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The Failure of the Global Plastics Treaty Conference and Its Implications for Developing Countries

Mar'atus Solikhah
Sekolah Tinggi Manajemen Informatika dan Komputer LIKMI, Indonesia
Email: maratussholikhah615@gmail.com

Abstract

Plastic pollution has become one of the most serious environmental challenges of the 21st century, with more than 11 million tons of plastic entering the oceans each year. Efforts to form the Global Plastic Treaty are expected to be a multilateral instrument that is able to systematically reduce plastic pollution. However, the conference, which took place in 2024–2025, failed to reach a consensus due to the tug-of-war between developed countries, developing countries, the plastics industry, and civil society organizations. This study aims to analyze the factors that cause the failure of the global plastics treaty conference, assess its implications for developing countries, and provide recommendations for alternative policy strategies for the Global South countries. The research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method. Data were collected through documentation studies of official conference documents, reports of international organizations, academic articles, as well as semi-structured interviews with sources from academics, diplomats, and environmental activists. The analysis was carried out using thematic analysis techniques and source triangulation. The results show that the failure of the global plastics agreement is triggered by differences in fundamental interests, the dominance of the industry lobby, and the weak consensus mechanism. By implication, developing countries bear greater environmental and socio-economic burdens, such as increasing marine pollution, vulnerability to informal workers recycling, and limited access to environmentally friendly technologies. The recommendations offered include the formation of a South-South diplomacy coalition, strengthening domestic capacity, and innovative financing mechanisms such as green bonds or plastic taxes.

Keywords: Global Plastics Agreement, Developing Countries, Plastic Pollution, Environmental Diplomacy, Circular Economy

INTRODUCTION

The issue of plastic pollution has become one of the most pressing global environmental challenges of the 21st century. Every year, more than 11 million tons of plastic waste enter the oceans, posing a major threat to biodiversity, human health, and global economic stability

(Jambeck et al., 2020; Lau et al., 2020; Borrelle et al., 2021). While efforts have been made through national policies and regional initiatives, the need for legally binding global agreements is becoming increasingly clear.

The Global Plastics Treaty Conference, which is projected to be a multilateral instrument equivalent to the Paris Agreement on climate, is expected to be able to reduce plastic pollution from upstream to downstream. However, its failure to reach consensus in 2024–2025 shows that there is a tug-of-war between developed and developing countries (Raubenheimer & Urho, 2020; Simon et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2023). This failure raises concerns over the continued unchecked plastic crisis. The stalemate reflects deeper systemic issues in global environmental governance, where economic interests often override environmental urgency (Dauvergne, 2025; Farrelly et al., 2024).

Global plastic production increased from 2 million tons in 1950 to more than 400 million tons in 2022, with 36% of this going to single-use packaging (Geyer et al., 2020; OECD, 2022; UNEP, 2023). Developing countries, which mostly serve as markets as well as plastic dumps, face a disproportionate burden. Recent data indicates that Asia alone receives approximately 80% of global plastic waste exports, intensifying environmental and health crises in the region (Martínez et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024).

Table 1. Plastic Production and Disposal in Developed vs Developing Countries (2022)

Region	**Plastic Production (million tons)**	**Per capita consumption (kg/year)**	**Unmanaged Waste (%)**
Developed Countries	220	90	5
Developing Countries	180	25	40

Source: OECD (2022); UNEP (2023); World Bank (2023).

From the perspective of *global environmental governance*, the failure of the plastic agreement reflects a weakness in the principle *of common but differentiated responsibilities* (CBDR). Developed countries encourage production restrictions, while developing countries emphasize funding, technology transfer, and transitional justice (Najam et al., 2021; Hickmann, 2022; Yamaguchi, 2023). This shows that the plastic problem is not only an environmental issue, but also a global justice issue. The treaty negotiations exposed fundamental conflicts between petrostate interests and environmental imperatives, with industry lobbying significantly undermining progress (Financial Times, 2025; Carney Almroth et al., 2023).

A number of previous studies have highlighted the complexity of negotiating international environmental agreements. Raubenheimer and McIlgorm (2018) emphasized the need for global economic instruments, while Dauvergne (2018) criticized the dominance of industry in reducing policy ambitions. Recent studies also highlight the existence of *asymmetric power relations* in global plastic diplomacy (Brooks et al., 2022; Dauvergne, 2023; Chen et al., 2023). Baztan et al. (2024) argue that upstream reduction of primary plastic polymers is urgently needed, while Bergmann et al. (2023) emphasize the necessity of science-based criteria in plastic management frameworks.

However, there is still little research that specifically addresses the implications of the failure of the global plastics conference on developing countries. Most studies focus on global policy analysis or technical plastics management, rather than on the socio-economic and political consequences in Global South countries (Simon et al., 2021; Dauvergne, 2023; UNEP, 2023). This gap is the space for this research's contribution. Furthermore, few studies examine how competing power axes influence treaty outcomes and their differential impacts on vulnerable nations (Dauvergne, 2025; Syberg et al., 2024).

This article presents a novelty by analyzing the failure of the global plastics treaty conference from the perspective of the environmental justice gap and its implications for developing countries. This approach blends international legal analysis, global justice theory, and public policy studies that have not been explored much in the literature before (Najam et al., 2021; Yamaguchi, 2023; Chen et al., 2023). By integrating political economy perspectives with environmental diplomacy analysis, this study offers unique insights into how structural inequalities perpetuate plastic pollution burdens in the Global South.

Thus, the objectives of this study are: (1) to explore the factors that cause the failure of the global plastics treaty conference, (2) to analyze their implications for developing countries, particularly in environmental, social, and economic aspects, and (3) to provide alternative policy recommendations to strengthen the position of developing countries in future international negotiations (UNEP, 2023; OECD, 2022; Brooks et al., 2022). These findings contribute to both academic discourse and practical policy-making for sustainable development and environmental justice.

METHODS

Types of Research

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method. The aim is to delve deeply into the dynamics of the failure of the global plastics treaty conference and its impact on developing countries. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on understanding the process, actors, and policy implications that cannot be reduced to numbers alone (Creswell, 2018; Flick, 2019; Given, 2020). The study was conducted across multiple locations, including analysis of international conference venues and case studies in Southeast Asian developing countries particularly affected by plastic waste imports.

Population and Sampling

The research population includes official documents of international conferences on plastics treaties, reports of international organizations (UNEP, OECD, World Bank), academic publications, as well as interviews with experts and representatives of civil society organizations from developing countries. The sampling technique was carried out by purposive sampling, namely selecting data and sources that are relevant to the focus of the research. The sample consists of:

1. 20 official documents of international conference results and policy reports (2020–2024).
2. 15 scientific articles from reputable journals that discuss plastic diplomacy.
3. 6 key speakers, consisting of academics, environmental activists, and diplomats from developing countries.

Informant selection criteria included: minimum 5 years of experience in environmental diplomacy or plastic policy, direct involvement in international negotiations or national plastic management programs, and representation from diverse geographical regions within the Global South.

Research Instruments

The research instruments include:

1. Guidelines for document studies, for analyzing treaty texts, policy reports, and academic publications.
2. The semi-structured interview guidelines are used to explore the perspective of the interviewees regarding negotiation experiences, barriers, and implications for developing countries.
3. Thematic coding sheets, as a content analysis instrument to categorize the main themes of the collected data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018; Yin, 2020).

Data Collection Technique

Data is collected through three main techniques:

1. Documentation study of official conference documents, international reports, and academic literature.
2. In-depth interviews with key speakers to gain first-hand perspectives from the actors involved or affected.
3. Virtual participatory observation, which is to follow recordings and media reports related to the negotiation process of the conference.

Research Procedure

The research steps were carried out as follows:

1. Identify the problem: formulate a research focus based on the failures of the global plastics conference.
2. Data collection: collecting documents, literature, and conducting interviews with selected sources.
3. Data reduction: sorting out relevant data according to the category of the research theme.
4. Thematic analysis: interpreting by linking field data, global governance theory, and previous literature.
5. Drawing conclusions: compiling findings that answer research questions as well as policy implications.

All research procedures followed ethical guidelines including informed consent from interviewees, confidentiality protection, and transparent data usage disclosure.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was carried out by thematic analysis using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2018) model, which includes:

1. Data condensation: summarizes and classifies key information.
2. Data display: presents data in the form of tables, diagrams, and thematic narratives.
3. Conclusion drawing/verification: draws a temporary conclusion that is verified with additional data.

To strengthen validity, sources triangulation techniques (documents, interviews, observations) and theoretical triangulation (global governance, environmental justice, international negotiations) were used (Yin, 2020; Given, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Dynamics of the Failure of the Global Plastics Conference Negotiations

The failure of the global plastics conference was caused by the sharp disparity between developed and developing countries. Developed countries are demanding a significant reduction in plastic production, while developing countries are emphasizing the financing and technology transfer aspects. This shows that the debate is not only about the environment, but also economic justice (Raubenheimer & Urho, 2020; Simon et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2023).

In addition, the plastics industry lobby played a significant role in undermining the deal's ambitions. Multinational companies have managed to influence several major plastic-producing countries to reject production reduction targets. This phenomenon is similar to the pattern of climate change negotiations, where business actors influence the course of diplomacy (Dauvergne, 2018; Brooks et al., 2022; Dauvergne, 2023).

The conference also failed due to consensus mechanisms that hindered quick decision-making. Each country has a veto, so differences in interests lead to a stalemate. In fact, the plastic issue is urgent because it has direct implications for human health and ecosystems (Hickmann, 2022; Najam et al., 2021; Yamaguchi, 2023). Scientific input faced systematic obstacles in entering policy deliberations, despite clear evidence of environmental and health impacts (Carney Almroth et al., 2023; Syberg et al., 2024). Some analysts argue that incremental progress, though slow, may ultimately prove more sustainable than rushed compromises (The Verge, 2025).

Figure 1. Map of Conflicts of Interest in Global Plastics Treaty Negotiations
Source: Researcher Analysis, 2025 (adapted from Simon et al., 2021).

Environmental Implications for Developing Countries

Developing countries bear the brunt of treaty failures. Without global regulations, the rate of plastic waste imports from developed countries to the Global South continues to increase. Data

shows that 70% of the world's plastic waste exports end up in Southeast Asian countries (OECD, 2022; UNEP, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Case studies from Indonesia reveal how failed waste-to-energy projects compound local environmental challenges (Reuters, 2025a).

Plastic pollution also exacerbates the damage to coastal and marine ecosystems in developing countries. Microplastics have been found in seafood chains in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, threatening food security and public health (Jambeck et al., 2020; Borrelle et al., 2021; Lau et al., 2020). Ocean cleanups require coordinated global frameworks with science-based criteria to be effective, yet such frameworks remain elusive (Bergmann et al., 2023).

Furthermore, developing countries have limited waste management capacity. The level of unmanaged plastic waste in developing countries reaches an average of 40%, much higher than in developed countries which are only 5% (OECD, 2022; UNEP, 2023; Hickmann, 2022).

Table 2. Plastic Waste Management Rates in Developing Countries vs Developed Countries (2022)

Region	Unmanaged Plastics (%)	Marine Pollution (tons/year)	Recycling Capacity (%)
Developed Countries	5	1.2 million	35
Developing Countries	40	8.5 million	12

Source: OECD (2022); UNEP (2023); World Bank (2023).

This table shows a large gap in plastic waste management capacity. Developed countries have only 5% of unmanaged plastic waste, while developing countries account for 40%. This has an impact on the high level of marine pollution from developing countries which reaches 8.5 million tons per year, far exceeding developed countries (1.2 million tons). The difference in recycling capacity is also significant: developed countries are 35% while developing countries are only 12%. This data confirms structural inequities in global plastics management.

Socio-Economic Implications for Developing Countries

In addition to environmental damage, the failure of the conference has an impact on economic injustice. Developing countries face the additional burden of managing waste without adequate financial support from international mechanisms. As a result, the cost of managing plastic waste is increasingly burdening the state budget (Brooks et al., 2022; Dauvergne, 2023; Chen et al., 2023).

The urban poor are also directly affected. Those who depend on the informal sector of recycling face dangerous working conditions, without health and social protections. This situation exacerbates the cycle of poverty and social vulnerability (World Bank, 2023; Hickmann, 2022; UNEP, 2023).

Furthermore, the failure of the plastics agreement reduces the opportunities for developing countries to access environmentally friendly technologies. In fact, the transition to a circular economy requires research and technology support from developed countries (Najam et al., 2021; Yamaguchi, 2023; Chen et al., 2023).

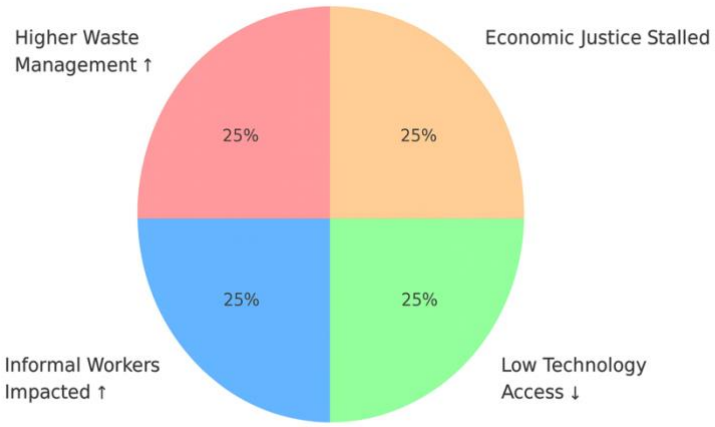

Figure 2. The Socio-Economic Impact of Conference Failures on Developing Countries
Source: Researcher Analysis, 2025.

This diagram shows the four main impacts of the failure of the global plastics conference on developing countries. First, the cost of waste management increases due to the absence of international funding mechanisms. Second, informal workers in the recycling sector are increasingly vulnerable due to the lack of social protection. Third, developing countries' access to environmentally friendly technology remains low. Fourth, economic justice is difficult to realize because developing countries continue to be "victims" without adequate compensation.

Policy Recommendations for Developing Countries

Based on the results of the analysis, there are three main recommendations:

First, developing countries need to form a South-South diplomacy coalition to strengthen bargaining positions in global treaty negotiations. This is important so that their interests related to funding, technology, and environmental justice are not marginalized (Najam et al., 2021; Hickmann, 2022; Yamaguchi, 2023). Such coalitions can leverage collective negotiating power and share best practices across similar contexts (Simon et al., 2021).

Second, developing countries should strengthen domestic capacity in plastic waste management through investment in recycling technology and circular economy development. This approach can reduce dependence on foreign aid (OECD, 2022; UNEP, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Catalytic upcycling technologies represent promising avenues for value creation from waste streams (Yue et al., 2023).

Third, innovative financing mechanisms such as green bonds, carbon pricing, or plastic taxes are needed to support national efforts. Thus, developing countries are not completely dependent on the results of global conferences that are often stagnant (Dauvergne, 2023; Brooks et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023). Implementation requires phased approaches with capacity-building support and regional cooperation frameworks (Reuters, 2025b).

Table 3. Recommendations for Emerging Countries Strategy After the Failure of the Global Plastics Conference

Strategy	Goal	Instruments
South-South Diplomacy	Regional collective power	Negotiating alliance
Local Capacity Building	Domestic waste management	Recycling technology
Innovative Financing	Sustainable development	Green bonds, plastic tax

Source: Researcher Analysis, 2025.

This table details three strategies that developing countries can pursue. First, South-South diplomacy to form a collective force in global negotiations. Second, strengthening local capacity through investment in recycling technology and the circular economy. Third, innovative financing, such as *green bonds* and *plastic taxes*, to finance the transition without being completely dependent on developed countries. This strategy is designed to strengthen the resilience of developing countries in the face of uncertainty in the outcome of international agreements.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the failure of the global plastics treaty conference is mainly triggered by the imbalance of interests between developed countries, developing countries, industry, and civil society organizations. Developed countries are focusing on limiting plastic production, while developing countries are emphasizing the need for funding and technology transfer. On the other hand, the plastics industry is trying to defend its economic interests, and NGOs are pushing for more ambitious environmental agendas. This tug-of-war has led to a deadlock in the consensus mechanism so that a binding global agreement cannot be reached.

The findings of the study also confirm that the failure of this agreement has significant implications for developing countries, both from environmental, social, and economic aspects. Developing countries bear a huge burden in managing plastic waste with limited capacity, facing increased marine pollution, and serious public health impacts. Socio-economically, the poor and informal workers in the recycling sector are the most vulnerable groups. In addition, limited access to environmentally friendly technology and lack of international funding support exacerbate global injustice.

As a follow-up, the study recommends three key strategies for developing countries: strengthening South-South diplomacy coalitions to improve bargaining positions, building domestic capacity through recycling technology and the circular economy, and developing innovative financing mechanisms such as green bonds or plastic taxes. With these measures, developing countries can be more self-reliant in dealing with the plastic crisis, while reducing their dependence on the results of international negotiations that are often not on their side.

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