



# Event Ethnography to study the global negotiations on the treaty to end plastic pollution: dataset from the first session of negotiations (INC-1)

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## Abstract

Plastics and their associated chemical pollution have emerged as a global threat. This recognition materialized in March 2022 with the adoption of a groundbreaking mandate among United Nations (UN) Member States, signaling the commencement of negotiations for a comprehensive treaty aimed at ending plastic pollution, encompassing the entire lifecycle. The first session of negotiations convened at the International Negotiating Committee (INC-1) in Punta del Este, Uruguay from November 28th–December 2nd, 2022, from there, four other negotiation sessions have either convened or will, with the expected conclusion in December 2024. The current study introduces a methodology for systematically observing and documenting global agreement-making. It utilizes a dataset from the first session of negotiations to explore the event ethnography (EE) methodology for following Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEA). This paper aims to inspire and guide researchers in employing EE, recognizing its efficacy in navigating the complexities of the extensive Global Plastics Treaty (GPT) negotiations and promoting collaborative efforts for a comprehensive understanding of the process. EE is a method increasingly recognised to study multilateral international negotiations within the science-policy nexus to examine emerging obstacles, trends, power dynamics, and actors (both state and non-state) in action within the negotiations. Finally, a dataset is presented from INC-1 through a practical Excel document; the article then demonstrates one example of how the dataset can be employed to enhance comprehension of the negotiators and observers influencing the GPT negotiations.

**Keywords** Plastics · Treaty · UNEP · Global · INC · Negotiations

## Introduction

*“Plastic is not only a waste management issue, it is about the health of our planet, humans, plants, and animals.”* –**Children and Youth Major Group, INC-1 opening statements**

In Greek mythology, after escaping death multiple times, Sisyphus was condemned to a life of endlessly rolling a boulder up a hill to reach the peak. Only every time Sisyphus thought the task was complete and the boulder atop the hill—it fell—forcing the process to start over again (Camus 2013). This analogy can symbolize the past decades of fragmented plastic regulations and narratives with a focus

on downstream waste management solutions (Williams and Rangel-Buitrago 2022) which have created a 'giant boulder' of plastic waste society cannot recycle its way out of. We have been endlessly 'running up a hill' to 'end plastic pollution'—which to date has only left us with business-as-usual practices, and an overarching belief that the problem is in the hands of consumers to choose different products and properly dispose of their waste (Steinhorst and Beyerl 2021; Dauvergne 2016). This previous approach has left us unable to find true solutions regarding plastic materials and waste (Jambeck et al. 2015). In the Spring of 2022, United Nations (UN) delegates agreed to include the life cycle approach (LCA) in negotiating the treaty to end plastic pollution (UNEA 2022). It is therefore crucial to establish a clear definition of the term LCA in this context. Although there are numerous definitions depending on the field of study, this study utilizes the UNEP 2022 definition where the LCA involves consideration of potential impacts at every stage in the life cycle of a product or service—in this case,

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plastics. When referring to the stages in the life cycle, it can be broadly defined into three categories: upstream (i.e., raw material production and manufacturing), midstream (i.e., distribution, packaging, and product use), and downstream (waste management and recycling). Understanding these streams is crucial for developing comprehensive strategies to address plastic pollution and promote sustainability. The mandate to begin negotiations on the Global Plastics Treaty (GPT) stemmed from failure within the multi-decade span of focusing on downstream solutions.

To analytically track the progress of global environmental treaty negotiations, this article explores the methodology of event ethnography (EE) to systematically document the GPT negotiations. In lay terms, EE refers to the practice of conducting research within the context of a specific event by observing and documenting what takes place. This article includes a brief review of the EE methods and provides qualitative data sources employed in the social and political sciences to examine power dynamics and track participation in global agreement-making. The ongoing GPT negotiations serve as the source of data, demonstrating the practical application of EE. An initial version of the EE data gathered at the first Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee session (INC-1) is openly accessible, within this article. Ultimately, following the conclusion of all sessions of the GPT negotiations, a revised dataset encompassing all plastic INC sessions will be published and formatted into a dedicated database, facilitating deeper insights into the formation of the GPT.<sup>1</sup> In light of this, the article offers a brief examination of EE as a methodology utilized in agreement-making, followed by a presentation of the dataset derived from INC-1. Lastly, the article explores an illustrative potential application of the dataset for future research, offering insights into the policymaking process from the first session of negotiations.

The lack of coordinated global regulations of plastics throughout their life cycle continues to bring vast amounts of pollution into our environments (Barboza et al. 2019). Plastics are characterized by intricate value chains and exhibit a transboundary nature, implying that both their production to use and subsequent pollution pathways are dispersed across various locations involved in material manufacturing, distribution, trade, and waste disposal. Addressing this issue cannot be accomplished by one or a few countries independently due to the interconnected and widespread nature of the problem. This has been clear in the previous fragmented regulatory response on how to solve this problem (Gago et al. 2020). To date, these responses have been

uncoordinated, polycentric governing mechanisms that regulate the downstream end-of-life side of pollution (Dauvergne 2018; Haward 2018). Negotiations are currently underway to address the fragmentation of previous responses to plastic pollution. Maes et al. (2023) investigate how regional and national policies are found to only tackle one part of the plastic problem (i.e., Single-use plastic bans, or deposit return schemes) and, like other global agreements (i.e., The Basel Convention 2019 plastic amendments, or MARPOL Annex V) are not solely focused on the entire life cycle of plastics and what agreements are in place encounter enforcement and compliance challenges.

Considering this, the current study reviews EE for systematically observing and documenting the process of Multilateral Environmental Agreement (MEA). This paper advocates for the implementation of EE from a 'bottom-up' perspective, particularly in the context of the intricate and expansive GPT negotiations. The focus of this paper is to inspire and guide other researchers in conducting EE. An EE-generated database for the GPT negotiations holds significant value for several reasons. Firstly, it may enhance accountability by providing a detailed record of the negotiation proceedings, thereby establishing transparent and traceable documentation of the decision-making processes. This transparency is crucial for holding involved actors (UN Member States, Regional Groups, and Observers) accountable for their contributions and decisions throughout the negotiation timeline. Secondly, the database contributes to an improved understanding of the diverse actors involved in the negotiations. By capturing qualitative data, the database enables a nuanced analysis of power dynamics and participant engagement, shedding light on the roles and influences of various stakeholders and UN member states. Furthermore, beyond accountability and actor comprehension, such a database has the potential for efficiency in treaty interpretation. It could serve as a valuable resource for future scholars, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking to understand, analyze, and learn from the complexities and nuances embedded within the GPT negotiations to do so.

## Event Ethnography as a deep observation method

What is Ethnography? Varying definitions have been introduced as to what specifics the method entails, especially when examining MEAs. When broken down ethnography comes from the Greek term – *Ethnos* meaning 'folk/the people' and *grapho* meaning 'to write' (McGranahan 2014). 'Event' is then applied to ethnography to study a specific event or process, in this case, the GPT negotiations. As early as the 1980s, EE was realized as a method in the social and political sciences to analytically evaluate nonstate actors

<sup>1</sup> At the time of publication, the host website for the final database is not yet established – please contact the corresponding author for additional information.

and their influence throughout MEAs (Young 1991). The primary method of analysis within EE as understood in this review is called 'participant observation', where ethnographers watch, listen, and take detailed notes on an activity (Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019). In the study of global environmental agreement-making, EE is a methodological approach used to better recognise the process and outcome of an MEA (Mendenhall et al. 2019). It has been deployed in various ways, whereas (Campbell et al. 2014) uses EE to, among others, relate individual research experiences to the establishment of biodiversity agendas, however, there has been a lack of concrete data coming out of EE research. As Campbell mentioned the method of EE continues to evolve in theory and practice (pg.15) there is room, in the field for new and innovative ways to collect data during MEAs. EE can also allow interested parties (I.e., non-governmental organizations, financial institutes, researchers, etc.) to consider and increase awareness of inequalities within the negotiating arena (McGranahan 2014). This awareness factor is demonstrated by EE's ability to document statements made (or not made), the speaking time of participants, as well as the gender of delegates. Interested parties can then understand the best point to interject with capacity building to aid member states in implementing a future agreement or complying with it.

EE is an evolving method for challenging theories of who, what, and where agreement-making takes place—and typically as it relates to environmental action (Hughes et al. 2021). Traditionally the method has been used for in-depth investigations to describe the actions of negotiators and stakeholders within agreement-making (Luken and Vaughan 2021). Over the years, there has been a call to undertake EE to follow global negotiations as field sights (Brosius and Campbell 2010) to better understand and later decipher, the process of agreement-making. According to Campbell et al. 2014 (Pg. 2), The objectives of EE methods are to.

1. Analyze the dynamic role of individuals, groups, and objects situated in networks;
2. Document the social, political, and institutional mechanisms and processes; and
3. Relate experiences in diverse locations around the world to the agendas established during agreement-making.

Since the 1992 Earth Summit, large-scale conferences have attracted more researchers. Moreover, the number of nonstate actor participants in MEAs has exponentially grown (O'Neill and Haas 2019) taking with them a multitude of methods both qualitative and quantitative for observing MEA-making (O'Neill et al. 2013). This happens in collaboration with a group by ensuring enough ethnographers are present at negotiating events to observe all negotiations ongoing. The participant observation method deployed in

previous EE studies demonstrates a collaboration where researchers document and make inferences about what takes place during MEAs in real time (Büscher 2014). The methodological choice deployed in this study does not allow for ethnographers to make their interpretations but to acquire a broad set of data during negotiations, which can later be utilized by scholars and policymakers to make their interpretations of how a treaty was formed. The process behind how this review's EE data is collected and used is described in the following sections.

## Data gathering from the GPT negotiations

EE scholars have previously argued that it lacks neutrality in observations because "observation is always contextualized" (Campbell et al. 2014). This is primarily because EE methods commonly involve deploying large teams of ethnographers to record what transpires at environmental mega-events such as those on climate and biodiversity.<sup>2</sup> Given the large nature of these events (for instance, the most recent UNFCCC, COP28 in Dubai 2023, included over 100,000+ participants, according to the UN), ethnographers must pick and choose which sessions to attend and what data to prioritise (Hughes and Vadrot 2023). This article argues that achieving neutrality is feasible and depends on the methodological choices used during negotiations. Unlike a COP, the plastic INCs have never exceeded 2,500 participants, nor have they had more than two sessions running in parallel. This setup allows for a smaller team of ethnographers to be present who can capture all statements taking place within the negotiations. During INC-1, as there were only plenary sessions, only the corresponding author was present throughout the approximately 50-h ethnographic work, with an additional time dedicated to reviewing and editing the dataset for grammatical and formatting errors. The GPT EE collaboration team has expanded since INC-1 to accounting for the inclusion of multiple sessions negotiating at the same time (Cowan et al. 2024b, a).

Although there are working papers (UNEP 2023) and input submitted before, during, and, after negotiations take place,<sup>3</sup> there is a lack of systematic documentation within the negotiation room to better understand power dynamics and steering tactics. This also allows for future research to focus on the process of negotiations rather than the outcome opening a 'black box' of how international decisions are made after the fact (Duffy 2014). EE was employed at

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

<sup>3</sup> See UNEP INC "Pre-session submissions" as an example.

INC-1 to systematically document the following features from the negotiation room:

1. Member States/ Observers (i.e., NGOs, IGOs) group/ Regional Groups (I.e., GRULAC, African Group, etc.) speaking;
2. The statement made (as verbatim as possible)
  - a. The statement is then placed under the agenda item it relates to, and
  - b. if the opinion aligns with another statement or like-minded group.<sup>4</sup>
  - c. [The dataset also accounts for laughs, or applause, taking place during statements];<sup>5</sup>
3. Gender of the person making the statement;
4. If the speaker attended online or in-person;
5. The date, time, and session the speaker spoke at.

Contrary to certain assumptions, a comprehensive documentation of the GPT negotiations has not been initiated or published at the UN level, nor by the esteemed treaty tracking organization, the *Earth Negotiation Bulletin*. The consideration of employing artificial intelligence (AI) for this task has been considered as well. However, to date, no AI exists with the capability to transcribe English spoken in hundreds of diverse dialects and accents. Furthermore, the most important negotiations take place in closed ‘contact group’ sessions at the negotiations. No video or audio recordings are allowed at this time, and it is therefore necessary to rely on human transcription and note-taking as the sole available option for ethnographic studies.

This first-of-its-kind systematic documentation from the GPT negotiations can lead to increased participation from member states and open doors for organizations and representatives to engage with delegates in a meaningful way by understanding their participation (Duffy 2014). As mentioned, NGOs play a dual role during negotiations by both observing and documenting the proceedings, offering their interpretations. The *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* serves as an exemplary model for effectively summarizing global negotiation events through daily reports, outlining countries’ positions and key issues discussed. Nevertheless, there exists an untapped potential for employing alternative empirical methods in the context of agreement-making. The deliberate

choice to transcribe statements verbatim as well as speaking order serves as a methodological approach, facilitating knowledge transfer to future scholars and policymakers in accessing the database post-negotiations. This allows future users to infer with how the GPT materialized based on the interactions among state actors and major group stakeholders in the negotiation room, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the influence and power dynamics at play throughout the negotiation process.

## INC-1 dataset design and accessibility

The dataset from INC-1 details the interventions by UN member states and observers throughout the negotiations. Each instance of involvement is linked to a component of the prospective plastics agreement and the corresponding provision in the draft text where the engagement took place. As INC-1 exclusively covered recorded Plenary sessions (unlike the following negotiation sessions which were not recorded and not publicly available), a preliminary version of the dataset is accessible in addition to this article. This dataset provides empirical details on the participation of member states and observers, indicating who was active, referred to, or mentioned in connection with specific package items and provisions of the draft text. It also offers factual information on their involvement, such as the considerations deemed important by each state in the context of the future treaty. The dataset and the approach to obtaining materials drew inspiration from the EE methods employed by Mendenhall et al. (2023) and Langlet and Vadrot (2023), who conducted similar work in the context of the BBNJ treaty negotiations. The EE involved in the systematic collection of field notes through collaborative ethnographic fieldwork was conducted during the initial and subsequent negotiations for the plastics treaty. These negotiations transpired in Punta Del Este, Uruguay, in November 2023.

## Utilizing data from INC-1

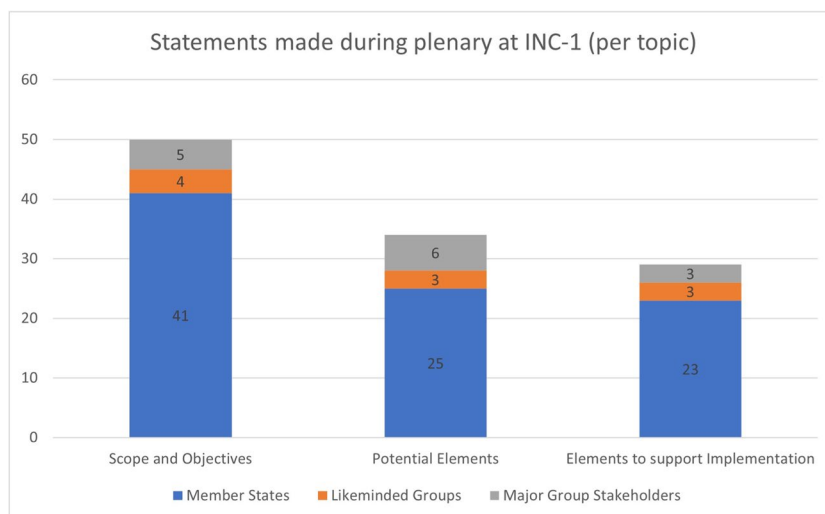
*“We wish to stress there is enough evidence to act now. [...] There will always be uncertainties, but the Precautionary Principle must be applied.” – International Science Council, INC-1 opening statements*

At INC-1, 371 Member State delegates and over 770 major group stakeholders were registered and attended the negotiations in person. When including online participation, intergovernmental organizations, and UN staff, the total number of representatives reached over 1500 for INC-1 (UNEP 2022). As no informal ‘contact group’ negotiating sessions transpired at INC-1, the data collection was

<sup>4</sup> This is stated outright by the person speaking—see *column M* in the accompanying excel dataset. Speakers will at times state at the beginning of their intervention ‘*We align ourselves with X*’. ‘*X*’ may either be a UN member state, Group of States (e.g., African Group), likeminded group (e.g., high ambition coalition), IGOs or NGOs.

<sup>5</sup> Accounting for laughs or applause in the database is only included when nearly everyone in the negotiating room laughs or applauds.

**Fig. 1** Statements made by UN Member States, Likeminded Groups, or Major group Stakeholders during the plenary at INC-1 (outside of opening and closing statements)



simplified to one room, where recordings are available for the entirety of the first session of negotiations. This was considered a test run towards building on the future data collected at the subsequent negotiation sessions, as they would have started to be solely closed-room negotiations where no formal recording or transcriptions take place.

When analyzing the dataset from INC-1, a central thread of disagreement was the structure of the agreement itself. Two differing schools of thought appeared to fracture the negotiations. Before the negotiations, a group of like-minded countries emerged, calling themselves the high-ambition coalition (HAC). As of February 2024, the HAC includes over 65 members from diverse geographic regions and cultures, representing all continents except Antarctica. Their overall goal is to mobilize countries to take decisive action and develop an ambitious, legally binding treaty. The HAC argues for limiting production and problematic plastics and ensuring transparency of plastics' value throughout their lifecycle (HAC 2023). The other aisle influencing negotiations and arguing for a bottom-up 'Paris-agreement' style approach stemmed from mostly major oil and/or plastic-producing countries (including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Cuba, Russia, and Bahrain) and as of INC-3 is formally known as the Global Coalition for Plastics Sustainability (Fillion 2023). Dubbed by the media as the 'Low Ambition Coalition' this group of like-minded countries argue for self-determined National Action Plans (NAP) without enforceable measures with the ability to control plastic production (Bruggers 2023). These two divergent perspectives may strengthen (with top-down, legally binding and enforceable measures) or stall the GPT negotiations which in turn has the potential to re-make global political order (Hughes et al. 2021).

*"We need governments to take on legally binding commitments. Including eliminating problematic plastics*

*and chemicals of concern. Targets should promote reuse & mandate transparency measures. [...] By agreeing to a legally binding instrument, we demonstrate to other parties that 'my country' is prepared to stay the course."* – Delegate from Norway

*"The treaty must have practical provisions that take into account national circumstances, needs, and priorities. [...] plans should be nationally determined and based on the bottom-up approach."* – Delegate from Saudi Arabia

The dataset originating from INC-1 offers an opportunity to scrutinize shifts in UN member states' perspectives on prospective treaty options. As exemplified by the distribution of time spent on specific subjects derived from INC-1 Fig. 1, this highlights a potential avenue for interested parties to utilize the dataset, enabling further analysis of the negotiation process.

This is one of the many ways data may be used from the negotiation dataset. Figure 1 was completed by selecting the three categories from the dataset seen in the figure (i.e., scope and objectives and potential elements) and manually counting the number of times a member state, like-minded group or major group stakeholder intervened on the topic. Cowan et al. (2023) employ another utilization of the dataset in applying quotes from statements made during UNEA 5.2 to demonstrate the important role of stakeholders in negotiating the GPT. Outside of the negotiations, there has been an increased call by the public and academics regarding the urgent need for a treaty (WWF 2020; Bergmann et al. 2022; WWF and BCG 2020). However, within the negotiation room, there appears a strong rift on whether the agreement will include stricter 'legally-binding' measures like the Montreal Protocol or lean towards NAPs similar to the Paris Agreement. This is a precise example of utilizing both qualitative data as well as the quantitative accountability the dataset provides to seek answers to these questions in future research. Due to

the neutrality of the dataset and the ethnographers writing statements made as verbatim as possible, future researchers or policymakers can examine the dataset from INC-1 and make their own interpretations from what transpired. For example, it is possible to search a specific country or likeminded group and read their interventions throughout INC-1. The dataset may also be used for capacity building where one can read what a country or regional group states they need in terms of implementing the treaty based on what they do not know or yet have resources for. These topics are further examined in Cowan et al. 2024a, b & Cowan et al. 2024b) which utilizes EE data from INC2-3.

## Discussion

EE allows for a stronger insight into the policymaking process and statements from all that is lost in the final reports after negotiations have concluded (Luken and Vaughan 2021). During negotiations, there can often be multiple countries taking the floor where it may be documented that a statement was made, but with no way to go back and read what was explicitly said. Moreover, by being present during negotiations researchers using EE can document cheers or laughter as well as silence between state and nonstate interjections (Hughes et al. 2021). Within the methods used, value can be added by direct observation and documentation of statements to better understand how power and influence are exercised within global agreement-making (O'Neill and Haas 2019). The dataset provides an extra layer of accountability over content analysis or interviews by adding an accountability factor of 'being there' and not relying on text documents, that do not cover all that is stated or taking place during negotiations.

Like any methodology, there are also trade-offs to using EE. Scholars point to the fact that the sheer size of MEAs makes the task daunting (Brosius and Campbell 2010). Moreover, at major conference of the Parties (COP) as the ones for biodiversity and climate change, there are hundreds of side events, working groups, demonstrations, media sessions, and expos that make it difficult to document and gather all analytical insight into the governance process (O'Neill et al. 2013). However, the EE methodology in this paper focuses on following an INC process which is far smaller than when agreements already have a treaty. A trade-off to using EE following treaty negotiations is its possible limitations within data collection. As the negotiations proceed some delegates will convene discussions behind closed doors and report their findings back to the open plenary hall—ethnographers are then unable to determine how some positions of member states developed. Nonetheless, the dataset in this paper has only documented exactly what transpires in the negotiating room, the side and private

discussions on the influence of the treaty may be a task better undertaken by future scholars and policymakers utilizing the dataset along with other methods.

## Conclusion

*"We will judge the treaty not by what it promises, but what it actually does"* – **NGO Major Group, INC-1 opening statement**

This article critically examines EE as a methodology within the social and political sciences for monitoring and tracing Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEA). Following a comprehensive assessment of the diverse applications of EE, the study delves into an analysis of the qualitative data generated through this methodology. Additionally, the article introduces and publishes a dataset derived from the first GPT negotiation session, providing a glimpse of its potential application in future research scenarios. A clear consensus during INC-1 was the need for two parallel groups to be established to push forward negotiations rather than having all talks take place in one plenary room. The first group was tasked with focusing efforts on the core obligations and objectives of the future agreement while the other will concentrate on the implementation of the agreement, compliance, and financial mechanism. This has been the case at the following negotiating sessions, even moving towards three dedicated negotiating groups. Due to multiple negotiations convening simultaneously, it is vital to have numerous ethnographers on the scene to be everywhere all at once. The subsequent negotiations either have or are set to take place in person only, making the 'being there' aspect of EE increasingly important for researchers to participate in. Ending plastic pollution and getting that boulder to stay at the top of the hill is now in the hands of negotiators, and EE allows future interested parties to analyze how decisions are made.

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**Data availability** The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials.

## Declarations

**Ethics approval** The dataset was generated within the framework of two research projects funded by the Research Council of Norway (RCN): PLASTICENE, led by Emily Cowan, and GOMPLAR, led by Anne Katrine Normann. The research methodology and data collection procedures underwent scrutiny and received approval from the Ethics Committee at SIKT in Norway, in 2023. It is important to note that the data

contained in this dataset does not include any personal or human data. An email has been sent to the secretariat responsible for organizing the plastic INC conferences. This email served to convey information about the project, its objectives, and the nature of the data to be collected.

**Conflict of interest** The author declares no competing interests.

**Disclaimer** This publication reflects the views of the authors, the Research Council of Norway cannot be held responsible for any use which might be made of the information contained therein.

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