



Submission to the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to development on participation in development and peace for development

17 April 2026

The Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) works for a just, zero waste world where people are free from toxic pollution, and resources are sustainably stewarded, not burned or dumped. This submission to the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to development complements that of GAIA Asia-Pacific and its member organizations.



A. Participation in development

Active, free and meaningful participation in practice

Environmental policymaking: Representatives from civil society and Indigenous Peoples must be given direct access to environmental decision-making. This includes access to international negotiations on environmental agreements, regional and national discussions that shape environmental policies, in the form of:

- direct access to negotiation premises;
- access to live broadcasts of discussions;
- access to meeting minutes;
- availability of interpretation (including sign language) and translation of documents;
- availability of information in multiple formats (written, audio) to account for varying literacy levels and disabilities;
- multiple avenues for public comment, oral or written, in person or remote;
- sufficient advance notice; legal requirement of notification;
- travel support and compensation, especially for most marginalized groups who could not otherwise afford to lose daily income or cover transport costs.

Barriers to access during INC plastic treaty negotiations: UNEP severely limited physical access to negotiation premises or negotiating rooms during most of the UNEP-hosted Intergovernmental Negotiations Committees (INC) for an international legally-binding instrument to end plastic pollution. UNEP ended its support for hybrid participation in negotiation meetings while failing to provide adequate meeting room capacity, resulting in the exclusion of most observers.¹ At INC-4 in Ottawa, Canada in April 2024, local Indigenous representatives highlighted facing barriers to access, despite their position on the

¹ [Statement from Members of the Civil Society and Rights Holders Coalition on Room Capacity Issues at the Fifth Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee \(INC-5\) for a Plastics Treaty](#), 26 November 2024; [Letter to UNEP Secretariat INC plastics treaty due to restrictions on participation and absence of Indigenous Peoples and latin american organizations in INC2 side events](#), 24 May 2023; GAIA (2025) [GAIA calls for greater accountability, inclusiveness, transparency in plastics treaty process](#), 20 February 2025.

frontlines of the plastics crisis.² At INC-5.1 in Busan, South Korea, the contact group negotiation room capacity limitations led to inhumane participation conditions, as observers remained without access to water, food, or washrooms for hours after being told that they would lose their seats upon leaving the room.

Furthermore, civil society representatives experienced several other barriers to participation at all the rounds of INC negotiations to date. These include language barriers from the lack of interpretation during negotiations and the lack of translation or delayed translation of key negotiations documents; economic barriers for communities and workers unable to cover the costs of travel to the INC negotiations or the cost of lost daily income, even though they are severely affected by plastic pollution; and gender barriers due to the absence of childcare during INC meetings, to allow the full and effective participation of childcare givers, including mothers, during the negotiations. These barriers also undermined full and effective participation in negotiations by many government delegates from Global South nations.

Participation key for effective negotiations, policy: The active inclusion and participation of civil society is not only important to uphold the human right to development, but also has co-benefits in securing successful treaty negotiations and effective policy, as experience from the Ramsar Convention and Mine Ban Treaty reveals. Indeed, environmental and human rights defenders, representatives of Indigenous Peoples and of affected communities, as well as scientists often have unique expertise both in understanding the problems in need of regulation and the realities of different solutions. Moreover, unlike government negotiators and international organizations, they have the independence needed to call spoilers to account when they undermine negotiations, and energy to provide continued momentum.³

Permitting and siting of industrial facilities: In parallel, transparency on emissions from industrial facilities allows individuals and communities to participate in permitting and other facility-related environmental decisions in an informed manner. Access to detailed information on emissions is particularly relevant for environmental justice (EJ) communities, who typically suffer from cumulative environmental and toxic burdens from different industrial and polluting facilities located in their vicinity. This transparency complements legal and procedural guarantees for community participation in decisions on the permitting and siting of industrial facilities to ensure the upholding of the rights to health, to a clean environment, and to development.

Barriers to participation for the waste incinerator in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Residents living near Addis Ababa's Reppie waste incinerator in Ethiopia are exposed to smoke and ash, noxious odors and noise pollution. They have reported worsening health including increased respiratory and skin disease. Their lack of access to any pollution monitoring data or information about related health risks generates anxiety and stress that aggravates their preexisting health burden from toxic exposures.⁴

Barriers to participation for a proposed waste incinerator in Lagos, Nigeria: Civil society organizations in Nigeria have failed to receive adequate information from Lagos State Government on a proposed waste

² Spokespeople for Aamjiwnaang First Nations, the Society of Native Nations, and Keepers of the Water reported limited access to the treaty negotiations: Ecojustice (202) [Indigenous communities on the frontlines of the plastics crisis speak at global plastics treaty negotiations](#), 2 April 2024.

³ Rached, Sirine (2025) [Pathways to an effective plastics treaty](#) Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)

⁴ Awgichew, Eskedar, Okotie, Weyinmi and Marnece, Carissa (2025) [Reppie Waste Incinerator: A Case Study Examining Social And Environmental Implications](#), Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)

incinerator, and have been denied the opportunity to participate in permitting and siting decisions, despite concerns about harm to community health as well as toxic and climate pollution from the planned facility.⁵

Community win against a battery recycling facility in Sacheon, South Korea: In 2024, Korean company SK Ecoplant proposed to build a battery recycling complex with three operation components: battery recycling, energy recovery (through incineration), and final treatment (disposal). After residents publicly raised strong health and pollution concerns, the city of Sacheon imposed mandatory public consultation and committee review of the siting of the facility. SK Ecoplant ultimately decided to withdraw the project in 2025.⁶

While some communities have taken science in their hands to conduct punctual or temporary monitoring of air pollutants from industrial facilities, including waste-burning facilities,⁷ this does not remove governments and polluters' responsibility to provide disclosures and monitoring. On the contrary, it demonstrates the affordability and feasibility of continuous pollution monitoring, and the urgency of mandating it through legal means, to protect community right to health and to a clean environment.

Other enabling conditions

Transparency on chemicals in products: Transparency on chemicals in products allows communities to access information about their likely exposures from facilities manufacturing these products or managing them as waste. Without this information, it is much more difficult for communities to formulate convincing, fact-based demands against industrial siting or in favor of specific safeguards.

Freedom from reprisals against environmental defenders: Enabling conditions for individuals and communities include freedom from reprisals for exercising their human rights to free expression, free assembly, and participation in development including environmental decision-making. Communities should also have the right to generate their own data (such as air and water quality), document environmental harms, and publish their findings without fear of reprisals.

Barrier: SLAPP suit against Greenpeace: In 2025, Energy Transfer filed a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP suit) against various Greenpeace entities for opposing the routing of a pipeline through Indigenous land and drinking water resources in North Dakota, in the United States. This action also undermined the sovereignty of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.⁸

⁵ GAIA (2024) [Press Statement: Urgent Call To Halt Lagos State's Waste-To- Energy Incinerator Plan And Adopt Sustainable Waste Management Practices](#)

⁶ Moon, Doun (2025) [Community Guide To Dealing With An Electric Vehicle Battery Recycling Facility](#), Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)

⁷ Moon, Doun, Emmanuel, Jorge and Babatunde, Oladeoladimeji Adedoyin (2025) [Clearing the Air: The Truth Behind Waste Incineration](#)

⁸ GAIA (2025) [GAIA Stands With Greenpeace Against Corporate Attacks On Free Speech And Environmental Defenders](#)

B. Peace for development

Addressing resource extraction and material overproduction as a driver of war and violent conflict

Zero waste cuts material overproduction while preserving wellbeing: Competition over natural resources is a well-established driver of violent conflict. Today, Global North regions continue to overconsume material resources and to burn or dump them as wastes, while Global South regions are increasing their historically low material consumption, feeding material overproduction and underlying overextraction of material resources. A zero waste approach, founded in the avoidance of unnecessary material use, followed by an emphasis on responsible material use through product and packaging reuse instead of single-use or disposable products and packaging, alongside an emphasis on repair and refurbishment instead of planned obsolescence and fast fashion, with safe recycling as a last resort, is a responsible approach that holds the promise to keep our societies' material footprint within planetary boundaries, without compromising on quality of life and equity.⁹

Transparency needed on environmental footprint of military industries, war: Informed public participation in decisions on military and war spending hinges on access to accurate information about the full environmental footprint of related industries and activities. Such transparency is critical to guide public spending decisions away from weapons and war spending and redirect them towards spending for the environment and other areas critical to the right to development. Exempting militaries from environmental assessments (such as omitting their carbon footprint from national accounts) not only leads to inaccurate data but impairs the public's ability to meaningfully assess related policy decisions.

Reforming the global peace and security architecture

From consensus paralysis to convergence through voting: To overcome the current impasse, global peace and security institutions must overcome the consensus paralysis allowing single governments to veto majority or near-unanimous decisions in favour of peace and international legality. Furthermore, consensus must not be confused with unanimity, otherwise the integrity of effective decision-making is jeopardized.

The UN Security Council's structural inability to put a stop to genocide and other war crimes, or uphold the international rule-based order, is a function of the veto power of its permanent members, or the "tyranny of one". The same focus on exclusive consensus has obstructed successful environmental decision-making at the global level, whether under the UNFCCC or in the global plastic treaty negotiations.

Conversely, voting does not have to mean a tyranny of the majority, but can instead create momentum for genuine convergence. Furthermore, it is unlikely to be abused given the strong culture of consensus in diplomacy, and there is no evidence of voting being used excessively or incessantly in international institutions. On the contrary, it is a minority of powerful states who usually override the wishes of the majority when voting is not an option.¹⁰

⁹ Tat, Esra (2025) [Rethinking resources: the next frontier for a zero waste future](#), Zero Waste Europe (ZWE)

¹⁰ Rached, Sirine (2025) [Pathways to an effective plastics treaty](#) Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)

Realising the right to development for people affected by conflict

Realising the right to development for people in countries affected by violent conflict or in post-conflict situations requires protecting and upholding their human rights including the rights to health and to a clean environment. Specifically, post-conflict rehabilitation of territories and the populations who inhabit them can only be fully achieved once the toxic, climate and other environmental burdens of war are fully recognized and remediated.

Acknowledgements

This submission was authored by Sirine Rached (GAIA), with contributions from Weyinmi Okotie (GAIA). It was reviewed by Ana Rocha, and Neil Tangri (GAIA).

GAIA is a global network of grassroots groups and national and regional alliances representing more than 1000 organizations from 92 countries. We envision a just, zero waste world built on respect for ecological limits and community rights, where people are free from the burden of toxic pollution, and resources are sustainably conserved, not burned or dumped. We work to catalyze a global shift towards environmental justice by strengthening grassroots social movements that advance solutions to waste and pollution.