

Frequently Asked Questions

Further information on UNEP's *Turning off the Tap* report

Below are some answers to frequently asked questions on the [*Turning off the Tap: How the world can end plastic pollution and create a circular economy*](#) Report.

Q: Why did UNEP write this report?

A: Plastics pollution is a major global environmental issue and features largely in UNEP's [medium term strategy, approved in February 2021](#). As part of UNEP's mandate to keep the environment under review, research on plastics has a long history in UNEP, and after the adoption of the [UN Environment Assembly resolution 5/14 in March 2022, "End plastic pollution: Towards an international legally binding instrument"](#), UNEP has redoubled efforts to compile the best available science on possible solutions to the plastics pollution crisis. The ambition for this report was to bring to the table the best science available and economic analysis on the solutions to plastic pollution ahead of [the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee's \(INC\) second session in Paris in May 2023](#).

Q: What is UNEP's role vis-à-vis the INC?

UN Members States gave [UNEP the mandate to convene the INC](#), with the ambition of completing the INC work by the end of 2024, following which a diplomatic conference would be convened for the purpose of adopting and opening the instrument for signature. Those assigned to the INC Secretariat are tasked with facilitating the work of the INC, independently from UNEP.

Q: The idea of calling for a circular economy is not new. What's new in this report?

A: The problem of plastic pollution has not changed, and it has been known for a while that shifting to a circular economy is a crucial part of the solution. What this report brings is a strong economic rationale with new estimates on the size of the health and environmental costs of plastic pollution, as well as clear actions needed to be taken by regulators, industry, and other actors across the plastics' life cycle to shift to one that is not resulting in pollution.

Q: How did the 80% reduction figure in plastic pollution come about -- was it a target since the start, or after research it was landed upon as a feasible figure? Why not 100%?

A: An 80% reduction refers to the amount of plastic pollution saved by 2040 compared with what is currently projected for 2040 if we continue to operate as we are today in 2023. This 80% has been modelled as an ambitious yet achievable target through regulations and actions using technologies

and solutions available today. UNEP does not suggest we should aim to only get to the 80% reduction: the report simply says this is a target that can be achieved by 2040 with currently known solutions. Greater ambition by all actors, future innovation, and new ways of scaling up existing solutions over the next two decades is the goal.

Q: When it comes to burning plastic waste in cement kilns or incinerators, shouldn't we be concerned with health impacts?

A: The burning of plastics is always an issue of concern as the pollutants emitted from unmanaged or poorly managing practices will produce pollutants of concern. The report outlines that there are circumstances where co-firing plastics in cement kilns or incinerators, as well as chemical conversion of plastic to fuel could be safer options when safe disposal facilities are lacking and could help reduce plastic leaking into the environment. It needs to be stressed that this would only be a suitable option where good management practices and emissions (and/or effluent) control and standards to assure safety are in place. There is the potential for a lock-in effect of purpose-built facilities such as incinerators and plastic-to-fuel plants and needs to be considered in the decision-making process. The report stresses these are only options to consider when there are no other suitable ones in place.

On incineration, the report clearly disfavours this route, although it includes in its results the effects of incineration plants that are already in use or have already started planning / construction, mainly in middle-income countries. This is a picture of what the world looks like today and might look like in 2040 if existing infrastructure is utilized; not a plug to continue the use of this technology.

Q: The report focuses on technological fixes, even though many are unproven. Why?

A: The report strives to provide a solution-focused perspective in terms of what can be achieved with a non-technological fix (re-design of the plastic products put in the market, and of the systems in which these products are used; regulation and economic instruments; etc.), but also in terms of technological options that must have clear guardrails considered where investments are made. The report provides transparency on the pros and cons of options to aim for more informed decision making.

Q: Has the overall framing of the report shifted away from health and the environment to waste management?

A: No - a large part of the estimated economic costs associated with plastics pollution, assessed at the outset of the report, are due to human health impacts. The report states that over a third of the estimated USD 300 bn/yr costs linked to plastics pollution are related to exposure to hazardous chemicals.

This early evidence on the costs of plastics pollution make it clear we need to transform the plastics economy.

Chapter 2 proposes changes that affect the whole life cycle, from raw materials extraction and processing, focusing a lot on design needs (design of both products and systems), the whole use and

reuse stage, and indeed touching as well on the importance of strengthening waste collection and management. But the report does not shift the focus to waste management only.

While the report also addresses ways to consider chemicals in plastics (there is [a specific topic sheet on the subject](#)), the report does not go in depth into all aspects, and for the particular element of chemicals refers significantly to the recent UNEP report: [Chemicals in Plastics: A Technical Report](#). At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the report only represents one contribution on ways to address the plastic pollution challenge, without attempting to provide a comprehensive review of all issues and solutions associated with plastic pollution.

Q: What sort of peer review was used for the report?

A: The report has gone through two review periods, in July 2022 and in March 2023. In total, more than 1,000 individual comments from 75 external experts from 39 organisations spanning civil society, science and academia, industry, governments and international organisations were received and addressed.

Q: Who paid for this report?

A: The report has used three main sources of funding: unearmarked funds from Norway and Sweden towards the UNEP Pollution Action and the Resource Efficiency subprogrammes; funds from Norway for [the Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency](#); and an [Environment Fund](#) allocation.