DEMYSTIFYING REUSE IN THE GLOBAL PLASTICS TREATY

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This summary document outlines priority considerations for reuse in the Global Plastics Treaty based on extensive research by the Global Plastics Policy Centre, including arts-based research carried out during a two-day stakeholder workshop and a participatory game show event held in April 2024 ahead of INC-4 that was hosted by the University of Portsmouth's Revolution Plastics Institute and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, with support from the UK Government and the Government of Chile.

What is the definition of a reuse system?
Reuse is the repeated use of a product or packaging item for its originally intended purpose without significant modification. In a reuse system, the product or packaging item is owned by the business or system and is washed or sterilised before being loaned to the consumer again through their next purchase.

Refill and reuse systems are different.
Refill is a strategy for reducing packaging waste by allowing consumers to use their own containers multiple times, either through in-store refill systems or at-home concentrate refills. Refill does not form part of our definition of a reuse system because the packaging is owned by the consumer and not returned, washed and sanitised to complete a target number of measurable rotations.

Recycling is NOT reuse.
Recycling is a much more resource-intensive process than reuse and requires the physical or chemical breakdown of the product or material before remanufacturing. Recycling and reuse are complementary systems: reuse can reduce contamination of recycling streams by displacing non-recyclable items with reusables; and when a reusable item reaches the end of its useful life it may be appropriate to consider recycling back into new reusable items, provided critical circular design and safety conditions are met. In this way, reuse can ensure a high-quality, clean recycling input stream compared to single-use items.

Reuse systems should be provisioned separately in the Treaty.
Reuse is currently included in the Revised Zero Draft alongside refill, refurbishment, repair, and remanufacture (Part II.5 b) under product design, composition, and performance. Given that reuse is higher on the waste hierarchy than refill, refurbish, repair and remanufacturing - reuse can significantly contribute to reducing the demand for single-use plastics. Various modelling efforts demonstrate that reuse systems can reduce plastic pollution and mismanaged waste by between 28% and 75%, depending on setting and whether reuse items are recycled at end of life. Therefore, we suggest that reuse is provisioned separately in the Treaty. We also recommend cross-referencing reuse in other provisions, such as Extended Producer Responsibility (Part II.7) and Just Transition (Part II.12).

KEY REUSE TAKEAWAYS

1. The packaging sector is the readiest to transition to scaled reuse.
The packaging sector benefits from existing infrastructure that can be adapted for reuse systems. For instance, beverage companies have long used bottle return and reuse programs, providing a model that can be expanded or adapted by other types of packaging firms. Takeaway food and drink or business to business transport packaging are two other examples where reuse is already happening at scale. This existing framework can be leveraged to implement similar systems across a broader range of products and materials, reducing the initial investment required and accelerating the transition.

2. Standardised reuse packaging does not necessarily kill brand recognition.
Standardised reuse packaging diminishing brand recognition is a misconception that overlooks effective branding possibilities. Many products already thrive in standardised packages, such as tin cans, soda cans, and wine bottles, which showcase that brand identity transcends the shape or originality of packaging. Brands can leverage logo placement, distinctive typography, unique colour schemes, and graphic design to create a memorable presence. Moreover, standardised packaging can enhance the consumer-brand relationship by signalling a commitment to sustainability, appealing to the growing consumer base that values environmental consciousness.

3. Reuse offers employment opportunities for waste pickers
Reuse systems present an opportunity to diversify and dignify jobs for waste pickers with reduced threats to their health and safety and recognition of their extensive knowledge and experience of the plastic waste economy. This

includes roles in the logistics of collecting, cleaning, and redistribution of items. Building capacity and providing training for waste pickers to manage the logistics can turn informal waste collecting into more stable and safer employment opportunities, including for women. Furthermore, collecting reusable items, which fetch a price more than three times higher than single-use counterparts, represents a substantial economic uplift for waste pickers.

4. Reuse systems can be less expensive to governments than single use systems.
Single use can be less expensive per unit to businesses and consumers, but when considering the costs to governments, single use delivers significant costs in terms of annual waste management and infrastructure, healthcare and environmental damage. Delivering reuse at scale and with shared infrastructure will offset waste management costs to governments, taxpayers and businesses, especially if an implementation strategy is defined in a national plan.

5. Reuse is relevant to small island settings.
If reuse is taken up at scale globally, much of the single use plastics originating elsewhere that flood the shores of small islands would be reduced. Furthermore, given the limited purchasing power of small islands, geographic remoteness, and limited waste management infrastructure or infrastructure needed to manage alternatives such as biodegradable or compostable materials, reuse presents an opportunity to leapfrog over recycling which at present is expensive and out of reach. Furthermore, the smaller size of islands represents a relatively 'closed' system for the implementation of reuse when compared with larger countries with diversified provincial-level decision-making and value chains.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Eunomia and Systemiq report 'Unlocking a reuse revolution: scaling returnable packaging' identified three key performance drivers for reuse systems: 1. Sharing infrastructure, such as collection, sorting, cleaning and transportation, provides economies of scale. 2. Standardising packaging for certain product types can significantly increase the efficiency of sorting, cleaning and storing, while pooling packaging can dramatically decrease transport distances and the associated emissions and costs. 3. By incentivising return and providing a frictionless customer experience, companies can increase return rates. The report highlights that to make the economics work for returnable packaging, collective action is vital.

PRIMARY REUSE CONSIDERATIONS IN THE TREATY

Closed reuse systems are where packaging is purchased, used, and returned at the same site. This includes settings such as stadiums, festivals, concerts, on-site dining restaurants, food courts, government and community buildings, transport hubs, theatres, cinemas, and museums. Due to the large quantities of single-use packaging sold in these locations, a shift to reusable packaging in closed systems is a high priority. **Evidence shows that adopting reuse systems in closed settings would be a quick win, as much of the reuse infrastructure already exists.**

When considering reuse provisions in the Treaty, the most requested considerations by stakeholders in our research and participatory events are:

- Reuse mandates for specific sectors (easiest: packaging) and settings (easiest: closed systems).
- Clear mandatory targets for the adoption of reuse schemes and guidance on how to set them
- Mechanisms of financing to make reuse financially competitive compared to single-use alternatives
- Standards and guidance on how to implement reuse systems in different settings and ensure interoperability between systems
- Ensuring the inclusion and livelihoods of waste pickers in reuse systems

This note further draws from the "Making reuse a reality" report and Accelerating the scaling of reuse systems in the global plastics treaty by the Global Plastics Policy Centre.

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Common Seas
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Event funded by:

ELLEN MACARTHUR FOUNDATION
Flotilla FOUNDATION