable, transparent and coordinated funding to all communities that need it in line with shared objectives. 			

CONCLUSION

While the G7 Charter and OBV contain important actions and commitments, their overall visions will fall short without taking the additional step of negotiating and adopting a binding global agreement on plastic pollution to operationalise, institutionalise and supplement them. For these reasons, the G7 Charter and OBV should not be presented as substitutes for a binding global agreement on plastic pollution, but instead as a steppingstone towards the adoption of one.

For more information

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¹ The G7 Ocean Plastics Charter. Available [here](#).

² G20 Osaka Leaders' Declaration, paragraph 39. Available [here](#).

³ G20 Implementation Framework for Actions on Marine Litter. Available [here](#).

⁴ WWF, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and BCG, 2020. The Business Case for a UN Treaty on Plastic Pollution. Available [here](#).

⁵ See Manifesto: The Business Call for a UN Treaty on Plastic Pollution (October 2020). Available [here](#).

⁶ UN Environment, Draft Provisional Summary of the Inventory of Technical and Financial Resources and Mechanisms for Supporting Countries in Addressing Marine Plastic Litter and Microplastics, ¶ 53(a). Available [here](#).

⁷ UN Environment, Draft Provisional Summary of the Inventory of Technical and Financial Resources and Mechanisms for Supporting Countries in Addressing Marine Plastic Litter and Microplastics, ¶ 53(d). Available [here](#).