

# Foreword

Plastic pollution is one of the most pressing environmental challenges of our time, fueling the triple planetary environmental crises of climate change, nature, land and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste. With over 400 million tonnes produced annually—nearly half of it for single use—plastic waste permeates land, rivers, and oceans, endangering ecosystems, human health, and sustainable development. Its transboundary nature amplifies the plastics crisis, threatening marine biodiversity, fisheries, and coastal communities, from microplastics in deep-sea sediments to plastic debris disrupting food chains. Urgent, coordinated action across governance levels and sectors is essential to address this growing global threat.

Recognizing the urgency and scale of the problem, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) – the highest decision-making body on the environment - adopted Resolution 5/14 in 2022, titled "End Plastic Pollution: Towards an International Legally Binding Instrument." This landmark resolution acknowledges that plastic pollution is a global problem that requires a coordinated international response, taking into account the full lifecycle of plastics. It mandates the development of a legally binding agreement to address plastic pollution, including in the marine environment, through a comprehensive and inclusive approach that integrates traditional and indigenous knowledge, fosters interdisciplinary collaboration, enhances coordination and cooperation at all levels, and promotes the sustainable production and consumption of plastics.

Formal legal systems provide the essential framework for addressing environmental challenges. In this regard, many multilateral environmental agreements and national environmental laws have been concluded. However, in plural legal systems, where diverse normative frameworks coexist, other norms, practices and legal realities—deeply rooted in culture, ethics, and religion, among others—hold significant sway over human behavior. These norms, practices and legal realities, though not formalized, profoundly influence how communities interact with their environment, offering a powerful avenue to complement and strengthen formal legal measures. By leveraging these norms, practices and legal realities, societies can build a more comprehensive, holistic approach to tackling pressing issues such as plastic pollution, ensuring that responses resonate with local values and practices, while fostering widespread environmental stewardship.

In this context, the conference on “*Beyond Formal Law: The Role of Ethics, Beliefs and Values in Amplifying Action Against Plastic Pollution in Africa*,” was held in 2023, as a collaborative initiative with the UN Environment Programme, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) and Strathmore University Law School. It aimed to explore how governance systems — rooted in norms, practices and other legal realities can complement formal legal frameworks in addressing plastic pollution. By bringing together policymakers, legal scholars, faith leaders, and environmental leaders, the conference provided valuable insights into integrating these non-formal norms into national and global environmental governance, with a focus on Africa.

In line with this evolving understanding, UNEP, including through its Law Division, is actively exploring the role of norms that exist outside formal law, in environmental governance. This aligns with UNEP’s ongoing efforts to incorporate diverse approaches in tackling environmental challenges.

This publication, featured in a special issue of the *Strathmore Law Journal*, serves as the starting point for a deeper exploration into the role of norms, practices and other legal realities outside formal law in combating plastic pollution. The papers presented here provide valuable insights into how cultural, ethical, and religious norms can complement formal environmental laws, contributing to a more comprehensive and effective approach towards sustainability.

I extend my deepest gratitude to our partners, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Strathmore University, as well as all contributing scholars and practitioners, whose dedication has made this publication possible. Their unwavering commitment to advancing knowledge and innovative solutions in environmental governance is invaluable. I hope that this marks the beginning of an ongoing exploration into the role of informal norms, practices and other legal realities in environmental governance, particularly in the era of needing to urgently address the triple planetary environmental crises of climate change, nature, land and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste.

Prof. Patricia Kameri-Mbote  
Director, Law Division,  
United Nations Environment Programme