

REPORT: From plastic waste to circular solutions in South - East Asia

Side Event: 13th Asia-Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development

27 February 2026, 10:30-12:00 (GMT+7)

Meeting Room H, United Nations Conference Center, Bangkok, Thailand



What are the key questions discussed in the side event?

The side event explored how integrated approaches can address plastic pollution while delivering social, environmental and economic benefits. Discussions focused on how social innovation models, such as CareVend, can transform plastic waste into opportunities by linking waste collection with access to essential goods, livelihood creation and community empowerment.

The panel examined the regulatory and institutional barriers that limit the integration of plastic waste into circular economy systems and considered the policy actions needed to overcome these challenges. Participants also discussed which incentives and policy signals are most effective in encouraging private sector investment in circular plastic economy models that combine environmental objectives with social impact.

The discussion further explored the role of applied research and technological innovation in bridging the gap between plastic waste collection and higher-value circular applications. The panel also addressed how data sharing, regional monitoring frameworks and city-level tools can support municipalities in designing long-term plastic waste management strategies and making informed investment decisions.

Key messages, outcomes, recommendations (five maximum):

1. The discussion highlighted that addressing plastic pollution requires integrated solutions that combine environmental protection, social innovation and economic incentives. Participants noted that enabling policy frameworks are essential to reduce regulatory barriers and support the integration of plastic waste into circular economy systems.

2. The discussion also underscored the importance of clear policy signals and targeted incentives to encourage private sector investment in circular plastic economy initiatives, particularly models that generate both environmental and social benefits.
3. Applied research and innovation were identified as important in bridging the gap between plastic waste collection and higher-value circular applications, while stronger collaboration between academia, industry and cities can help accelerate this transition.
4. Participants emphasized that improved data sharing and harmonised regional monitoring frameworks are critical for strengthening evidence-based policymaking and guiding long-term investment in plastic waste management.
5. Social innovation initiatives were highlighted as practical examples of how plastic waste solutions can simultaneously support livelihoods, improve access to essential goods and contribute to environmental sustainability.

Conclusions / next steps

The discussions highlighted the importance of strengthening collaboration across governments, industry, academia and communities to advance circular solutions for plastic waste management. Participants emphasized that combining policy reforms, social innovation and data-driven tools can help translate regional commitments into practical action at the national and city levels.

Moving forward, greater efforts are needed to support knowledge sharing on successful models that link plastic waste reduction with social and economic benefits. Expanding the use of monitoring frameworks and city-level data tools will also be essential to guide evidence-based investments and improve long-term waste management strategies.

Participants also noted the value of strengthening regional cooperation and aligning national efforts with global frameworks on biodiversity protection and sustainable development. Continued dialogue and partnerships will help scale innovative solutions, mobilize investment and support communities in transitioning towards more inclusive and sustainable circular economy systems.

"PET recycling isn't just disposal; it turns waste into worth. By reclaiming scarce resources instead of depleting them, we protect our ecosystems and fuel a circular economy closing the loop—one bottle at a time." - **Mr. Harsha Reddy, Vice President & Global Head of Sustainability Development, INDORAMA Ventures**

"Local actors need to be key partners in the transition to a circular economy. UN-Habitat's Healthy Oceans and Clean Cities Initiative supported cooperatives and associations in the cities of the Philippines, scaling activities like community junk shops and social enterprises which enabled resource-efficiency improvements of up to 50%, while also channeling profits back to communities, ensuring that circular transitions are effective—and just." - **Ms. Chloe Pottinger-Glass, Project Associate, UN-Habitat**

"COBSEA and its Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter underscore the urgent need for strong regional cooperation, policy action across the full plastic value chain, as well as enhanced knowledge sharing and capacity building in tackling both land- and sea-based sources of marine litter." – **Mr. Mahesh Pradhan, Coordinator of the Coordinating body of the Seas of East Asia (UNEP-COBSEA)**