

UN politics won't deliver an ambitious plastics treaty

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Negotiators again failed to finalize the text for a global plastics treaty in Geneva in August 2025. The talks exposed two harsh truths. Consensus on the treaty text, where no state formally objects, cannot be reached. And securing a high-ambition treaty is going to require launching a new process outside the United Nations (UN) framework.

Today's geopolitics has turned the commendable goal of consensus into a tool for obstruction, delay, and inaction by states and industries profiting from rising plastic production. A bloc of oil-producing states with powerful petrochemical interests—including Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Kuwait—is distorting scientific findings and opposing any controls on new plastics, almost all of which are derived from petrochemicals. The United States under President Trump, meanwhile, has aligned with these petrostates, enhancing the bloc's power.

The majority of states in Geneva refused to placate these petrostates and fossil fuel interests. Preventing a weak treaty was a victory for those advocating strong, binding measures. Delegate after delegate was insistent: To address escalating environmental and health risks, the agreement must cover the full life cycle of plastics and regulate petrochemical and plastic production.

To break this deadlock, some are urging states to finalize the treaty text by a two-thirds majority vote. Yet, like-minded petrostates have already rejected this option on the grounds that the provisional rules of procedure were never formally adopted. The failure to negotiate a global forests convention since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit serves as a warning: Consultations can remain mired for decades in debates over definitions, scope, and procedures.

A coalition of willing states can, and should, quickly launch an alternative negotiating process for the global plastics treaty. World leaders will be attending the UN climate summit in Belém, Brazil, in November 2025. An invitation-only, small-group gathering on the sidelines could generate political will to initiate new talks. From there, environment ministers and negotiators could move forward to work on the broader parameters and finer details, respectively. Ministers and negotiators from more ambitious countries are already in regular contact and understand each other's positions. This bodes well for the mutual trust and understanding that successful talks require and that are lacking at the UN-convened negotiations.

Without the UN, a convener will need to step up. Various leaders are possible. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a nonstate organization with state members, initiated and facilitated the process leading to 80 countries negotiating the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). An Iranian government official and two conservation scientists from the UK and France were instrumental in initiating and drafting the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. As with CITES and the Ramsar Convention, the UN can provide administrative support to treaties negotiated outside its auspices. A small treaty can also expand over time. Countries may join to access benefits, obtain technical assistance, or gain scientific knowledge. Originally signed by 12 countries, the Antarctic Treaty now has 58 Consultative and Non-Consultative Parties. Not every issue needs to be addressed in a single treaty, or by the same set of countries. Over time, the scope of agreements often evolves. The 1967 Outer Space Treaty has been reinterpreted in light of increasing space debris; the climate regime started as a mitigation treaty and now encompasses adaptation, loss and damage, and related social issues.

Treaties can raise global standards without full state participation, as the literature in global governance confirms. Development banks, investors, and certification bodies may rely on agreements like the Rotterdam Convention to evaluate the risks and safety of chemicals and pesticides. Subnational jurisdictions may pursue treaty goals even when their national government rejects them, as Hawaii and California have done since the US first withdrew from the Paris Agreement. In countries that opt out, treaties can motivate municipalities, civil society groups, and scientific organizations to assume environmental leadership. Treaties without full participation can signal to corporations the need to improve their practices to access markets, reassure shareholders, and retain customers.

Adopting a plastics treaty without the support of states such as Russia, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, or the US is not ideal. Nor would a coalition of ambitious states want to alienate China, the world's largest producer of plastics, or key states such as India or Brazil. But the lesson from Geneva is clear: Inclusivity must be balanced with practicality to achieve an ambitious treaty. It's time to bypass the UN negotiating process to empower states genuinely committed to ending plastic pollution. □

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10.1126/science.aec1353