

WHY MOVING BEYOND SINGLE-USE PLASTICS REQUIRES MORE THAN BETTER MATERIALS

— AND MORE THAN NATIONAL ACTION ALONE

Plastic substitution is often presented as replacing one material with another.

The Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution (SMEP) Programme experience shows that it is more complex than that. Alternatives need to be affordable, safe, available at scale, suitable for local use, and compatible with collection, recycling, composting or disposal systems (UNEP 2023).

The wider lesson is that substitution cannot be separated from policy pathways. National bans and controls can drive action, but plastics, packaging, substitutes and markets move across borders. Without coordinated standards, transition periods, trade conditions and enforcement, countries risk fragmented regulation, uneven implementation and unintended impacts (UNCTAD 2025a).

The key question is not simply which material can replace plastic. It is what policy, market, standards and regional coordination conditions are needed for substitution to reduce pollution without shifting the problem elsewhere.



SMEP (2025). *FreshPPact: the Fresh Produce Impact Hub*. Available at <https://smepprogramme.org/project/freshppact-impact-hub/>

UNCTAD (2025a). *A review of parameters and requirements for an effective consumer label on plastics and plastics alternatives*. Geneva.

UNCTAD (2025b). *East Africa workshop on single-use plastics and plastic substitutes*. Geneva. Available at <https://unctad.org/meeting/east-africa-workshop-single-use-plastics-and-plastic-substitutes>

UNEP (2023). *Turning off the tap: how the world can end plastic pollution and create a circular economy*. Nairobi.

IN BRIEF



Substitution is not just replacing one material with another. It includes reduction, reuse, redesign, alternative delivery models and, where appropriate, alternative materials.



Alternatives need to be assessed against real use conditions, end-of-life systems, affordability and availability to avoid regrettable substitutions.



Standards help prevent unclear or misleading claims, especially around compostability, biodegradability and recyclability.



Regional policy pathways can reduce fragmented regulation and support trade, enabling much-needed market scale.



Countries can share common goals while sequencing implementation according to their different starting points.

WHAT THE SMEP PROGRAMME EXPERIENCE SHOWS

Substitution needs an enabling ecosystem

Alternatives to problematic plastics may already exist, but scaling requires more than product development. FreshPPact's work in Ghana (SMEP, 2025), including coconut fibre mats replacing plastic mulch in pineapple production, shows the importance of testing alternatives in real production systems. Economic incentives, standards, awareness, R&D, monitoring and compliance can help promising solutions move beyond the pilot stage.

Regional policy pathways can reduce fragmentation

National bans and controls can drive action but also create uneven rules across neighbouring markets. The East African Community Single-Use Plastics Bill (UNCTAD 2025b) offers a shared regional framework, with common definitions, standards, transition periods, EPR obligations and enforcement.

Sequencing matters because countries start from different places

A regional framework can create direction and coherence, but partner states may have different legal systems, enforcement capacity, industry structures, waste infrastructure and market readiness. The value of a regional pathway is not that it removes these differences, but that it creates shared direction while allowing implementation to be phased realistically.

Trade and standards shape whether alternatives can scale

UNCTAD's work shows that substitution is also a trade and market issue (UNCTAD 2025a). Alternatives may struggle if tariffs, standards or market access conditions work against them. Regional coordination can align standards, expand markets and create the scale needed for alternatives to grow, while demonstrating how harmonised standards, shared controls and phased implementation could support the Global Plastics Treaty process.



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PRACTICAL LESSONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Keep prevention and reuse at the centre

Substitution should not replace efforts to prevent unnecessary plastic use, reduce single-use items, redesign systems or expand reuse. Alternatives should be used where they solve a real problem, not as a default replacement for every plastic product.

Test alternatives against real use conditions

Alternatives should be assessed for cost, performance, availability, user acceptance and end-of-life management, not simply whether they can replace plastic in theory.

Build policy pathways, not only product alternatives

Alternatives need standards, incentives, R&D, market development, monitoring and compliance if they are to move beyond pilot stage.

Use regional alignment to create market scale

Shared definitions, standards and transition pathways can reduce confusion, support trade and help credible alternatives reach the market scale needed to compete.

Sequence implementation realistically

Countries may need different timelines depending on legal readiness, enforcement capacity, industry structure, infrastructure and available alternatives.

Consider the effects on recycling-based livelihoods

Substitution should reduce avoidable single-use plastics without undermining existing collection and recycling livelihoods. Policy change needs to consider who currently earns from plastic recovery, and what support may be needed as material flows change.



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LEARNING CONTRIBUTORS

This briefing draws on the third session in the SMEP plastics webinar series, held on **20 May 2026**. It reflects learnings from SMEP-supported projects and a moderated discussion with **Ebenezer Laryea** from FreshPPact, **Faith Macharia** from ALN Kenya, **Carlotta Dal Lago** from ALN, Henrique Pacini from UNCTAD, and contributions from the webinar audience.

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WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE

Practitioners

Test alternatives against real use conditions, including cost, performance, availability, user acceptance and end-of-life management.

Donors & programme designers

Fund the enabling system around substitution, including standards, testing capacity, policy support, market development, compliance and implementation learning.

Policymakers & regulators

Develop policy pathways that link bans, standards, EPR, transition periods, enforcement and regional coordination, rather than treating substitution as a standalone product issue.

Regional bodies & trade actors

Use regional alignment to reduce fragmented regulation, support trade, enable market scale and sequence implementation across different national starting points.

Waste & recycling actors

Assess impacts on material flows, collection, recycling and livelihoods, and plan for the systems and investment needed to manage new materials after use.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Moving beyond single-use plastics is not simply about finding better materials. Substitution only reduces pollution when alternatives are tested in real conditions, supported by standards, linked to end-of-life systems and backed by coordinated policy pathways. Regional alignment can help countries move in the same direction while adapting implementation to different legal, economic and infrastructure contexts.

“ We need to fund the systems around substitution, not just the substitute themselves. ”



Faith Macharia-Okaalo
Africa Legal Network



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