Executive Summary: World Plastics Council Roundtable Discussions at INC-4

The World Plastics Council (WPC) is a global association whose members represent 80% of global plastics production from Asia, the Middle East, North and South America, and Europe. As the global voice of the plastics industry, we consider it essential to facilitate dialogues across many sectors and regions to advance the transition to a circular plastics economy.

The WPC organised two significant events at the fourth round of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution (INC-4) in Ottawa. INC-4 marked a crucial milestone in our journey towards a global agreement on ending plastic pollution. WPC events brought together decision-makers from various sectors, including the entire plastics value chain, consumer brands, governments and IGOs, civil society and think tanks, and financial institutions, to discuss pressing issues surrounding the Global Plastics Treaty.

Breakfast Roundtable Saturday, 20 April: The flagship event, '360° to Ending Plastics Pollution', convened over 100 participants across the plastics ecosystem to discuss and debate comprehensive policy solutions. It provided a platform for open dialogue and set the stage for constructive negotiations at INC-4. Discussions centred on circularity objectives, policy priorities, collaborative opportunities, and overcoming hurdles in the plastics ecosystem.

Key Takeaways from the Roundtable Discussions

During this interactive session, participants were asked to comment on what they considered key enablers of and hurdles to circularity and their organisation's specific role in the circular ecosystem. In line with its objectives, the conversations focused on areas of commonalities while highlighting the role of different stakeholders.

In terms of circularity, Participants noted that there needs to be:

- An appropriate legislative framework
- Placing value on plastic waste
- Design for circularity
- Waste management and recycling infrastructure
- Suitable financing mechanisms
- Behavioural change
- Support for emerging economies

While each of these components is important to achieving circularity, they are interdependent. Participants shared practical examples of how circularity breaks down without one or more components. Thus, we must shift our perspectives from current upstream versus downstream debates and think in terms of circular solutions, with all parties working and moving together.

Appropriate legislative framework: Participants stressed the importance of science- and evidence-based policies to foster trust and create a level playing field for industry operations. Such policies must be built on principles, not technology or ideology.

An international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution (ILBI) was identified as an opportunity to drive a convergence of regulations, norms, and practices related to plastics circularity. Civil society was acknowledged as needing to support industry in the transition to a circular economy, and the ILBI should provide multiple solutions to end plastic pollution and enable circularity, as recycling on its own is an incomplete solution. Additionally, participants reiterated that the ILBI must be tailored to both developed and developing countries for it to be effective. The treaty should account for different starting points of countries and prioritise support for regions lacking basic waste management infrastructure.

Placing value on plastic waste: Participants noted that to achieve a system change for plastics, policy needs to ensure that plastic waste can be assigned a value and be commodifiable. Commoditising plastic waste would create an incentive to keep it out of the environment and invite private financing to invest in waste collection, sorting, and recycling infrastructure. Mandatory recycled content targets and mandatory collection, sorting, and recycling targets were proposed as possible means of increasing the value of plastic waste. Additionally, education will be needed to shape consumer perception regarding the value of plastics, resulting in better management of plastic waste.

Design for circularity: Improved product design for plastic materials was identified as indispensable to circularity. For instance, global recycling standards, coupled with adequate sorting of waste streams, will ensure the availability of high-quality recyclates. Participants also discussed the use of mono-materials as an enabler of recycling. Other prominent topics were the safe management of chemicals and further transparency regarding chemicals in plastic, especially additives. Perspectives differed regarding broader concerns about chemicals in plastics and their effect on recyclability. Additionally, some participants stressed the need to consider upstream measures, for instance, sustainable production. Measures to tackle problematic plastic applications were also discussed.

Waste management and recycling infrastructure: The shortage of adequate waste management infrastructure, especially in emerging economies, was identified as a severe obstacle to circularity. Adequate collection, sorting, and recycling technologies are needed to keep plastics in the economy as long as possible. Participants recommended financial support and capacity building for countries lacking such robust infrastructure.

Furthermore, waste trade serves as a critical enabler for efficient waste management systems. Attention should be given to supporting economies facing challenges in this regard. Trade initiatives between countries can help address these concerns. However, effective inspections and measures are necessary to prevent illegal trade in waste materials.

Suitable financing: Moving from a linear to a circular economy for plastics is a complete system change requiring extensive financing beyond the means of the state or industry alone. Participants agreed that unlocking private-sector financing was a key hurdle to circularity. However, there were contrasting views on how to finance this system change. Some participants favoured a fee-based model, whilst others favoured a model based on Extended Producer Responsibility. The proposal for a blended model of both EPR and fees was discussed but raised many questions among participants. They also explored the possibility of creating a funding pot to support the transition while respecting the sovereignty of all nations regarding tax and other financing issues. Overall, financing principles should be unified, encompassing waste management and trade considerations.

Behavioural change: All participants agreed that no efforts from industry or government would be successful without consumer buy-in. Therefore, citizens must be involved in designing and implementing waste management systems. Education and engagement are pivotal in driving behavioural change and shaping public attitudes towards sustainable consumption and proper waste management.

Transparency and communication: Transparency and trust were recurring topics as participants noted that collaboration was impossible without trust, and trust required transparency from all parties. For instance, data transparency and traceability (digital product passports, cradle-to-grave data, etc) were highlighted, as well as clarity about what is recyclable.

Additionally, implementation and communication were highlighted as significant factors, but many questions remain about how policies relating to the ILBI might be implemented. Hence, communication between and within the plastics supply chain, the waste management sector, policymakers, consumers, and all other stakeholders remains vital in resolving hurdles to circularity.

The discussions underscored the collective responsibility of transforming the entire plastics system. Participants agreed that the complexity and urgency of ending plastic pollution and achieving circularity warranted multiple solutions. It is better to start and optimise the process than wait for the perfect environment. Furthermore, this transformation necessitates demonstrated commitment and collaboration from all stakeholders to achieve the above recommendations, summarised as Trust/ Transparency/ Transition/ Technologies/ Trade.

Networking Reception Sunday, 20 April: The WPC's engagements at INC-4 were wrapped up with a high-level networking reception, which attracted over 150 delegates and facilitated deeper engagement on critical insights from the roundtable discussions. The reception was opened with a keynote speech by Steven Guilbeault, Minister for Environment and Climate Change of Canada and Jim Fitterling, Chair and CEO of Dow.