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The image shows a collection of discarded items on a green lawn. In the center is a large, crumpled, corrugated metal can. To its left is a white plastic bottle with a white cap. Below the bottle is a clear plastic bottle with a clear cap. To the right of the large can is a white plastic cup and a clear plastic cup. In the bottom right corner, there is a brown paper bag and a brown paper box. A white plastic straw and a clear plastic straw are also visible. The items are scattered across the grass, illustrating the problem of plastic and metal waste.



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Acronyms and abbreviations

RCA	Revealed Comparative Advantage
SMEP	Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

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Turning the tide on plastic pollution requires multiple parallel and inclusive responses within the United Nations and the multilateral trading system to succeed. Improvements in trade and domestic governance, including to promote plastic substitutes, alternatives and increased material recovery and recycling capacities, can be a sound course of action for developing countries.

pollution challenge and the role of trade, explore options for devising a more coherent and concerted governance action within the United Nations and the multilateral trading system and to share findings on what the potential of plastics substitutes to reduce plastic pollution and enabling local sustainable manufacturing development in selected developing countries.

The paper concludes that useful, adaptable, and flexible policies are at hand to contribute to mitigate the plastic pollution globally but also in developing countries by making use of oceans and circular economy principles.



2. THE PLASTIC POLLUTION CHALLENGE AND THE ROLE OF TRADE

Plastic pollution, alongside climate change and biodiversity loss, is one of the key environmental challenges we face today. **Approximately 7,000 million of the estimated 9,200 million tons of cumulative plastic produced between 1950-2017 have become plastic waste** – about 76 per cent of total plastic ever produced. Of this plastic waste, three-quarters was discarded and placed in landfills, became part of uncontrolled and mismanaged waste streams; or was abandoned in the environment, often ending up in the ocean. Additionally, the greenhouse gas emissions from plastics in 2015 were estimated at 1.7 gigatons of carbon equivalent (GtCO₂e) and are projected to increase to four-fold by 2050.¹ As governments grapple with how to tackle plastic pollution, there is increasing recognition that environment and health impacts arise across the life cycle of plastics, harming not only ocean ecosystems, coastal areas and water ways, but also causing pollution on land and in the air, including our climate.

Today, it is impossible to talk about “plastic” in the singular. Instead, we should talk about “plastics” in a comprehensive and more systemic manner. There are multiple forms of fossil fuel-based polymers, including polypropylenes, polyvinyl and Styrofoam, to mention a few. Also, a wide array of plastic inputs and packaging (so called hidden plastics) are used in vast range of agricultural, food, personal care, and other value chains globally. All these plastics have different life cycles, environmental footprints, and levels of recyclability and reusability.

Plastics are also big business and one of the most traded family of goods by all countries. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates show that global trade in plastics reaches \$1 trillion per year, or 5 per cent of total merchandise trade.² This is 40 per cent higher than previous estimates and involves all nations in the world.

While many considered plastics as an iconic material symbolizing global progress over the 20th century, its role is being critically re-examined today. Concerns about growing pollution on land, water and air pollution has given impetus for multiple calls on what should and can be done within the United Nations and the multilateral trading systems to address this problem. Special momentum exists in 2021, as the issue will be highlighted through the co-sponsored Ministerial Statement on Trade and Environmental Sustainability³ by World Trade Organization (WTO) Members,⁴ to be made at the 12th Ministerial Conference of the WTO (MC12) from 30 November- 3 December 2021.

Proponents of action to deal with the plastics problem call for solutions at the source of production, at the border, at the consumer level and at disposal systems. Additionally, many consider that actions should follow the circular economy principles of **reduce, reuse, and recycle**. Further, UNCTAD has recently highlighted the opportunities to “**substitute**” problematic plastics products with more natural and environmentally friendly materials (UNCTAD, 2021) which could help enhance productive capacities in developing countries.⁵

All these actions are needed and complementary. There is not one single line of action or simple solution to this global issue.



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