



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

The WTO Dialogue on Plastics Pollution and Environmentally Sustainable Plastics Trade (DPP) & the Global Plastic Treaty

*The WTO as Major Driver of Sustainable Development
and its Reform Process*

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What is the WTO Dialogue on Plastics Pollution and Environmentally Sustainable Plastics Trade?

- The **WTO Informal Dialogue on Plastics** was launched in 2020 (only 7 Members). It now includes over 80 WTO Members (e.g. China, European Union, New Zealand, Suriname, Vanuatu) representing a diverse range of economies.
- Its aim is to explore **trade-related solutions to plastic pollution**, while promoting sustainable practices.
- Importantly, this dialogue is **non-binding** — it's not a formal negotiation process.
- But it plays a vital role in **building consensus, exchanging knowledge, and exploring common standards** and policy tools.



Topics Covered in the Dialogue

- The dialogue has developed around **key focus areas**:
 - ❖ Improving **transparency in trade flows** of plastic products and **waste**;
 - ❖ Promoting **standards** and **eco-design** for more sustainable packaging and products;
 - ❖ Supporting **developing countries** with technical assistance and capacity building;
 - ❖ And encouraging trade in **alternatives to plastic**, such as biodegradable or reusable materials.

These areas show how trade policy can be part of the solution, not the problem.



Legal and Strategic Advantages

From a legal and strategic point of view, the informal dialogue offers several benefits:

- It is **compatible with WTO principles**, such as non-discrimination and transparency.
- It provides a **safe space for policy experimentation**, without the immediate risk of legal disputes.
- It can help **prevent conflicts** by clarifying how environmental regulations can align with WTO rules.
- And it serves as a technical and political **foundation for future binding commitments** — including the UN Global Plastic Treaty.



Legal and Strategic Challenges

But there are important limitations.

- Since the dialogue is non-binding, it **lacks enforcement power**.
- **National measures** may still be **fragmented**, with inconsistent definitions or standards.
- There is a **risk** that certain policies — such as bans or subsidies — could **conflict with WTO law**, particularly under the TBT Agreement or the GATT.
- And for many **developing countries**, there are **serious implementation challenges**, due to limited infrastructure, financing, or legal expertise.



The UN Global Treaty on Plastic

The **UN Global Treaty (UNEA Res. 5/14)** is currently under negotiation within the INC (Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee). The INC was **supposed to complete** negotiations by the **end of 2024** in South Korea.

Next meeting will take place from 4 to 14 August 2025 in Geneva.

Although no agreement has yet been reached, considerable progress has been made on the draft text and stakeholder participation remains very high.

Unlike the WTO dialogue, the Treaty aims to become a legally **binding instrument**, regulating the **entire life cycle of plastics**: from production to design, use, and disposal.

It seeks to establish global rules and commitments, potentially including:

- phase-outs of certain harmful plastics,
- minimum design standards,
- requirements for waste management and extended producer responsibility.



	WTO Dialogue	UN Treaty
Nature	Informal, voluntary	Formal, legally binding
Focus	Trade and technical cooperation	Environmental governance
Scope	Trade flows, standards	Full plastic lifecycle
Role	Supportive and complementary	Central, regulatory instrument



Complementarity and Risk

If coordinated well, the **WTO Dialogue can support** the implementation of the Treaty, by:

- harmonizing standards,
- reducing trade barriers for alternatives,
- building technical capacity.

But if poorly aligned, the two processes **risk**:

- duplicating efforts,
- creating conflicting rules,
- increasing legal uncertainty, especially for exporters.



Conclusions

In conclusion, the **WTO Informal Dialogue on Plastics** is a **vital** even if limited tool. It creates space for cooperation, for policy innovation, and for learning.

It cannot replace the need for a strong, coordinated, and enforceable global agreement but it could be the **starting point** on which to develop a strong **cooperation**.

For both initiatives to succeed, we **need**:

- Legal clarity on trade–environment interaction,
- Political will to harmonize standards,
- An inclusive process that supports developing countries and ensures fair implementation.





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