

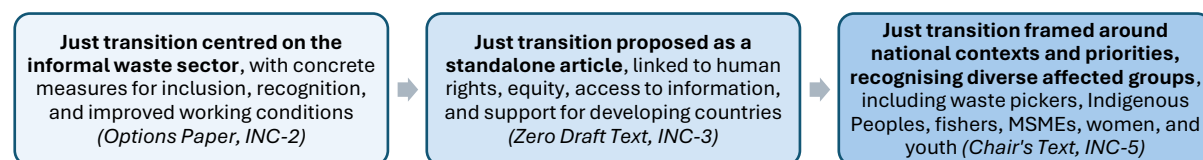
A lifecycle perspective on just transition in the global plastics treaty

Just transition should serve as a cross-cutting principle guiding the treaty’s ambition and design. Centring the knowledge and lived experience of affected communities is key to achieving outcomes that are not only effective, but also equitable and enduring.

Overview: The concept of *just transition* is gaining traction in the global plastics treaty process to ensure no one is left behind in the transition to reduce plastic pollution. While initially focused on downstream waste workers, just transition is increasingly recognised as a cross-cutting principle relevant to all stages of the plastics lifecycle, from extraction and design to consumption and disposal.

This brief explores how just transition is taking shape in the treaty and examines its potential justice implications for workers, communities, and ecosystems. Just transition calls for inclusive, people-centred, and lifecycle-informed approaches that supports meaningful participation of rights- and knowledge-holders, such as affected communities, Indigenous Peoples, and local experts in the treaty process. This should span from negotiation to implementation, to ensure the treaty delivers on its promise to leave no one behind.

From principle to provision: Since UNEA Resolution 5/14ⁱ, just transition has evolved from implicit references to equity and sustainable development, into an explicit principle and dedicated article in the treaty negotiations, with ongoing debate over its scope and implementation.



While the broad framing of just transition allows for flexibility for national interpretation, the operational details of just transition remain undefined. Without further clarification, through implementation frameworks, national plans, and sector specific guidelines, there is a risk that just transition commitments may remain symbolic, unevenly applied, or fail to meaningfully address the needs and challenges of those most affected.

Justice across the plastics lifecycle: Recognising differentiated harms and responsibilities

To be effective, a just transition must address differentiated harms and justice concerns across the plastics lifecycle. Meaningful participation of affected stakeholders is essential to shaping a treaty that is equitable and effective. Without it, there is a risk of unintended consequences, including further marginalisation, exclusion from circular economy benefits, and failure to anticipate harm. Meaningful inclusion supports fairness, strengthens outcomes, and fosters more durable solutions.



Upstream: Communities living near and working in fossil fuel extraction and plastic production sites face disproportionate environmental and health burdens.



Midstream: Hazardous chemicals in consumer products pose health risks, disproportionately affecting low-income and marginalised groups lacking access to safe alternatives.



Downstream: Waste workers, coastal communities, and residents near poorly regulated recycling and landfill sites face heightened risks to their livelihoods and health.

ⁱ In March 2022, United Nations Member States adopted *UNEA Resolution 5/14*, establishing a mandate to develop an international legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution, including in the marine environment. Negotiations have been conducted through an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC), with the treaty expected to address the full lifecycle of plastics and carry significant implications for workers, communities, industries, and governments worldwide.

✳️ These challenges intersect not only with structural inequalities, such as gender, class, and migration status, but also with broader geopolitical and development debates, shaping who bears responsibility, who is most affected, and whose priorities are centred in global decision-making.

🌐 For example, India has been identified as a major plastic polluter in absolute terms but has among the lowest per capita emissions globally¹. This raises questions about equitable responsibility and how global targets can be balanced with national development priorities.

🛠️ A just transition must respond to these differentiated burdens through concrete provisions, dedicated resources, and inclusive governance.

Justice embedded across key treaty articles: Justice concerns are not only confined to the just transition article, but other key articles have significant implications for justice and equity. For example:

<p>Article 5: Plastic Product Design</p> <p>Design decisions determine who bears the risks and costs associated with consuming and exposure to hazardous plastic products. Embedding transparency, traceability, and safety at the design stage can shift risks upstream and protect vulnerable populations.²</p>	<p>Article 6: [Supply] [Sustainable Production]</p> <p>Reducing the production and use of primary plastic polymers is key to meeting climate and environmental goals, upholding human rights to a clean and healthy environment, and advancing a just transition, by easing burdens of frontline communities, protecting workers, and promoting more equitable resource use across regions.³</p>	
<p>Article 8: Plastic Waste Management</p> <p>Safe and environmentally sound waste management, anchored in rights-based systems with legal recognition and social protection, is essential to protecting workers, particularly waste pickers, from health risks, exploitation, and market volatility.⁴</p>	<p>Article 11: Financial Mechanisms</p> <p>Determines who contributes to and who benefits from financing for plastic reduction across the plastic lifecycle. Without accessible and equitable funding, informal workers, grassroots groups, frontline communities, and local actors risks exclusions from transition opportunities and decision-making processes.⁵</p>	<p>Article 19: Health</p> <p>Offers an opportunity to address the differentiated health impacts of plastics as equity and rights issues, including exposure to hazardous chemicals, microplastics, air pollution, and occupational hazards.⁶</p>

Justice in practice: Participation, implementation, and the road ahead

Waste pickers, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, small and medium enterprises, and other rights- and knowledge-holders bring diverse and legitimate justice concerns to the table. Their priorities may differ, but they often share a common call: for transitions that are inclusive, rights-based, and community-led.

To reflect these priorities in the treaty, affected groups must play a meaningful role, not just during negotiations, but also in shaping how solutions are designed and delivered. This includes participation in the development of sector-specific guidelines, working groups, and national plans.

Recommendations

- ✅ Strengthen just transition provisions by including clear definitions, implementation safeguards, and mechanisms for accountability.
- ✅ Ensure meaningful participation across negotiations and implementation by ensuring observer access, supporting stakeholder coordination, and enabling direct input from affected groups.
- ✅ Integrate justice across lifecycle provisions by embedding equity, rights, and differentiated responsibilities.
- ✅ Ensure accessible, targeted financing through dedicated funding streams for informal workers, Indigenous Peoples, and grassroots actors, including capacity-building and support for participation.

Acknowledgements: This brief has been developed as part of the India-Norway cooperation project on capacity building for reducing plastic and chemical pollution in India (INOPOL) funded by the Norwegian Embassy in New Delhi.

Authors: Emmy Nøklebye (NIVA); Rachel Karasik (NIVA) **Reviewers:** Girija K. Bharat (Mu Gamma Consultants); Hans Nicolai Adam (NIVA).

Corresponding author: emmy.noklebye@niva.no

References: ¹ Cottom, J.W., Cook, E. & Velis, C.A. (2024) A local-to-global emissions inventory of macroplastic pollution. *Nature*. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07758-6>. ² Scientists' Coalition for an Effective Plastics Treaty (2025) Article 5: Plastic product design: Core elements. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15639190>. ³ Scientists' Coalition for an Effective Plastics Treaty (2025) Article 6: Sustainable production and consumption criteria: Pathways for achieving a global primary plastic production reduction. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15639284>. ⁴ Tanner L., Cook E., Wilson D.C., O'Hare P., Gower R. and Velis C.A. (2024) Solid waste management in the UN Plastics Treaty – Version 2 for INC-5. July. <https://learn.tearfund.org/solid-waste-management>. ⁵ Gower, R., Lucy, T. (2025) The plastics treaty finance mechanism: Lessons from other Multilateral Environmental Agreements regarding access for waste pickers and other grassroots groups. <https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/policy-reports/the-plastics-treaty-finance-mechanism>. ⁶ Scientists' Coalition for an Effective Plastics Treaty (2025) Article 19: Human health in the global plastics treaty. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15792163>.