



How theatre, music and film are helping us unlock new solutions to the world's plastics problem

Published: November 28, 2024 6.30pm GMT

The play Who Knows It Feels It was performed to fellow waste pickers at Dandora dumpsite in Nairobi. Revolution Plastics Institute, Author provided (no reuse)



Member states of the UN environment assembly are meeting this week in Busan, South Korea to discuss the details of a [global plastics treaty](#) for the fifth, and hopefully final, time. Negotiations can be difficult, monotonous, and often go around in circles. The talks can go on for more than 14 hours a day. Those attending complain of meeting fatigue.

So far, despite the efforts of the chair Luis Vayas Valdivieso, the global plastics treaty negotiations remain on a knife edge. Decisions have stalled, corporate interests have had an increasing presence, and vital [community voices feel unheard](#).

Creative arts can disrupt this process and bring about a fresh way of opening up dialogue. Our team at the Revolution Plastics Institute at the University of Portsmouth has been pioneering the use of theatre, music and visual arts to research issues around plastic pollution for almost a decade. Working with diverse groups including grassroots communities, industry leaders and policymakers, we have found these tools to be inclusive, effective and highly engaging.

We have used these methods at previous UN meetings on climate, sustainability and plastic pollution. In November 2023, for example, to coincide with plastics treaty negotiations in Nairobi, Kenya, we staged a play called Who Knows It Feels It: A Waste Picker's Perspective, for a Just Transition. Watched by more than 300 negotiators, this performance was created by a group of 12 waste pickers from Nairobi and Kisumu, Kenya, together with Kenya- and UK-based theatre producers.

Read more: [Time is running out for a treaty to end plastic pollution – here's why it matters](#)



A rehearsal with people from the Kenyan National Waste Pickers Welfare Association and the Social Justice Centre Travelling Theatre, Kenya. Revolution Plastics Institute, Author provided (no reuse)

Audience interaction is encouraged by using a form of participatory performance known as “forum theatre” to explore different options for dealing with a problem or issue. This play's six scenes showed the daily experiences and concerns of the waste pickers, including low rates of pay, social discrimination, and exposure to health risks such as air pollution from burning plastics and hazardous waste.

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These themes were incorporated into a chant – “*integration, recognition, survive fee, we demand!*” – that served as a powerful leitmotif and call for action. The play also featured the poem Partnering of Convenience for Living in Harmony with Nature, written and performed by waste picker and spoken word artist [Tony “DC” Agie](#):

*Unlike the past local conventions which we were invited out of pity,
Not for our grievances to be heard but just to be seen,
And funnily during the conventions expected to be the most keen,
Thank you for the appreciation of our integral role,
It brought about a certain kick that transformed us from the Sauls to Pauls,
For the first time we've gone from hearing to feeling the call,
So for the whole present team, let's make it an environment never dreamt but meant for all.*

DC's poem illustrates how these methods can serve as a platform to bring multiple voices, which might otherwise not be heard, to the fore.

In another performance created for plastics treaty negotiations held in Ottawa, Canada, in April 2024, reuse experts took the stage to demystify plastic reuse systems. Using a gameshow format, we dispelled myths that might discourage countries from advocating for reuse in the treaty. The audience's knowledge and attitudes were put to the test, before experts clarified areas of confusion. This event allowed people to engage in constructive discussions about the challenges of reuse in an interactive way.

Intrinsic links between plastics and climate

Now, our multimedia exhibition, Plastic Action is Climate Action, at the negotiations in Busan aims to get people thinking [about the connection](#) between plastics and climate change, and how both could be regulated in tandem.

Our immersive exploration uses [video](#), music and photos to show the environmental effects of every stage of the plastics life cycle, while highlighting the urgent need for action. We are facilitating participatory workshops to encourage collaboration between people from member states, conservation organisations and industry.



Pollution: a music video created for the Plastics Action is Climate Action exhibition, by MHUB Studios Ft. Bilha, MC Sukuma, T Boli and Nelmo Newsong, describes air pollution in Mukuru, Nairobi.

This week, with Nigeria-based nonprofit grassroots organisation [Community Action Against Plastic Waste](#), we held a theatre workshop that taught attendees how to use drama as a powerful engagement and research tool in their own work. The workshop served as a platform for community building and resilience in the face of an often difficult negotiation process. Scenes are performed alongside a discussion about the use of theatre in plastics policy research.

Arts-based approaches can encourage people to think creatively, holistically and emotionally, working towards much-needed solutions from outside the box. Introducing them into this sphere can help disrupt power structures, uncover unexpected findings, and highlight a range of environmental issues and perspectives.

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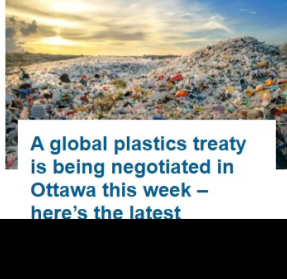
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