



PREVENTING PLASTIC POLLUTION

International sustainability criteria: A thematic summary

Exploring a key theme from the report *Possible elements of a new global agreement to prevent plastic pollution*

The development of **international sustainability criteria** is essential for the elimination of plastic leakage into the environment as it will catalyse sustainable design to ensure that plastics are recyclable, reusable and repairable, while also helping to protect human health by enabling the phase-out of toxic additives and minimising potentially harmful microplastics releases. The sustainability criteria can be embedded in a new global plastics agreement following steps described below.

The goal of international sustainability criteria

A new international agreement to combat plastic pollution must address activities across the life

cycle of plastics. The agreement would have four strategic goals:

1. Elimination of problematic and avoidable plastic products (reduction)
2. Sustainable management of essential plastic products (redesign)
3. Sustainable plastic waste management (reuse, repair, recycling)
4. Chemical hazard reduction

International sustainability criteria are developed to provide governments with a toolbox to achieve the four strategic goals. The new agreement could formulate obligations or guidance for States to promote industry compliance with the performance

measures set out in the sustainability criteria. This can be achieved through the development of **National Plastics Sustainability Standards** that give effect to the international sustainability criteria. These may be further elaborated in **National Plastics Management Plans** (NPMPs).

At the same time, the convergence of industry standards at the international level, harmonised by international sustainability criteria, could help create a level playing field for industry and governments and incentivise the design of products that generate less waste or waste that is more likely to be collected and recycled. This would ultimately reduce the burden of waste management on municipalities and taxpayers.

The sustainability criteria hierarchy

The development of international sustainability criteria and the fulfilment of these through the development of National Plastics Sustainability Standards are two of the three core national commitments that Parties to the agreement might commit to.

The sustainability criteria may be developed and implemented in steps as follows:

- (1) The product sustainability **criteria** for plastic products, including additives, can be embodied in the text of a new global agreement.
 - (2) The broad **measures** for achieving these product sustainability criteria can then be further detailed in annexes and guidelines developed by a subsidiary body, including criteria relating to "design for recyclability".
 - (3) Technical **standards** and sectoral codes of practice can be developed to promote "design for recyclability". The aim of design for recyclability is to:
 - enable economically viable collection and recycling, but also to
 - set criteria against which products can be reduced on domestic markets.
- By including "design for recyclability" objectives and criteria in a global agreement, governments are provided a tool to:
- **reduce** products on the market that do not meet the recyclability criteria, and
 - promote the circularity of the value chain through the **reuse, repair and recycling** of products and components, with recycling being a "catch-all" for products for which reuse and repair are not options.

- (4) At the national level, countries develop national sustainability standards for plastics and additives in fulfillment of the international sustainability criteria. Countries may then choose to implement regulatory or voluntary measures, as well as

market-based instruments, based on a product meeting, at a minimum, the agreed international product sustainability criteria.

The benefits of implementing National Plastics Sustainability Standards

By reducing the products placed on the domestic market that are not recyclable, either through the use of regulatory measures or market-based incentives, greater value is given to plastic at the end of life. In areas that lack formal waste collection, the socio-economic benefits will be notable for informal waste pickers, since sustainable design of plastics will help to eliminate residual waste that has no value and remains uncollected. Moreover, the higher value of plastics can stimulate investment in collection and sorting, improve the economic viability of recycling processes, and ease export of plastic waste under the 2019 amendments to the Basel Convention, as illustrated in Figure 1. A comprehensive national strategy to reduce the generation of waste across the plastics value chain can be further detailed in NPMPs.

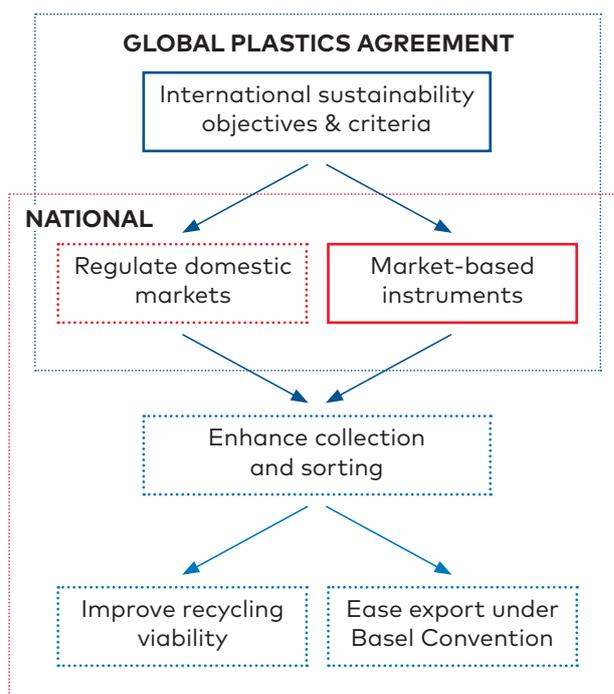


Figure 1: Overview of the role of international sustainability objectives and criteria

For further details, see sections 6.2 and 6.3 and Annex 2 in the report "Possible elements of a new global agreement to prevent plastic pollution".

The sustainability criteria could be accompanied with a certification scheme that could have an important role to drive markets towards sustainable plastics by enabling companies to label their products if they meet the sustainability criteria. Moreover, education and awareness raising will be important to help consumers make informed choices and to help dispose of plastic products appropriately at end of life.