BACKGROUND GUIDE — Juniors Advanced

GIISMUN
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CHAPTER 5

Committee:

UNEP

United Nations Environment Programme

Agenda:

Addressing the Global Ocean Plastic Crisis: Innovative Solutions for Reducing Marine Pollution

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Committee Overview

The UNEP Junior Committee functions as a youth-oriented platform for advanced delegates to examine multifaceted global environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Each country has one vote, and the committee operates without veto powers, encouraging collaboration and consensus. Delegates rely on scientific data and international agreements like the Paris Agreement to inform their debates. Through collaborative discussions and negotiation, delegates draft resolutions aimed at promoting sustainable development, renewable energy, and environmental justice. (UNEP, n.d.)

History of the committee

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was established in 1972 following the landmark United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. Created to coordinate global efforts on environmental issues, UNEP has been central in catalyzing international cooperation on sustainability and environmental protection. It was the first UN body solely dedicated to the environment and remains a key platform for science-policy collaboration.

A few important moments that define in UNEP's historical timeline include:

Laying the Groundwork (1972 to 1987):
UNEP began by raising awareness on pollution, biodiversity loss, and the ozone layer, playing a key role in initiating the 1987 Montreal Protocol on ozone-depleting substances. It also developed foundational environmental assessment methods and began supporting national environmental institutions in developing countries.

Global Mobilization (1988 to 2000):
UNEP helped create the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and supported the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, which led to major global environmental treaties. The organization also advocated for integrating environmental concerns into development planning worldwide.

Institutional Strengthening (2001 to 2012):
During this period, UNEP advanced environmental policy through global reports and promoted the Green Economy concept. It also expanded technical support to

countries and partnered with other UN agencies to address environmental drivers of poverty.

Present and Future (2013 to Present):
Today, UNEP leads global action against climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Through the UN Environment Assembly, it coordinates international environmental policy and supports countries in implementing sustainable practices. UNEP also provides science-based guidance and financing mechanisms to help nations transition to cleaner economies.

Background Information

UNEP stands as the environmental authority of the UN system, which leads sustainability efforts by promoting stewardship of the environment to achieve development. The institution collaborates with governments along with civil society, and the private sector to handle environmental crises that severely affect degraded regions. As an organization that does not establish standard practices, UNEP focuses on informing leaders and offering support, and promoting positive environmental actions instead of applying prescribed methods.

UNEP executes its operations untill sustainable development requires a long-term solution or an environmental emergency takes place. The organization manages activities that include climate change mitigation, alongside natural resource preservation and pollution management, and green economic promotion. Through UNEP, the production of international treaties, scientific assessments, and aid for policy creation becomes possible. The organization develops programs that strike a balance between environmental health and societal economic requirements in nations alike, regardless of their development stage.

The organization's achievements touch upon the Montreal Protocol signing and the establishment of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), together with enabling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) development particularly SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). The United Nations Environment Program maintains its position as a key promoter of innovative stakeholder relationships, which lead to planetary wellness.

Key Definitions

- **Marine Pollution**: The introduction of harmful substances such as plastics, chemicals, or waste into the ocean, affecting marine life, ecosystems, and human health. This includes both land-based and sea-based sources, such as sewage, oil spills, or industrial discharge.

- **Ocean Plastic Crisis**: A global environmental issue caused by the accumulation of plastic waste in the oceans, with devastating impacts on marine biodiversity and coastal communities. It poses risks to food safety, livelihoods, and the health of marine species through ingestion and entanglement.

- **Microplastics**: Tiny plastic particles (less than 5mm) resulting from the breakdown of larger plastics or manufactured for products like cosmetics. They are pervasive in marine environments and harmful to aquatic life. Microplastics have been found in seafood, drinking water, and even human blood.

- **Circular Economy**: An economic model focused on reducing waste by reusing, repairing, and recycling materials to keep products in use for as long as possible. This model aims to decouple economic growth from resource consumption and environmental harm. (UNEP, 2025)

- **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR):** A policy approach that holds producers accountable for the entire lifecycle of their products, especially for take-back, recycling, and final disposal. EPR incentivizes design for recyclability and waste reduction.

- **Marine Ecosystems:** Biological communities found in oceanic and coastal environments, essential for biodiversity, climate regulation, and food security. Coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass beds are among the most productive and vulnerable marine habitats.

- **Basel Convention:** An international treaty that controls the transboundary movement and disposal of hazardous and other wastes to protect human health and the environment. It plays a key role in regulating the export of plastic waste between countries. (Basel Convention, n.d.)

- **UN Environment Assembly (UNEA):** The governing body of UNEP, where all UN Member States meet to set priorities for global environmental policies and develop international environmental law. It meets biennially and brings together ministers, scientists, and civil society.

Agenda Overview

The agenda and the committee's aim/targets

Addressing the Global Ocean Plastic Crisis: Innovative Solutions for Reducing Marine Pollution.

Ocean plastic pollution stands as the most severe environmental crisis society faces in the present day. Yearly plastic waste quantities stemming from a million tons flow into marine waters, resulting in their accumulation on beach fronts and currents along with the seafloor. Large marine creatures to tiny plankton experience damage in marine ecosystems since plastic debris directly affects them all through ingestion or entanglement.

Microplastics from plastics continue breaking down into particles that build up inside fish bodies, creating potential risks for human wellness. Food security faces threats from reef and fishery damage, and marine economic losses exceeding billions of dollars are observed through coastal contamination and shipping lane and the loss of tourism revenue alongside expensive cleanup operations. Plastics persist for long periods, which causes distant nations to feel the consequences due to trade activities and ocean current movement.

Tackling this emergency remains vital to reach Sustainable Development Goal number 14 about Life Below Water while protecting the ocean services being utilized by billions of people. (Global Goals, 2024)

The 2023 UNEP report shows plastic pollution in water ecosystems is rising fast, with double the quantity projections for 2030 unless immediate intervention takes place (UNEP, 2023a). The ocean receives one plastic garbage truck worth during every minute, which threatens over 800 marine and coastal species and causes contamination of seafood among millions of people (UNEP, 2021). Marine plastic waste creates excessive economic losses reaching between $6-19 billion each year for fisheries and maritime industry, and tourism sectors (OECD, 2022).

The UNEP designated plastic pollution as a “triple planetary emergency” because it links plastic pollution to the disruptions of climate change and biodiversity loss (UNEP, 2021). Unprecedented plastic consumption at this rate will result in ocean plastic volumes exceeding the total fish biomass before 2050 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2016).

The environmental issue with plastic pollution evolved past its initial scope to create an international risk that endangers both human health and food systems and sustainable development and livelihoods. The United Nations Environment Programme considers ocean plastic pollution as a fundamental issue that requires worldwide science-based collaboration for quick solutions.

Discussion Points

- **Reducing plastic production and improving product design:** Delegates should consider policies to curb single-use plastics (such as bans, taxes or design standards) and promote circular economy practices. UNEP is interested in encouraging reduce–reuse–recycle approaches and sustainable alternatives (e.g. biodegradable materials), since designing out waste is the most effective long-term solution.

- **Waste management and recycling infrastructure:** The committee should discuss how to build and finance effective waste collection, recycling and disposal systems globally. UNEP’s interest lies in supporting capacity-building (especially in developing countries) and transferring clean technology, so that plastic waste does not escape waste streams into rivers and oceans.

- **International governance and legally binding agreements:** Delegates should evaluate the merits of a global plastics treaty and other multilateral mechanisms. UNEP’s role here includes steering the UN Environment Assembly process: it has helped launch the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to draft a treaty covering the full life cycle of plastics. The committee could debate enforcement measures, targets, and how to balance national sovereignty with common goals.

- **Innovation and technology:** New solutions (such as chemical recycling, plastics-eating organisms, or advanced cleanup devices) could be explored. UNEP is interested in fostering innovation that can be scaled up, working with

- science and industry partners to pilot cutting-edge projects. Delegates might discuss incentives for research, patent sharing, and public–private partnerships to develop new materials and cleanup methods.

- **Impacts of microplastics and toxic additives:** Addressing microplastic pollution (from textiles, industrial pellets, degraded larger plastics, etc.) is a growing concern. UNEP emphasizes the need for scientific assessment and monitoring of health impacts. The debate could cover standards for allowable microplastic levels, monitoring programs, and safe replacement chemicals.

- **Finance, equity and support for developing nations:** Developing countries often lack resources to manage plastic waste. UNEP's interest is in ensuring equitable solutions, such as funding mechanisms or technology transfer. Delegates should discuss how the global community can assist vulnerable coastal nations with marine cleanups, waste infrastructure, and economic development that does not rely on disposable plastics.

- **Public awareness and stakeholder engagement:** UNEP has led campaigns (like #BeatPlasticPollution) to engage youth and communities on ocean health. The committee may consider education programs, eco-labeling, and corporate social responsibility. UNEP's interest is in building a broad global consensus, so delegates can debate ways to mobilize public support and hold industries accountable.

Issues faced by the committee

Legal and Jurisdictional Barriers

- Lack of effective international legal enforcement tools
  - Frameworks like the Basel Convention exist but are toothless without consistent national implementation.
- National implementation varies
  - Legal effectiveness fluctuates due to different enforcement capabilities across countries.
- Multiple overlapping legal jurisdictions
  - Cross-border cooperation is hampered, especially in nations with weak governance systems.

Waste Management Disparities

- Unequal development of waste management systems
  - Developing countries often lack sufficient infrastructure for plastic waste collection and treatment.
- Increased plastic leakage into oceans
  - Insufficient prevention systems = more unsecured waste ending up in marine ecosystems.
- Funding limitations
  - UNEP lacks consistent, scalable funding to support infrastructure or capacity-building in lower-income countries.

Institutional & Operational Challenges

- Reliance on voluntary member-state donations
  - Funding is unstable, making long-term planning difficult.
- Competing environmental priorities
  - UNEP must divide limited attention and resources across multiple global environmental crises.
- Economic agenda conflicts
  - Developed countries push for strict environmental targets, while developing nations prioritize economic growth and basic infrastructure.
- Administrative fragmentation
  - Disconnected governance structures and a lack of cohesive strategy slow down coordinated global action.

UN Response (Actions taken)

- **UN Environment Assembly Resolutions:** Since 2017, UNEA has adopted multiple resolutions on marine litter and plastics. In 2022, UNEA Resolution 5/14 “End Plastic Pollution” mandated negotiations for a global treaty covering the full plastic lifecycle. This high-level action galvanized international cooperation.

- **Clean Seas Campaign**: Launched by UNEP in 2017, this public awareness initiative encouraged governments and businesses to pledge plastic reductions. By mid-2021, 62 countries (covering 60% of world coastlines) had joined the campaign with concrete commitments (banning microbeads, eliminating single-use bags, etc.). The campaign raised public pressure and kept the issue in the media.

- **Global Partnership on Marine Litter (GPML):** Established in 2012 (Rio+20), this UNEP-led platform brings together governments, NGOs and industry to share solutions and best practices. GPML works on projects like waste-management plans in small nations and provides data tools for tracking marine debris. It demonstrates UNEP's role in fostering collaborative, multi-sector action.

- **International Legal Instruments:** Under UNEP's oversight, the Basel Convention (a global treaty on hazardous waste) was amended in 2019 to include many categories of plastic waste. This amendment imposes stricter controls on transboundary plastic waste shipments, helping prevent developed countries from dumping plastic in poorer nations.

- **Sustainable Development Goals:** The UN's 2030 Agenda (A/RES/70/1) includes Target 14.1 to "prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds" by 2025. UNEP assists countries in monitoring SDG 14 progress and integrating plastic-reduction strategies into national SDG plans. This aligns marine pollution action with broader development agendas.

- **Research and Reporting:** UNEP has published authoritative reports on plastic pollution (e.g., "Beat Plastic Pollution" briefings) and media pieces highlighting impacts and solutions. These efforts improve the science-policy interface and inform INC negotiations. UNEP also highlights best practices in its annual World Environment Day campaigns (e.g. 2025's #BeatPlasticPollution theme).

- **Capacity-Building Initiatives:** Through partnerships with bodies like the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and UNEP's Regional Seas programmes, the UN supports projects improving waste management in coastal regions. For example, UNEP helps fund sanitation and recycling infrastructure in several developing countries, thereby reducing runoff of plastics into oceans.

Each of these actions has helped raise the profile of the issue and build momentum. The treaty process in particular is expected to be a game-changer; once finalized, it will commit countries to enforceable rules. *However*, the full impact depends on implementation, which is precisely the challenge delegates must address.

Scope of Debate

Possible Caucus Questions:

- Should all countries commit to banning certain single-use plastic products such as plastic straws and bags, and what exceptions, if any, should be allowed?
- What role should national education and awareness programs play in reducing plastic waste, and how can countries support each other in developing these campaigns?
- Should countries with access to more recycling technology be required to support others through technology sharing or training programs?
- Is it fair for developing countries to be expected to meet the same plastic reduction goals as wealthier nations, or should there be different standards?
- Should large producers of plastic packaging be required to pay for the cost of cleanup and recycling in the countries where their products are sold?
- How can countries work together to stop plastic waste from entering the ocean through rivers, especially in regions where waste management systems are weak?
- Should there be global rules to stop the export of plastic waste from one country to another, especially when that waste ends up polluting the environment?
- Should biodegradable or compostable plastics be promoted as a global solution, and what rules are needed to make sure they truly help the environment?
- Is it possible for countries to agree on a global plastic pollution treaty with clear goals and punishments for those who do not follow them?
- Should countries be held responsible for the plastic pollution they have caused in the past, and if so, how should they help fix the damage done to oceans and coastal communities?

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