

Université de Montréal

**Understanding the Emergence of Norms in World Politics:  
The Case of Plastic Pollution in the World Ocean**

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Mémoire présenté à la Faculté des études supérieures  
en vue de l'obtention du grade de  
Maîtres ès sciences (M.Sc.) en Études internationales

Décembre 2020

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*Ce mémoire intitulé*

**Understanding the Emergence of Norms in World Politics:**

**The Case of Plastic Pollution in the World Ocean**

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## Abstract

This research provides a novel outlook on the emergence of norms in world politics. Guided by a constructivist theoretical framework and a process tracing methodology, it tests Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink's pioneering life cycle model of norms (1998) with an unexplored case study. By investigating the processes that led to the legally binding Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention, it evaluates the model's main mechanisms and studies the question of *'How can we explain the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution within the scope of the Basel Convention?'* To do so, it combines an in-depth analysis of the international relations literature, official reports, and carefully selected interviews with actors involved in the global governance of plastic and the World Ocean. This research shows that co-construction processes between ideas, agents, and structures are at play in the emergence of norms. It offers a detailed understanding of the processes of norm emergence in world politics, original insights for the global governance of plastic pollution in the World Ocean, and opportunities to answer the challenges brought by transnational environmental issues. The findings of this research will likely be of particular interest for global environmental governance scholars and to those looking for pathways to foster global cooperation.

**Key words:** Norms; Norm Emergence; World Politics; Transnational Environmental Issues; Global Environmental Governance; Plastic Pollution; World Ocean; Basel Convention; Cooperation.

## Résumé

Cette recherche offre une perspective nouvelle sur l'émergence des normes en politique mondiale. Guidé par un cadre théorique constructiviste et une méthodologie basée sur le traçage des processus, elle teste le modèle de cycle de vie des normes de Martha Finnemore et Kathryn Sikkink (1998) par l'entremise d'une étude de cas inexplorée. En étudiant les processus qui ont menés aux amendements juridiquement contraignants sur les déchets de plastique de la Convention de Bâle, elle évalue les principaux mécanismes du modèle de cycle de vie des normes et étudie la question suivante : « Comment expliquer l'émergence d'une norme sur la pollution des plastiques dans le cadre de la Convention de Bâle ? ». Pour ce faire, cette étude combine une analyse approfondie de la littérature des relations internationales, des rapports officiels et des entretiens soigneusement sélectionnés avec des acteurs œuvrant dans la gouvernance globale du plastique et de l'océan mondial. Cette recherche montre que des processus de co-construction entre idées, agents et structures contribuent à l'émergence des normes. Cette recherche offre une compréhension détaillée des processus d'émergence des normes en politique mondiale; des perspectives originales pour la gouvernance globale de la pollution plastique dans l'océan mondial; et des opportunités pour relever les défis posés par les enjeux environnementaux transnationaux. Les résultats de cette recherche seront probablement d'intérêt pour les spécialistes de la gouvernance environnementale globale et pour ceux qui cherchent des moyens pour renforcer la coopération mondiale.

**Mots clés:** Normes ; Émergence des normes ; Enjeux environnementaux transnationaux ; Gouvernance environnementale globale ; Pollution de plastique ; Océan Mondial ; Convention de Bâle; Coopération.

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## List of abbreviations

**ACC:** American Chemistry Council

**AHEG:** Ad Hoc Open-Ended Expert Group on Marine Litter and Microplastics

**AN:** Advocacy Networks

**EC:** Epistemic Communities

**EEZ:** Exclusive Economic Zones

**ESM:** Environmentally Sound Management

**FAO:** Food and Agriculture Organization

**GPA:** Global Plan of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities

**GESAMP:** Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Pollution

**GPML:** Global Partnership on Marine Litter

**IGOs:** Intergovernmental Organizations

**IOs:** International Organizations

**INGOs:** International Non-Governmental Organizations

**INTERPOL:** International Criminal Police Organization

**IR:** International Relations

**London Convention:** Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter

**MARPOL:** Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter

**MNCs:** Multinational Corporations

**NGOs:** Non-Governmental Organizations

**OEWG:** Open-Ended Working Group

**PWP:** Plastic Waste Partnership

**UNCLOS:** United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas

**UNEA:** United Nations Environmental Assembly

**UNGA:** United Nations General Assembly

**WHO:** World Health Organization

**WOA:** World Ocean Assessment

*To future generations*

## Acknowledgements

This research is indebted to many.

I am extremely grateful to my parents, for their teachings, encouragements, and unparalleled support. They are at the source of my intellectual curiosity and willingness to overcome global challenges. I am also grateful to my grandparents who, through hardship and against adversity, raised courageous, inspiring, and resilient families. My gratefulness extends to my brother, brilliant figure of talent, ambition, and leadership, for his guidance and inspiration.

I am also most thankful to my one and only Rose for the flower that she is. Her inspiring creativity, cleverness, kindness, and open-mindedness, together with the genuine complicity we share, have greatly motivated my studies. You are the sun of my days and light of my nights; with you, I am daydreaming. My thanks extend to her generous and authentic family.

I would also like to express my deepest appreciation to all my teachers and mentors. Special gratitude goes to my two supervisors, Dr. Dominique Caouette and Dr. Erick Lachapelle. Both are inspiring intellectual figures that have at heart the success of their students. I am extremely grateful to Professor Dominique Caouette, who personifies generosity both in its intellectual and social forms, for his support and invaluable guidance throughout my studies. I am also grateful to Professor Erick Lachapelle for the stimulating discussions and down-to-earth suggestions. This appreciation also extends to the thesis committee. I am also extremely grateful to the University of Montreal for the freedom of thought it nurtures. Guillermo Aureano, Laurence McFalls, Sabine Demosthènes, Viviana Fridman, and the librarians of the University deserve special mentions for their continuous support throughout my M.Sc. in International Studies.

I would like to sincerely thank my friends for their crucial role in shaping who I am and the dreams I pursue. Special mention goes to my childhood friends Alexandre Allard, Joey Chevarie, Maxime Bélanger, and Vincent Boutin. All four have qualities most needed to build the world of tomorrow. I would also like take the opportunity to thank to entire community of Sept-Îles, where I grew up, and extend my thanks to the people across the globe who, by their utmost kind hearts, give me hope that everything is possible. To name only a few friends who have motivated my studies in the recent years, I would like to mention Alexandre Cardozo, Arnaud Brubacher, Christophe Caya, Diego Crespel, Dominic Chaloult-Lavoie, Frédérique Forget, Gabriel Pichette, Hugo Dumont, Ignacio Poppe, Jessy Roy, Joseph Steenhouwer, Julien Schuster, Juliette Milner, Lia Ferranti, Marie-Pier Phaneuf, Olivia Grace Burns, Philippe Chassé, Pierre-Louis Griveaud, Sébastien Darvenne, Simon Boucher, Simon Chouinard-Laliberté, Taariq F. Tayob, the Water Tribe of Lifou in New Caledonia, the many inspiring student committee members I collaborated with in Montreal, Lausanne, South Africa, and Paris, and the incommensurable number of bright and ingenious people I met in and out of universities around the world. Friendship beyond borders is most needed to overcome contemporary challenges. I have come to learn from experience that, after all, we are all brothers and sisters.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Canadian Commission for UNESCO for carrying out essential mandates to build a sustainable future and for giving me the chance to take part in their far-reaching projects. Special mentions to the outstanding leadership of Sébastien Goupil and Pauline Dugré.

I would also like to acknowledge the decisive role of Jo Ann Gagnon in my ability to pursue post-secondary studies. Both Jo Ann and her beloved Donat Savoie deserve special mentions for their support and their lifelong contributions to society.

I am also grateful to Caterina Milani and Denis Côté for their continuous contributions to creating a more equitable society and for inspiring generations of youth to engage in political, environmental, and social discussions and actions.

I am truly thankful to all the interviewees who brought invaluable insights and fruitful perspectives to this research. Their generosity has greatly facilitated the analysis of a novel case study and continue to play a determinant role in the global governance of plastic pollution in the World Ocean. Many thanks to Karen Raubenheimer for her insightful recommendations on Figure 1.

Thanks also go to the University of Geneva for inviting me to conduct my field research.

I also want to acknowledge the significant financial support provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

## Preface

This solution-seeking study finds its origin in a willingness to uncover pathways for advancing global cooperation. It is written with the hope of contributing to the ongoing discussions on how cooperation can be fostered beyond national borders. To do so, it investigates the roles of ideas, actors, and organizations acting on multiple scales and supporting norms that build common understandings and serve as the basis for collaborative action. This may prove particularly useful as the significant increase in the global environmental burden of human activities calls for new understanding of how we live on earth. As Morton A. Kaplan noted, “the absence of a formal political system in the international arena does not imply the absence of the political management of problems” (1961, 472). Following suit, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of norm emergence in world politics to offer opportunities to steer the political management of transnational environmental problems toward common objectives.

Interested in finding answers to transnational environmental issues, this study focuses on the case of plastic pollution in the World Ocean. As an illustrative example of transboundary environmental challenges, this case study holds the potential to bring new solutions to address other transnational environmental issues, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and degrading ecosystem health. Moreover, “the problem of marine plastic pollution raises the issue of intragenerational justice because costs have to be covered by regions where the plastic waste gets carried to, as well as intergenerational justice due its longevity” (Tessnow-von Wysocki and Le Billon 2019, 97). It shows, as many other transnational environmental issues, that the choices we make today may greatly impact the livelihood of future generations. Life is amongst the most beautiful gift; I hope our children will be able to unwrap theirs without plastic.

## Introduction

Philosophers and scholars have long paid attention to the social roles of norms (see for instance Hobbes 1651; Hume 1888; Durkheim 1895; Sherif 1936; Ullmann-Margalit 1977; Elster 1989; Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989). Over past decades, international relations (IR) scholarship has actively sought to understand the puzzling influence of norms in local, regional, international, and transnational contexts. As part of this effort, some scholars' theoretical endeavours have recognized norms as significant forces of both change and stability in world politics and global governance (Adler 2019; Finnemore 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Katzenstein 1996; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Klotz 1995; Price 1997). These scholarly contributions have stimulated the opening of different research agendas for investigating the complex processes of co-construction between previous and emerging norms, international organizations' programs and activities, and transnational actors' discourses and practices. Following their lead, this research examines the processes of influence between ideas, norms, actors and institutions in addressing the transnational environmental issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean. More precisely, it seeks to answer the following question: *How can we explain the emergence of a global norm on plastic pollution within the scope of the Basel Convention?*

Both empirically and theoretically grounded, this research analyzes the processes that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention to offer novel insights for both our understanding of the emergence of norms in world politics and the processes that led countries to agree on a framework that will impact the governance of plastic pollution in the World Ocean. The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal (hereinafter referred to as "the Basel Convention") originally focused on the movement of hazardous wastes. Adopted by consensus in May 2019, the amendments to Annexes II, VIII and IX to the Basel Convention widen the Convention's scope to include plastic wastes. Indeed, by entering into force in January 2021, the Plastic Waste Amendments subject the national management and global trade of several types of polymers, such as

polyethylene, polypropylene and polystyrene, to the Convention's procedures and rules (detailed in Chapter 4). The adoption of a legally binding framework to regulate both the global trade and national management of plastic waste is of great scientific interest. The Plastic Waste Amendments may serve as a steppingstone for the development of a global framework for the governance of plastic and their detrimental impacts on the World Ocean.

Ultimately, this research seeks to understand the theoretical and empirical processes that lead to norm emergence in world politics. Its intended contributions are two-fold: it aims to provide novel insights on emergence processes and offer innovative perspectives on how norms influence actors' discourses and practices. By combining complementary approaches, this research provides empirical and theoretical bases to answer Kathryn Sikkink's call to "further develop our theories of the influences of norms and ideas on international politics" (1998, 518). By investigating the processes that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention, it provides an in-depth evaluation of norm emergence based on the pioneering theoretical model developed by Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink in 1998, namely the life cycle of norms model. This evaluation will allow us to analyze the emergence of a global norm on plastic pollution in the World Ocean, providing an illustrative example of the global governance processes aiming to answer the contemporary transnational challenges faced by the global community and planetary-wide ecosystems. Rooted in the idea that "the international community's ability to preserve the quality of the planet for future generations depends upon international cooperation" (M. A. Levy, Haas, and Keohane 1992, 13), the in-depth single case study will offer insights on how an emerging norm can influence global governance, open space for the creation of common understandings, encourage cooperation beyond borders, and offer "a template for coordinating joint action" (Raymond 1997, 215). In doing so, it also shows that the recent Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention reveals the growing concerns over plastic pollution worldwide and provides empirical grounds to investigate the role



of ideas and norms in world politics as well as the interactions between transnational actors, global norms, and international institutions.

More broadly, this research hopes to contribute to ongoing theoretical discussions in IR literature on the influence of norms on local and global discourses and practices. Our assumption is that studying norm emergence may lead to unexplored opportunities and solutions to the transboundary and transgenerational issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean. As transnational issues are emerging, so are norms providing solutions for cooperation beyond national borders to address them. The single case study approach of this research also finds its justification in two objectives, to (1) “learn what conditions favors the development of norms so that cooperation can be promoted”, and (2) offer new perspectives to the question of “when cooperation based upon emerging norm will develop” (Axelrod 1986, 1097).

Before detailing the process tracing research method that will be used to examine the processes that led to the emergence of a global norm on plastic pollution and testing the studied model account of norm emergence, common ground must be set. Accordingly, the first chapter will undertake a literature review in order to clarify our perspectives on what a norm is. The second chapter will outline the conceptual framework of this research – clarifying the ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological perspectives mobilized – along with the main causal mechanisms studied. The third chapter will present the global governance and transnational environmental challenges posed by plastic pollution in the World Ocean. The fourth chapter will trace the processes that led to the emergence of a global norm on plastic pollution and the Plastic Waste Amendments within the scope of the Basel Convention. Enriched by these discussions, contextualization, and perspectives, the fifth chapter will test the life cycle model’s main mechanisms by analyzing the processes that led to Plastic Waste Amendments.

# Chapter 1 – From Ideas to Global Norms

## 1.1 Turning Points in IR Literature on Norms

Norms and ideas are core to the creation of common understanding in societies. Along with practices, they constitute and guide social repertoires of discourses and actions. In IR literature, their study dates back to the origins of the discipline. As detailed in the second chapter, this research considers ideas, norms, and practices to be constantly emerging and interacting through linear and nonlinear processes which bring novelty, stability and change to world politics (Adler 2019). In this light, and to answer the guiding question of this research, sustained attention will be paid to the interacting sets of norms, ideas, and practices. This is particularly relevant given that “a norm begins as an idea” (Alger and Dauvergne 2019, 2) and because “practices do not simply echo norms – they make them real” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 35).

While the study of international relations dates back to pre-Socratic thinkers, UNESCO’s *Proposed International Standard Nomenclature for Fields of Science and Technology* suggests that it has now reached the status of a discrete discipline<sup>1</sup> (UNESCO 1988, 15)<sup>2</sup>. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, IR literature has been subject to major turns. Firstly, the discipline has been influenced by change coming from its overarching field, political science. Indeed, as the fundamental knowledge and intellectual building blocks of political science were being (re)erected, so were those in IR literature. Secondly, as historical “critical junctures” challenged past models (such as the end of the Cold War), and as a result of the innovative works of its scholars (such as Alexander Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics*),

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<sup>1</sup> An insightful perspective on whether IR is a discipline is offered in Kaplan’s 1961 article *Is International Relations a Discipline?*

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO’s nomenclature is based on a two-, four-, and six-digit logic where the first refers to *fields*, the second to *disciplines*, and the third to *subdisciplines*. In UNESCO’s proposed nomenclature, Political Science is encoded with 59 and International Relations with 5901.

the discipline itself experienced significant shifts. This context encouraged Peter Katzenstein to suggest that “the uncertainties that mark international relations scholarship make this the right time to cast about for analytical perspectives that differ on key points from established theories, thus inviting us to take a fresh look at the world we live in” (1996, 4).

Important turns include the 1930s shift towards behaviouralism in political science that gave the field “its principle identity and enduring denomination” (Farr 1995, 219). Not only did this turn encourage many studies attempting to explain political behavior in political science but also had great resonance in IR literature. A few decade later, “norms have emerged as a defining force in world politics” and have therefore been increasingly incorporated in IR theories and models (Alger and Dauvergne 2019, 1). Indeed, as underlined by Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink’s, the 1970s marked a “return to norms” in IR literature (1998, 889). This normative turn shows that although international relations have been predominantly studied through empirical and positivist perspectives<sup>3</sup>, “they can also be evaluated normatively” (Keohane and Nye 1971, 345). As a result, a growing body of studies has focused on the role of norms and principled ideas in social contexts and opened the door for the “ideational turn”<sup>4</sup> of the 1980s<sup>5</sup> (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 887-889). In light of these turns, IR literature developed behavioural, ideational, and normative models and theories to explain how norms “govern much of our political and social lives” (Axelrod 1986, 1095). As both a cause and consequence of these most recent turns, the “constructivism turn”<sup>6</sup> brought the “breath of fresh air to the study of world politics” that was called for

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<sup>3</sup> This has especially been the case since the 1960s and 1970s, where scholars have attempted “to build a science of politics modeled on economics or natural science” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 887).

<sup>4</sup> For reviews of the ideational turn see for instance Yee 1996.

<sup>5</sup> We should also note that “the regimes scholarships of the early 1980s opened the way for the more extensive work on ideas, norms, and social construction processes in international relations scholarship in the late 1980s and 1990s” (Sikkink 1998, 518). Finnemore would further add that “the issue-specific character of norms research in political science may in part be a legacy of the regimes scholarship from which it grew. Norms were (re)introduced into mainstream political science via regimes, which are explicitly treated as issue-specific in their definition” (1996a, 16).

<sup>6</sup> Publications that have contributed to the “constructivism turn” include Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986; Wendt 1987; Onuf 1989; Kratochwil 1989; Adler 1997; and Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

by Katzenstein (Checkel 1998, 328). Together with the even more recent “practice turn”<sup>7</sup> (Adler 2019, 6), these shifts have significantly contributed to IR literature perspectives on norms and have also encouraged a consensus around the idea that practically any explanation of the ongoing rise of transnational concerns “must take into account the political power of norms and ideas and the increasingly transnational way in which those ideas are carried and diffused” (Sikkink 1998, 517).

## 1.2 Toward a Consensual Definition of Norms

As the IR literature was influenced by key developments in related fields of study, so were its definitions of norms. For instance, psychology and sociology brought to light many dimensions that are now central to IR models and explanations of the societal influence of norms. Indeed, scholars of psychology proposed insightful perspectives to define norms. Among them, Muzafer Sherif suggested that “we shall consider customs, traditions, standards, rules, values, fashions, and all other criteria of conduct which are standardized as a consequence of the contact of individuals, as specific cases of “social norms”” (1936, 3). As the author further notes, “buildings, language, and norms fall under the same category because they are products achieved in the course of the history of a given society” (ibid., 60). The contributions of psychology not only suggest a large array of social phenomena covered by norms, but also the importance of history in shaping the norms of a given society. Similarly, scholars of sociology suggested that norms play a key role in the interactions between individuals. Among them, Karl-Dieter Opp proposed that “almost all sociologically relevant facts are explained by norms” (1979, 777). Political science and international relations share much of psychology and sociology’s focus on behaviour and social interactions. Additionally, anthropology, history, and economics have also been instrumental in

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<sup>7</sup> For key literature on the “practice turn” in IR see for instance Pouliot 2008; Adler and Pouliot 2011a, 2011b; Acuto and Curtis 2013; Adler-Nissen 2013; Bueger and Gadinger 2014; Pouliot 2014.

developing IR literature's definitions of norms. Indeed, these sciences inspired development of new perspectives by giving increasing attention to norms and the development of models to explain how norms provide guidance, codes of conduct, and points of reference for behaviour in particular types of situations. In this light, "not only are norms important for many central issues in political science, but they are vital to the other social sciences as well" (Axelrod 1986, 1096). According to Kowert and Legro, the growing attention to norms in social sciences results "in large part from a desire to explain otherwise perplexing behavior" (1996, 454).

Additionally, prior to Peter Katzenstein's definition of norms (one of the most enduring definition in the IR literature, which we will revisit) important contributions were advanced both from political science and IR scholars. In both cases, influence from previous turns in the literature and insights of related field of study are ubiquitous. This is particularly the case for James March and Johan Olsen's life-long collaborations. The authors' work has provided fruitful perspectives to the study of political, social, and international life and has offered an important point of departure to understand how norms have been subsequently defined in IR literature. It is important to underscore the roles March and Olsen attributed to social norms and social expectations. For instance, they suggested that an actor often "sees what he is expected to see and likes what he is expected to like" (March and Olsen 1975, 164). They further argued that "seeing and liking are controlled by the elemental exogenous forces of objective reality, attitude structures, social reality, and social norms" (ibid.). Moreover, they proposed that "people attend to decisions not only because they have an interest at stake, but because they are expected to or obliged to" and, by doing so, highlighted that social norms are of particular importance for the study of social behaviour (ibid., 151 and 164). In addition, their sustained attention to behavioural and organizational choice<sup>8</sup> offered many relevant insights to the study of cooperation. For example, they

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance their 1972 collaboration with Michael Cohen: *A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice*.

proposed that when norms prescribe knowledge sharing and refer to “collective problem solving”, behavioural norms focusing on cooperation are likely to emerge (March and Olsen 1995, 112). Additionally, March and Olsen (1989) defined the rule-guided behaviour of individuals “as a conscious process whereby actors have to figure out the situation in which they act, apply the appropriate norm or choose among conflicting rules” (Risse 2016, 254). This definition served as an important starting point for integrating the “the logic of appropriateness” in the IR literature’s definition of norms (see for instance March and Olsen 1989 and 2011). This was accompanied by theoretical enterprises aimed at better understanding “standards of appropriateness” (Katzenstein 1996, 28) as a “powerful and important motor of political behavior worthy of investigation” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 914).

Robert Axelrod’s work has also been consequential in bridging economics and behavioural perspectives with the study of norms and the emergence of cooperation. Indeed, his 1984 book on *The Evolution of Cooperation* and his 1985 work *Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions* (with Robert Keohane) set the grounds for his 1986 article *An Evolutionary Approach to Norms* that examined “when cooperation based upon emerging norms will develop” (Axelrod 1986, 1097). Axelrod suggested that “the three most common types of definitions [of norms in the different literatures] are based upon expectations, values, and behavior” (ibid., 1096). He argued that while the first two are convenient for researchers, what is “the most important is actual behavior” and that one should thus favour the third definition (ibid., 1097). Accordingly, Axelrod proposed that “a norm exists in a given social setting to the extent that individuals usually act in a certain way and are often punished<sup>9</sup> when seen not

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<sup>9</sup> Axelrod developed the dimension of punishment through the concept of *metanorms* - defined as a norm based on “the willingness to punish someone who did not enforce a norm” (Axelrod 1986, 1095). Axelrod suggests that promoting metanorms “amounts to establishing a norm that one must punish those who do not punish a defection” – that is to say, punish those who do not support or act in accordance with the norm (ibid., 1101). Although the attention of the present study focuses on the emergence stage of norms rather than their subsequent stages, the concept of metanorms still brings an interesting perspective on how norms guide social behavior. Indeed, by introducing metanorms, Axelrod argues that it may be possible to reach a point where “the entire

to be acting this way” (ibid.). One could argue that this definition is particularly tailored to the study of norms emergence, as it “makes the existence of a norm a matter of degree, rather than an all or nothing proposition, which allows one to speak of the growth or decay of a norm” (ibid.).

Three years later, Friedrich Kratochwil offered insightful perspectives on the role of norms in decision-making, namely how norms reduce complexity, provide guidance and “link individual autonomy to sociality” (1989, 70). This further suggests that norms “allow people to pursue goals, share meanings, communicate with each other, criticize assertions, and justify actions” (ibid., 11). His 1989 book also greatly emphasized the coordinating function of rules and norms. In his words, “all rules and norms are problem-solving devices for dealing with recurrent issues of social life” (ibid., 69). Echoing the work of his counterparts, Kratochwil suggested that norms “are necessary in order to arrive at cooperation” and highlighted the role of norms “in simplifying the choices of independent actors” (ibid., 75 and 90). This is particularly relevant to our research as we intend to offer a better understanding of the emergence of norms arising in response to a transnational problem and how it may foster cooperation in a context of global interdependence.

Abram Chayes and Antonia Chayes’ contributions to the definition of norms are further complementary. They too emphasize the role of rules and norms in guiding behaviour, suggesting that actors “operate under a sense of obligation to conform their conduct to governing norms” (Chayes and Chayes 1993, 187). As March and Olsen stated, they likewise stress the relevance of social expectations and the logic of appropriateness. Indeed, they suggest that what defines norms is “that they are *prescriptions for action in situations of choice*, carrying a sense of obligation, a sense that they *ought* to

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system is self-policing and the norm becomes well established” (ibid., 1102). Further discussions on the implications of a self-policing system for global governance could be fruitful. In a highly influential book, Seyla Benhabib mobilizes “meta-norm” in another fashion: “the ideal speech situation is a “meta-norm” that applies to theoretical as well as to practical reason. It serves to delineate those aspects of an argumentation process which would lead to a “rationally motivated” as opposed to a false or apparent consensus” (1986, 284).

be followed” (ibid., 113, emphasis in original). As we will see, the focus on the *oughtness* dimension of a norm is still central to the discipline. Moreover, Chayes and Chayes complement Axelrod’s work on cooperation by suggesting that norms are “crucial for achieving cooperative action” (ibid., 115)<sup>10</sup>. In short, March and Olsen, Axelrod, Kratochwil, and Chayes and Chayes’ works are examples of theoretical endeavours that have contributed to the IR literature’s attempts to define norms and grapple with their influence in social contexts. Together with the work of their colleagues, they provided the basis on which the most enduring definition of norms in the IR literature is based: the definition proposed by Peter Katzenstein in his 1996 book *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*.

Katzenstein underscores the relevance of the concept of norms which is useful to “describe collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity” (1996, 5). This will serve as our working definition of norms. By emphasizing how norms represent collective definitions of behavioural appropriateness, we are better able to understand the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution in the World Ocean and how this norm became a legally binding agreement that will influence the national management and the global trade of plastics (once it enters into force in January 2021). Indeed, the emergence of collective definitions of the appropriate behaviour of actors with regard to plastic pollution in the World Ocean is attested to by the adoption of the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention. Katzenstein’s sociological institutionalism perspective to world politics highlights the role of norms in designating collective “standards of proper behavior” (ibid.). It helps explain how these collective standards of proper behavior surrounding plastic pollution became amendments that will

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<sup>10</sup> Additionally and of interest for what could follow as a result of the studied Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention, the authors suggest that “the fundamental norm of international law is *pacta sunt servanda* (treaties are to be obeyed)” (Chayes and Chayes 1993, 185). *Pacta sunt servanda* is Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties that states that “Every treaty in force is binding upon the parties to it and must be performed by them in good faith” (United Nations 1980, 339). This principle implies that repeated reference to a specific legal provision in international treaties can generate a norm of customary international law (Chayes and Chayes 1998, 113).



influence the behavior of state and nonstate actors with regards to plastics. Katzenstein further emphasizes that norms “either define (or constitute) identities or prescribe (or regulate) behavior, or they do both” (ibid.). As he outlines, norms can either “operate like rules that define the identity of an actor, thus having “constitutive effects”” or “operate as standards that specify the proper enactment of an already defined identity” thus having “regulative” effects (ibid.). The studied norm on plastic pollution mainly applies to the second case. Katzenstein and his colleagues, Ronald Jepperson and Alexander Wendt, also define norms “in a sociologically standard way”; as “collective expectations about proper behavior for a given identity” (1996, 54). Relevant to the present study, this highlights the dual dimension of norms as they both “establish expectations about who the actors will be in a particular environment and about how these particular actors will behave” (ibid.). .

Another important contribution to defining norms in Katzenstein’s book comes from Paul Kowert and Jeffrey Legro who underscore that norms “are social prescriptions” encompassing the laws, habits, and customs of a society (1996, 452). Moreover, they distinguish between norms as defined as constitutive and regulative elements of international politics and identities as defined as “prescriptive representations of political actors themselves and of their relationships to each other” (ibid., 453). The authors also bring light to the shift from individualism and materialism in IR theory “toward a focus on collective interpretation” in order to point “to analytical blind spots and gaps” in the process of understanding the conduct of international politics (ibid., 453-54). They suggest that “international relations theory cannot afford to ignore norms” (ibid., 454) and that it may greatly benefit from their incorporation in models and theories aiming to explain actors behavior and discourses.

In sum, Katzenstein’s definition has provided a significant contribution to IR literature, bringing together years of scholarly research on norms and paving the way for rich conversations on the role and influence of norms in societal contexts. Indeed, it bridges Axelrod’s, March and Olsen’s, Chayes and Chayes’ and Kratochwil’s contributions and encompasses the views of many others such as: Muzafer

Sherif, whose views suggest that norms serve as frame of reference for a given society (1936, 9); Stephen Krasner, who considers that “norms are standards of behavior defined in terms of rights and obligations” (1983, 2); Audie Klotz, who refers to norms as “shared understanding of standards for behavior” (1995, 14); Ann Florini, who proposes that norms have to do “with accepted standards of behavior” (1996, 372); Jeffrey Checkel, who suggests that “norms are collective understandings that make behavioral claims” (1998, 327); Elinor Ostrom, who defines norms as “shared understandings about actions that are obligatory, permitted or forbidden” (2000, 144); and Annika Björdhal, who emphasizes that norms “by definition are shared and intersubjective” (2002, 13).

Katzenstein’s definition also serves as an important point of departure for many authors, such as Martha Finnemore, Margaret Keck, Sanjeev Khagram, James Riker, Thomas Risse, and Krathryn Sikkink, all of whom contributed to the opening of a research agenda on norms in IR literature. This trend favored a “general agreement on the definition of a norm as a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891).

### **1.3 The Opening of a Research Agenda**

Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink’s 1998 seminal article, *International Norms Dynamics and Political Change*, brought significant insights to discussions on norms. As Finnemore and Sikkink suggest, norms researchers “provide explanations substantiated by evidence for puzzles in international politics that other approaches had been unable to explain satisfactorily” (1998, 890). Indeed, according to the authors, when used carefully, norm language can lead to new understandings of political patterns (ibid., 891). Moreover, Finnemore and Sikkink consider that “norms open the way for a long-overdue conversation with political theory and ethics” and bring attention to the fact that “making successful law and policy requires an understanding of the pervasive influence of social norms of behavior” (ibid., 893).

Finnemore's work also reminds us that while "ideas may or may not have behavioral implications, norms by definition concern behavior" (1996a, 22). Accordingly "international relations scholars have become increasingly interested in norms of behavior, intersubjective understandings, culture, identity, and other social features of political life" (Finnemore 1996b, 325). We note that Finnemore and Sikkink agree with Katzenstein, Jepperson, and Wendt in that they similarly suggest that norms can operate both like rules, by having "constitutive" effects, and like standards, by having "regulative" effects (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891). Hence, as the former, they distinguish between constitutive norms – "which create new actors, interests, or categories of action" – and regulative norms – "which order and constrain behavior" (ibid.).

Finnemore and Sikkink add that the constitutive and regulative effects of norms help explain their influence on the social world and why they "have powerful behavioral effects" (ibid., 916). Moreover, they underline the legal dimension of norms is also important to take into account as "customary international law *is* norms" (ibid., emphasis in original). Besides, in a more recent study, they remind us that "whereas IR theorists talk of norms, social movement theorists tend to talk of collective or shared beliefs" (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001, 409). The slight distinction in defining norms between IR and social movement evolves mainly around the terminology rather than what it actually refers to – as both may often be "talking about similar phenomena but using different words" (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002, 5 and 15). This can also be explained by the fact that social movement and constructivist IR scholars are equally interested in uncovering the processes of meaning creation (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001, 409).

Finnemore and Sikkink's work also contributed to opening the way for an analysis of the *norm life cycle* understood as a three-stage process – the first stage, norm emergence, being the subject of our study (1998, 895). The authors argue that after the emerging norm reaches a "tipping point", it is followed by a norm cascade – the second stage – characterized by "broad norm acceptance" (ibid.). After norm cascade, they suggest that the third stage, norm internalization, can ultimately lead to a state where

“norms acquire a taken-for-granted quality” (ibid.). Finnemore and Sikkink’s three-stage model serves as a fruitful point of departure for theorizing the different processes through which norms arise in societal context and become influential.

Sikkink’s work with Margaret Keck also offer a noteworthy contribution to understand patterns through which norms emerge and are promoted. Their 1998 book<sup>11</sup> and 1999 article<sup>12</sup> present explanations for *boomerang patterns* that develop “when the links between state and domestic actors are severed” (Keck and Sikkink 1999, 93). They suggest that in these cases, boomerang strategies are mobilized by domestic actors with the aim of influencing their state’s domestic policies or behavior through foreign assistance. Indeed, Keck and Sikkink “show how domestic and transnational social movements and networks unite to apply pressure on authoritarian governments “from above” and “from below” to accomplish norm change” (Risse 2013, 438). For example, the authors suggest that we can observe the “boomerang effect” when “domestic NGOs bypass their state and directly search out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 12). By focusing on the interplay between domestic and international actors together with the international – meaning and material – structures and institutions, the authors bring forth explanation for norms influence and dynamics in world politics.

At the end of the 1990s, Risse, Sikkink, and Ropp provided further contributions to the study of norms by paying close attention to the impact of norms in international politics, how they “affect political transformation processes”, and studying the dynamics through which principled ideas become norms (Risse and Sikkink 1999, 3-7). In their book, the authors present a *spiral mode*<sup>13</sup> of norm implementation which builds upon the “boomerang effect” as it, in fact, “consists of several transnational-international

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<sup>11</sup> *Activists Beyond Borders: Transnational Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (1998).

<sup>12</sup> *Transnational Advocacy Networks in International and Regional Politics* (1999).

<sup>13</sup> Their spiral model “incorporates five phases of transition toward rule-consistent behavior, four levels of interactions, and three different modes of social interaction” (Risse and Ropp 1999, 267).

“boomerang throws”” (Risse and Ropp 1999, 269). Their theoretical endeavour is motivated by the question of how international norms “influence the behavior and domestic structure of states” (Risse and Sikkink 1999, 7). Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink emphasize the importance of incorporating “a sense of the independent causal importance of international principled ideas and norms” in models of international change and provide insightful perspectives on the different stages of the socialization processes<sup>14</sup> (Risse and Ropp 1999, 258 and 270). In their words, the spiral model “specifies and details causal mechanisms through which international norms are transmitted into domestic arena and ultimately lead to domestic institutional change” (ibid., 269). Both the boomerang effects approach and the spiral model focus processes that unfold after norm emergence and, consequently, neither provide the in-depth theorizing of the emergence stage that we are attempting to investigate.

Nonetheless, from the end of the 1990s and the 2000s onward, their contributions and those of their colleagues and predecessors contributed significantly to the opening of the research agenda on norms in the IR literature. Following Katzenstein’s work, many of them emphasized that norms serve as “standards for how different actors “ought” to behave” (e.g. Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002, 14) and contributed to a widely shared focus on the *oughtness* character of norms in the literature. Indeed, Finnemore and Sikkink stress that it is precisely “the prescriptive (or evaluative) quality of “oughtness” that sets norms apart from other kind of rules” (1998, 891). In this regard, “norms entail a collective evaluation of behavior in terms of what ought to be done, a collective expectation as to what will be done, and particular reactions to compliant versus noncompliant behavior” (Raymond 1997, 218). However, Stanley Hoffman emphasizes that “one cannot mechanically derive an *ought* from an *is*” and that “in any system of law, or in any system of moral, there is always a gap between the *is* and the *ought*, between

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<sup>14</sup> The authors conceptualize socialization as “the process by which principled ideas held by individuals become norms in the sense of collective understandings about appropriate behavior which then lead to changes in identities, interests, and behavior” (Risse and Sikkink 1999, 11).

the empirical pattern and the norm” (1981, 28, emphasis in original). Hoffman further stresses that this gap provides a sense of obligation – what we could call a sense of *oughtness* – that discourages the violation of a norm (ibid.). As previously mentioned, March and Olsen drew up a portrait of *The Logic of Appropriateness* as a fruitful perspective on “how human action is to be interpreted” (2011, 1). They claim that “politics is organized by a logic of appropriateness” and that for actors, “political institutions are collections of interrelated rules and routines that define appropriate actions in term of relations between role and situations” (1989, 160). Their words resonated with Finnemore and Sikkink’s work that astutely demonstrate that: “under a logic of appropriateness, notions of duty, responsibility, identity, and obligation (all social constructions) may drive behavior as well as self-interest and gain” (1998, 913). Moreover, “the very idea of “proper” presupposes a community able to pass judgments on appropriateness” (Risse and Sikkink 1999, 7). This reminds us that norms are collective (Katzenstein 1996, 7). Accordingly, Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink note that norms are “shared expectations held by a community of actors about appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity” (2002, 13). This definition is building on Katzenstein and congruent to Andrew Hurrell and Terry Macdonald’s suggestion that “all normative analysis resolves around the two classic meanings of the term *norm*”: norms are either “identified by regularities of behaviour among actors” or “reflect patterned behaviour of a particular kind” (2013, 69, emphasis in original). Accordingly, norms “give rise to expectations as to what will, in fact, be done in particular situation” (ibid.). More recently, Matthew Hoffman shed light on how “conflicts over the meaning of shared norms” can emerge (2007, 1). He suggested that variation appears when “different actors have different ideas” about the meaning of what is appropriate to do and that these varied interpretations “are at the foundations of some of the most contentious disputes” (ibid., 2). This point is echoed by Finnemore’s argument that “social institutions are continually being contested, albeit to varying degrees at different times” (1996b, 341). This, however, does not imply that contestation is detrimental to norms. For instance, according to Axelrod “awareness of a given norm is most intense

when it is being challenged” (1986, 1096) and may therefore be seen as part of the dynamic processes that characterize norms.

Further description of the opening of a research agenda on norms could prove to be useful. For instance, we could underscore the importance of social movement scholars, such as Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, which inspired the opening of a research agenda on norms in the IR literature. Their work provided grounds on which the IR literature built to understand the puzzling influence of norms in social context. On another note, IR scholars, such as Emanuel Adler and Peter Dauvergne, brought significant contributions to the IR understanding of norms. As a fundamental contributor to the constructivist research program, Adler (2019) provided insightful perspectives to study social change by looking at the role of ideas, norms, and practices in bringing change and metastability in international social orders. By undertaking detailed studies of environmental norms, Dauvergne offered a rich apparatus of theoretical and empirical studies on which we can draw to study the emergence of a global norm on plastic pollution in the World Ocean (2018a; 2018b). Their work will be further highlighted in the following chapters.

#### **1.4 The Emergence of Norms**

Norm emergence entails complex processes. It involves multi-level linear and non-linear dynamics of interaction and influence between emerging norms with already established ones; domestic and international societies; and actors and institutions. Norm emergence is “the resultant of complex patterns of behaviour of a large number of people over a protracted period of time” (Ullmann-Margalit 1977, 8). The processes that lead to norm emergence “is not an affair of one or two days” (Sherif 1936, 87). Visibly, what Finnemore and Sikkink refer to as the emergence of norms or what Janice Thomson has referred to as “*norm initiation*” (1990, 37, emphasis in original), are puzzling to many studies (see for e.g. Sherif 1936; Ullmann-Margalit 1977; Kratochwil 1989, especially chapter 3; Price 1995; Florini 1996; Price and

Tannenwald 1996; Kowert and Legro 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Although “little theoretical work has focused exclusively on the process of emergence and “norm building” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 896), there are still noteworthy insights from which we can draw upon to answer the guiding question of this research of how can we explain the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution in the World Ocean within the scope of the Basel Convention? To do so, we bridge studies and conceptualizations of norm initiation, building and formation with researches suggesting that understanding the dynamics of norms first implies to assess “how they can be started” (Axelrod 1986, 1110) and “how they originate” (Opp 1979, 780) under the encompassing notion of norm emergence. This is primarily facilitated by a growing body of research in IR literature focusing on norm emergence processes.

*Inter alia*, Finnemore and Sikkink’s norm life cycle model has been particularly influential in the literature from the end of the 1990s onwards. It provides an original outlook to uncover the ongoing processes that arise in the different stages of norms, “from idea to emerging norm to global norm” (Alger and Dauvergne 2019, 6). Following their model, scholars have highlighted that the norm emergence stage “starts with principled ideas pushed forward by (transnational) actors” (Risse and Ropp 1999, 266). Furthermore, their model suggests that norms emerge when “they are actively built by agents having strong notions about appropriate or desirable behavior in their community” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 896). This view emphasizes both the logic of appropriateness inherent to norms and the role of actors in promoting notions of appropriate behaviour locally and globally. Actors are central to principled ideas emergence and spread in societal contexts (Risse-Kappen 1994, 187). Recognizing the role of actors in supporting emerging ideas underlines the influence of ideas-carriers in shaping policies and normative structures. It simultaneously pays attention to the fit of new ideas and norms with already established ones (Yee 1996, 90-91). Indeed, “activists work hard to frame their issues in ways that make persuasive connections between existing norms and emergent norms” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 908). Correspondingly, studying the emergence of norms must take into account that “the relationship of new



normative claims to existing norms may also influence the likeliness of their influence” (ibid.). This further suggests the majority of “efforts to promote a new norm take place within the standards of “appropriateness” defined by prior norms” (ibid., 897).

Moreover, “an understanding of stages suggests that the process of creating and institutionalizing new norms may be quite different from the process of adhering to norms that have already been widely accepted” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 211). Seen this way, norms emerge through processes of interactions with broader social structures (Alger and Dauvergne, 2019, 3). Consequently, the causes of the emergence of norms often “lie in the conditions which have given rise to an instability” (Sherif 1936, 86). These two statements may be tested through the analysis of transnational environmental issues – as we intend to do with the case of plastic pollution in the World Ocean – and explain why norm emergence is often a solution-seeking process. As Opp claims, we should also “explain under what conditions individuals express new normative statements” (1982, 61). This reemphasizes the importance of taking into account the context surrounding the emergence of norms. From there, we can better understand how “new set of norms supplants the old ones and becomes the regulator of social life” (Sherif 1936, 86). In other words, in some cases, emerging norms displace and “challenge existing standards of what is or what is not appropriate” (Alger and Dauvergne 2017, 301).

“Because norms are held collectively, they are often discussed before a consensus is reached” (Björkdahl 2002, 13). This invites scholars to study the discursive stages before consensus is reached to understand how norms emerge and are adopted. As underlined by Sikkink, “norms research suggests that the origins of many international norms lie not in pre-existing state interests but in strongly held principled ideas (ideas about right and wrong) and the desire to convert others to those ideas” (1998, 518). As principled ideas are promoted, they “become norms in the sense of being less contested and increasingly shared, the more international actors and states sign up to them” (Risse and Ropp 1999, 266). During these processes, actors can either be norm leaders or followers – or sometime simultaneously both

(Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 895). Moreover, for principled ideas to be considered as norms, scholars have suggested that “a critical mass of actors must accept the standards of behavior” (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002, 14). Indeed, “because we are concerned about international norms, a certain number of states must accept principles before we can refer to them as norms” (ibid.). In this line, Finnemore and Sikkink proposed that “approximately one-quarter to one-third of the actors must support and accept new standards of behavior before we can speak of the existence of new norms” (1998, 901). We must also take into account that in the international arena, “different states have more weight than others when it comes to promoting new norms” (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002, 15). Accordingly, “some theorists have argued that international norms emerge when they are embraced and espoused by the hegemon” (Sikkink 1998, 518).

However, there are many examples “where hegemons were followers, not leaders” (ibid., 518-19) as was the case in the emergence of an anti-plastic bag norm. Indeed, the leadership behind the promotion of plastic bag bans came from “the global South in the late 1990s and early 2000s” with Bangladesh opening the way to a complete ban on their use and manufacture (Clapp and Swanston 2009). This example also highlights that “some norms gain traction in various local jurisdictions even when political or industry elites oppose them” (Alger and Dauvergne 2019, 11). Summarizing some of the previous insights, norm emergence processes take place in relation to previous norms, are strongly influenced by the efforts of norm entrepreneurs acting on multiple scales and are subject to the institutional context with which they interact.

## 1.5 Global Norms

As Justin Alger and Peter Dauvergne have underscored, “norms can be local (unique to a community), regional (limited in geographic scope), or global (spanning many cultures and regions)” (2019, 2). The present study considers that “the very ubiquity of norms in international life” is worthy of investigation (Hurrell and Macdonald 2013, 70). Simply put, “global norms define which behaviors are expected by members of the international community and which ones are prohibited” (Wunderlich 2020, 16). Global<sup>15</sup> and “international norms are thought of as sources of action in three ways: they may be constitutive in the sense that they define what counts as a certain activity; they may be constraining in that they enjoin an actor from behaving in a particular way; or they may be enabling by allowing specific action” (Raymond 1997, 214). In other words, global norms can also be defined as those which frame the “standard of appropriate state behavior in the international system” (Alger and Dauvergne 2017, 299). Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink also “distinguish between international norms (standards of appropriate behavior held by a critical mass of states) and collective beliefs (or transnational norms) held by transnational networks, coalitions, and movements” (2002, 15). They further suggest that “many international norms serve the needs of states for coordination and stability of expectations” and that these norms define “shared expectations or standards of appropriate behavior accepted by states and intergovernmental organizations that can be applied to states, intergovernmental organizations, and/or nonstate actors of various kinds” (ibid., 14).

As we will further highlight in Chapter 2, the co-construction and co-constitution dynamics between actors, structures and norms occurs simultaneously and at multiple levels – from daily individual interactions to transnational relations. For Finnemore and Sikkink, “there is a two-level norm game

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<sup>15</sup> In this research, ‘global’ and ‘international’ norms are used interchangeably. However, “international” refers to that which is between nations and “global” to that which spans across and beyond national borders.

occurring in which the domestic and the international norm tables are increasingly linked” (1998, 893). Accordingly, domestic actors can significantly influence the emergence of an international norm and vice versa<sup>16</sup>. This also implies that “international norms must always work their influence through the filter of domestic structures and domestic norms, which can produce important variations in compliance and interpretation of these norms” (ibid.). In addition, “international norms are more likely to be implemented and complied with in the domestic context, if they resonate or fit with existing collective understandings embedded in domestic institutions and political cultures” (Risse and Ropp 1999, 271)<sup>17</sup>. In recent years, we have witnessed “a huge increase in the scope, density, and intrusiveness of rules and norms made at the international but affecting how domestic societies are organised” (Hurrell and Macdonald 2013, 74). Hurrell and Macdonald have suggested that many international norms “are powerful precisely because of the way in which they relate to the transnational structures within which all states are embedded and to the broad social forces that have transformed the character of states and altered the dynamics of the state system” (ibid., 73). In this line, in her study of international organizations as teachers of norms, Finnemore suggested that “state policies and structures are influenced by intersubjective systemic factors, specifically by norms promulgated within the international system” (1993, 593). In short, norms on every level are “deeply entwined” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 893) and there is an “increasing simultaneity of domestic and international normative processes” (Sikkink 1998, 519).

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<sup>16</sup> Armitav Acharya has clearly demonstrated this point. See for instance his 2016 article *'Ideas Shift': How Ideas From the Rest are Reshaping Global Order* and his 2004 and 2011 articles on similar matter.

<sup>17</sup> “The theoretical background of this argument can be found in sociological institutionalism which argued that institutions tend to converge through isomorphic adaptation” (Risse and Ropp 1999, 271).

## **Chapter 2 – Conceptual Framework**

### **2.1 Ontology**

Ontology is inherent to theorizing. As a metaphysical perspective on what is, what exists, and, in some cases, on the nature of things, it sheds light on one's conception and views of the world. Much of the ancients' work was informed by and attentive to ontology. From Asia and Europe to the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas, one frequently finds ontological questions and perspectives along with ideas and thoughts on the nature of things. The writings of many pre- and post-Socratic thinkers are centered around these questions. Discerning one's ontological position can significantly help understand how they define and see the world and which dimensions, focus, and emphasis they provide when studying it. For many, a refined ontology is a cornerstone for comprehensive research and studies. While some theorists present their ontology explicitly and explore its implications, others proceed implicitly – deliberately or at their own risk.

#### **2.1.1 A Becoming Ontology**

We support an ontology that sees our universe as continuous processes of change. This view finds its roots in philosophical lessons inherited from Heraclitus of Ephesus and Buddha which emphasize that the only constant in the world is change. We argue that acknowledging change is among the first steps towards theorizing and understanding the world. Without a proper view of change, one cannot account for the ongoing processes that stretch through space and time. In the unlimited realm of social theorizing, this is particularly important.

This partly explains why Emmanuel Adler's social theory of cognitive evolution brings considerable contributions to our study of norms emergence, as he offers a perceptive becoming ontology. Transposed to his study of international social orders, a becoming ontology suggests that "social orders are in a

constant state of nonequilibrium” which implies that “change and flows occur continuously, even and especially when social order is presumed to be stable” (Adler 2019, 3 and 47). For Adler, becoming “means that whatever exists is a process constantly being reshaped” (ibid., 50). These statements are aligned with Heraclitus’ perspectives on the world characterized by “incessant becoming” (Soumet et al. 2013, 31). In fact, Adler recognizes the influence of Heraclitus’ views on his own understandings (2019, 45).

To understand Adler’s perspective, three fundamental points should be emphasized. First, his theory of cognitive evolution is a “theory of world ordering” where practices play a key role; situating his views in line with the recent practice turn in IR (ibid., 9). Indeed, “cognitive evolution theory takes practices as being indivisible from the constitutional norms and fundamental rules that organize international social orders” (ibid., 140). Second, world ordering is seen as an incessant process of redefinition between practices and knowledge – in which norms play a key role and where “dynamic stabilization of new subjectivities” constantly occur (ibid., 16). Indeed, Adler’s approach sees “world politics as ongoing dynamic processes of social orders’ constitution, maintenance, contestation, evolution, and demise” (ibid., 295). This is supported by two pillars: the idea that “cognition is social” – arising from social interaction – and “social becoming” – expressing how everything is in a continual process of definition (ibid., 3 and 19). Third, while Adler sees the world as becoming, processual and dynamic, he also argues that “change and metastability cannot exist without each other” (ibid., 50). In this light, we need to study change, stability, and continuity in their own rights and “because a proper understanding of change itself is not possible without knowledge of the process of persistence against which it is measured” (Patterson 2010, 149 in Adler 2019, 235). Adler argues that through continuous change in international social orders, one can also discern metastability – understood as “practice’ continuity in a stable state of flow below a sociocognitive threshold” (2019, 3). In this light, studying the intimate relationship between practices and norms can bring insightful clues to understanding both change and (meta)stability. Moreover, by combining both Heraclitus’ and Adler’s philosophies, we can bring forward

an insightful metaphor that exemplifies our ontology. As the former philosopher suggested, to illustrate how our world is characterized by continuous change, you can cross the same river only once: “the river where you set your foot just now is gone – those waters giving way to this, now this” (Heraclitus 2003, 27). Yet, one can add that the riverbed brings metastability to the constantly changing river. As the river always renews itself and changes, the riverbed continues to guide the course of the water. Nonetheless, the riverbed can still be the object of significant change, such as a modification of trajectory, overflow or drought. We argue that world politics and international social orders are like the river and its bed; constantly evolving and changing, metastable and subject to occasional – but in some cases significant – changes. Building on both Heraclitus and Adler, we claim that change and metastability are intrinsic to the world we live in and must therefore be part of our theorizing of the emergence of norms in world politics.

### **2.1.2 Agents and Structures**

“All social scientific theories embody an at least implicit solution to the “agent-structure problem,” which situates agents and social structures in relation to one another” (Wendt 1987, 337).

Wendt’s structuration position vis-à-vis the *Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory* is significant in exposing how “human agents and social structures are, in one way or another, theoretically interdependent or mutually implicating entities” (ibid., 338). In the same vein, the sociologist Anthony Giddens called for the combination of “a theory of the human agent, or of the subject; an account of the conditions and consequences of action; and an interpretation of 'structure' as somehow embroiled in both those conditions and consequences” (1979, 49). Wendt answered this call, conceptualizing that neither agents or structures are the “ontologically primitive units”, as they are both “ontologically dependent upon the other” and thus “joining agents and structures in a “dialectical synthesis” that overcome[s] the subordination of one to the other” (Wendt 1987, 337, 356, and 360).

Clearly, “the agent-structure problem is essentially an ontological problem” (Wight 2006, 3). By “giving equal ontological status” to both, Wendt favours a structuration position that allows us to “use agents and structures to explain some of the key properties of each as effects of the other” (1987, 339). In other words, Wendt’s structuration theory – to which we adhere – provides “a relational solution to the agent-structure problem that conceptualizes agents and structures as mutually constituted or co-determined entities” (ibid., 350). As he underscores, this position allows for the development of insightful and adapted explanations of social action and “forces us to see agents and structures as simultaneously involved in the production of social phenomena” (ibid., 361).

This view is largely shared within IR constructivist literature. “Constructivists emphasize a process of interaction between agents and structures; the ontology is one of mutual constitution, where neither unit of analysis – agents or structures – is reduced to the other” as, per example, “for constructivists, agents (states) and structures (global norms) are interacting; they are mutually constituted” (Checkel 1998, 326; Katzenstein 1996, 2). In our study of the emergence of global norms, this ontological stance will favor the inclusion of the complex interplay between agents and structures.

Equally, paying attention to the social role of practices and norms helps understand structuration theory. On the one hand, agents and social structures – such as institutions and norms – “become concrete by practices” (Adler 2019, 46). In other words, “agents are inseparable from social structures in the sense that their action is possible only in virtue of those structures, and social structures cannot have causal significance except insofar as they are instantiated by agents” (Wendt 1987, 365). On the other hand, social norms “develop in the course of the actual relationships between individuals [...] and do change eventually with the important changes in the structure of the situation that gave rise to those norms in the beginning” (Sherif 1936, 17). For our study, the emergence of norms “is both driven and mediated (analytically speaking) by changes in the structure” (Archer 2013, 171) and changes in the structure are driven and mediated by the emergence of norms. Moreover, the interplay between agents



and structures can eventually lead to “the formation of a new superstructure of norms” (Sherif 1936, 202). In this light, we can consider that the “creation of global norms applying to all, are partly an effect and partly a cause of structural change” (Archer 2013, 171).

Wendt’s structuration theory is built on the philosophy of science – namely scientific realism. By allowing the researcher to ascribe an “ontological status to unobservable entities” on the basis that these entities “can produce observable effects” or “are manipulable by human agents”, scientific realism for Wendt aims to provide explanations by identifying “underlying causal *mechanisms*” behind phenomenon (1987, 351-353, emphasis in original). Following his steps, we will analyze norm emergence by integrating “the basic realist idea that scientific explanation consists in the identification of underlying causal mechanisms” (ibid., 354-55). This can prove to be particularly valuable to our theoretical endeavour that aims to understand and uncover the processes of norm emergence, given that unobservable entities and causal mechanisms may be at play.

## **2.2 Epistemology**

Whereas ontology brings light to one’s views of the world, epistemology unveils how one intends to study it. In most cases, they go hand in hand; epistemology receives direction from ontology; it is told “where to look” and must take position on “how to look”. Epistemology also questions our ability to know, the limits of our understanding, and the conditions and means to acquire knowledge. In short, epistemology is a view on how, and if, we can gather knowledge. Epistemologies find their roots in the philosophy of knowledge. The choice of epistemology has important implications for how phenomena will be studied, the type of knowledge created, and the conclusions drawn. In our case, a complementary epistemology must be selected or crafted in accordance with our becoming ontology. Likewise, to uncover the processes that characterize norm emergence, an adapted epistemology is needed.

### 2.2.1 Evolutionary Epistemology

Adler's becoming ontology suggests looking at practices and social processes to grapple with change and stability in world politics. In his words, "what is real are processes" (Adler 2019, 45). Accordingly, we propose that what can best inform the study of political and social reality is the investigation of those processes, and our epistemological perspective thus embraces a focus on social processes, where the emergence of norms holds an important place. Adler points to "complementarity and consistency between evolutionary epistemology as a general principle of knowledge and complexity concepts such as emergence" (2019, 103). We build on Adler's evolutionary epistemology to provide a tailored outlook on the emergence of a global norm on plastic pollution attested by the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention.

Importantly, Adler's evolutionary epistemology does not adhere "to a reduction of the social sciences to the natural sciences" as he suggests that "organic evolution is only one instance of a broader epistemological pattern of evolutionary change and metastability" (ibid., 78). Indeed, his view provides a focus on sociocultural – rather than natural – evolution; whereas practices, ideas, knowledge, and norms follow an evolutionary pattern (ibid., 81-2). According to the author, "theories of change based on evolutionary epistemology can offer a better explanation than, for instance, rational choice and structural-functional explanations, without having to reduce the social sciences and the humanities to the natural sciences" (ibid., 82). In short, Adler's evolutionary theory of knowledge is an interdisciplinary epistemology that provides insight on the emergence of norms by accounting for the social construction of knowledge, ideas, norms, practices, agents, and structures along with their retroactive, co-constitutive, and co-constructive interactions with each other (ibid., 78-96).

Where "philosophers and sociologists of science have pointed to the epistemological difficulty of verifying our collective visions of the world" (Haas 1992, 21), evolutionary epistemology suggests seeing the challenges of complexity and "the difficulty of prediction as a consequence less of inadequate

methods or knowledge than of the nature of the natural and the social worlds” (Adler 2019, 107). In this respect, Adler advises that “complex processes like emergence and nonlinear change *are features of the social world*” and suggests that we should therefore “enrich our theories” by taking them into account (ibid., 103, emphasis in original).

In line with our ontology, “one of evolutionary epistemology’s most important points is the need to study change and stability as part of a single theory of knowing the world” (ibid., 102). Indeed, “concepts of change and stability support and strengthen evolutionary epistemology” (ibid.). As change and stability are linked to the definitions and redefinitions of the self and the situation (March and Olsen 1998, 959), evolutionary epistemology takes both agents and social context as evolving together and pays attention to the ubiquity of normative and ideational concerns in daily social experiences. When it comes to norms, evolutionary epistemology answers Robert Axelrod’s call to consider that “what is needed is a theory that accounts not only for the norms existing at any point in time, but also for how norms change over time” (1986, 1096). In short, evolutionary epistemology considers change, metastability, and both linearity and nonlinearity in an all-encompassing scope, and suggests that the social world is conditioned by “knowledgeable and interpreting agents”, structures, norms, ideas, knowledge and practices (Adler 2019, 47-101). Accordingly, it offers a tailored approach to studying the emergence of norms.

Evolutionary epistemology sees evolution as occurring “through multiple mechanisms” (ibid., 80). This goes in line with the life cycle model that we will test. For instance, the model emphasizes, among other things, the role of ideational mechanisms. In the authors’ words, idea and norm shifts are “the main vehicles for system transformation” in an ideational international structure (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 894). Compatible with an evolutionary epistemology, this suggests that “a small fluctuation in human interpretation, in a system where positive feedback may prevail, can thus lead to the construction of rules, roles, and expectations, which, after being constructed, then construct us” (Adler 2019, 103-4). In other words, evolutionary epistemology and the model’s focus on ideational mechanisms suggests that “our

very understanding of the world changes the conditions of the changing world” (Popper 1990, 17 in Adler 2019, 103-4). Likewise, as norms emerge, they change the normative superstructure within which transnational actors interact. Accordingly, to account for both change and stability, we should also consider that “shared ideas, expectations and beliefs about appropriate behavior are what give the world, structure, order, and stability” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 894). This allows for a better understanding of the subject at hand, illustrating the implications of the change in the international ideational structure surrounding plastic pollution in the World Ocean.

It is important to acknowledge that in an “ever-changing environment”, one must be attentive to the fact that “one of the most important features of norms is that the standing of a norm can change in surprisingly short time” (Axelrod 1986, 1096 and 1110). Accordingly, special attention should be paid to the spatial and temporal contexts within which norms emerge. The context in which interactions between transnational actors and global norms take place should therefore be accounted for in order to understand the sources of change and stability in world politics. These points will be further investigated through our case study, by the means of process tracing, and will benefit from our attempts to answer the call “for deeper examination of the points of contact between normative and empirical study of norms in global politics more broadly, as a way of developing a more integrated understanding of the role of norms in global life” (Hurrell and Macdonald 2013, 80).

## **2.3 Theoretical framework**

### **2.3.1 Constructivism**

As a theoretical framework inspired by creative philosophical perspectives and century-long debates, constructivism offers the opportunity to study world politics through unexplored lenses. In the last decades, IR scholars have increasingly become interested in exploring how constructivism sheds new

light on the complex interplay between the social and physical worlds, the local and the global spheres, and the increasing challenges of transnational interdependence and connections between the global ecosystem and global society for global governance. Among key research, Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie's study of the analytical foci in the *International Organizations* journal pointed to "identifiable shifts in how the phenomenon of international governance has been conceived" (1986, 755). The authors explained that among these shift, the development of the regime scholarship in the 1970s contributed to prepare the grounds for the rise of constructivism<sup>18</sup> (Risse 2013, 430). Their work and the contribution of their colleagues led to the development of an important body of research studying the social construction of international relations and world politics. The growing constructivist research program not only "argues that the international reality is socially constructed by cognitive structures that give meaning to the material world" (Adler 1997, 319), but also proposes new understandings of the construction of norms, practices, and identities by providing an emphasis "on the importance of social processes that generate changes in normative beliefs" (Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998, 682; Hopft 1998, 192).

The constructivism school of thoughts considers that people and societies 'construct each other' (Onuf 1989, 36), suggesting that social relations construct or make people into what they are, and people "make the world what it is" (Onuf 1998, 4, emphasis in original). Onuf's constructivist stance emphasizes "the proposition that human beings are social beings, and we would not be human but for our social relations" (ibid., 3). Building on centuries of old philosophies and recent theoretical endeavours in social sciences, "constructivism is the view that *the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world*" (Adler 1997, 322, emphasis in original). In short, proponents of constructivism suggest

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<sup>18</sup> Pioneers of the constructivism turn in the IR literature include, but are not limited to, Emanuel Adler, Michael Barnett, Martha Finnemore, Ernst Haas and his son Peter Haas, Peter Katzenstein, Friedrich Kratochwil, Nicholas Onuf, Christian Reus-Smith, John Ruggie, Kathryn Sikkink, and Alexander Wendt.

that “people make society, and society makes people [in] a continuous, two-way process”, that “interests are constructed through a process of social interaction” and that “reality is socially constructed” (Haas 1992, 21; Katzenstein 1996, 2; Onuf 1998, 4). Additionally, constructivists seek “to understand how preferences are formed and knowledge is generated” (Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998, 681). Ideas, norms and their associated ideational and normative concerns, together with the role of beliefs, words and language, identity, culture, and the notions of social construction, complex interactions and interpretation all have an important place in the constructivism literature. Whereas Onuf suggests that “constructivism applies to all fields of social inquiry” (1998, 3), Hopf indicates that “constructivism is best defined in relation to the issues it claims to apprehend” (1998, 172). Attentive to the social construction of reality, a constructivist approach to international relations tends to focus on social context, intersubjectivity, norms, rules, the role of common understandings, the role of identity in the constitution of one’s interests, intersubjectivity, the role of rules, practices and social norms, along with the co-construction of agents and structures (Battistella 2015, 318).

For constructivists, ideas, norms, knowledge and practices are particularly relevant to understanding the sources of change and stability in world politics, as they are considered at the origin of the creation of meaning, actions, and behaviors (Adler 2019, 62; Battistella 2015, 316). For instance, “constructivists focus on discursive and social practices that define the identity of actors and the normative order within which they make their moves” (Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998, 681-2). This is one of the many reasons why a better understanding of norm emergence can be useful. Similarly, Wendt claims that “constructivists argue that material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded” (1995, 73). An analysis of the constructivism turn in IR shows that “constructivists have demonstrated that their sociological approach leads to new and meaningful interpretations of international politics” (Checkel 1998, 325).

Constructivism offers an insightful middle-ground between multiple theoretical perspectives to the benefit of our search for a theory apt to study processes of norm emergence, as it opens and “creates new areas for theoretical and empirical investigation” (Adler 1997, 319). Some advocates of constructivism suggest that it occupies “a middle ground between rational choice theorists and postmodern scholars” (Checkel 1998, 327). As such, “the promise of constructivism is to restore a kind of partial order and predictability to world politics that derives not from imposed homogeneity, but from an appreciation of difference” (Hopf 1998, 200). In other words, constructivism attempts to build bridges between philosophies of science by offering “a socio-cognitive synthesis that draws on the material, subjective, and intersubjective dimensions of the world” (Adler 1997, 323). On one hand, “constructivists have incorporated some of the strategic logics of rationalism” (Snidal and Wendt 2009, 5) and on the other, they have integrated the focus of postmodern scholars in “interpretive social theory and vocabulary” (Adler 1997, 320). Consequently, causal explanations and discursive understandings are both considered by constructivists for their relevance in explaining change and stability in world politics. Constructivism offers fertile ground on which structuration theory can flourish thereby accounting for the co-construction of structures and agents. “Rather than focusing exclusively on how structures constitute agent’s identities and interests, [constructivism] also seeks to explain how *individual agents* socially construct these structures in the first place” (Adler 1997, 330, emphasis in original). Constructivism is tailored to provide the basis on which we can test our studied theoretical model – the life cycle of norms – and investigate our empirical case study.

### **2.3.2 Theoretical Model**

Rooted in constructivism, Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink’s life cycle model is central to our study. While constructivism offers broad outlooks to approach norm emergence, the life cycle model provides specific focus on causal mechanisms. Both can greatly inform our analysis of norm emergence.

Therefore, we will combine our constructivist theoretical framework with Finnemore and Sikkink's theorizing of norm emergence to investigate the life cycle model's ability to offer an accurate account of the studied outcome. With the hope of bridging theory and practice, analyzing the presence of the model's conceptualization of norm emergence and its principal causal mechanisms will be done in conjunction with the case of plastic pollution in the World Ocean. Indeed, by operationalizing the model's explanation of the mechanisms that contribute to norm emergence, we will be able to compare them with the empirical observations of the processes that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention. As such, we hope to determine if the life cycle model's account of norm emergence is a relevant guide for the growing research program on norms and their influence in world politics.

Although Finnemore and Sikkink's life cycle model was briefly introduced in the first chapter, we will now provide a detailed description of how it theorizes norm emergence. This will allow us to shed light on the processes and causal mechanisms emphasized by the authors in their explanation of norm emergence. The two authors "generate some propositions about three aspects of norms — their origins, the mechanisms by which they exercise influence, and the conditions under which norms will be influential in world politics" (ibid., 888). Although we pay attention to all three, the first is the focus of our inquiry. Accordingly, we investigate the life cycle first stage, namely norm emergence. Finnemore and Sikkink's "patterned" model suggest that "different behavioral logics dominate different segments of the life cycle" (ibid.). Hence, they underline that "different social processes and logics of action may be involved at different stages" (ibid., 895). An in-depth understanding of the implications of this statement is particularly crucial for the present study, as it suggests that the prominent "actors, motives, and mechanisms of influence" vary during the different stages of the life cycle and that the diverse social processes and logics of action in the norm emergence stage must be adequately theorized in order to operationalize, mobilize and ultimately test their model (ibid.).



To begin, Finnemore and Sikkink suggest that norm emergence is intimately linked to the efforts and initiatives of “norm entrepreneurs”<sup>19</sup> (ibid., 897). Similarly, Ann Florini suggested that “norms are most likely to obtain their initial foothold through the efforts of a “norm entrepreneur,” an individual or organization that sets out to change the behavior of others” (1996, 375). Norm entrepreneurs can take many forms, from activists and scientists to government representatives and NGOs members. Finnemore and Sikkink’s study suggests that initial leadership of norm entrepreneurs have proven to be key in most global norm emergence processes (1998, 897). Our study can therefore benefit from an attentive focus on norm entrepreneurs’ efforts to understand the processes that led to the studied amendments of the Basel Convention. As they additionally pointed out, the concept of norm entrepreneurs is closely associated with Lawrence Lessig’s concept of “meaning architects” as, in both cases, these actors endeavour to bring new ideas, norms, and meanings in political arenas to light (ibid., 897). Their conceptualization of norm entrepreneurs not only calls for attentiveness to their leadership but also for their role in meaning creation processes, emphasizing that “norm entrepreneurs are critical for norm emergence because they call attention to issues or even “create” issues by using language that names, interprets, and dramatizes them” (ibid.).

These processes are closely related to the social movement literature’s notion of framing. Prominent contributors to this literature, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly have suggested that framing can be understood as an “active, creative, constitutive process” (2001, 16), a definition consistent with our ontological and epistemological perspectives. As Tarrow has subsequently emphasized, frames “are present in all societies to organize experience and guide action” (2005, 61). Inspired by Tarrow’s work, Peter A. Hall has stressed that “frames are not ideas, but ways of packaging and presenting ideas” (2008, 306). This reminds us that frames are not only constituted of ideational and

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<sup>19</sup> According to Ann Florini “the term “norm entrepreneur” was used by John Mueller at “The Emergence of New Norms in Personal and International Behavior” conference held at UCLA, May 1993” (1996, 375).

normative concerns but are the result of agents' strategic decisions. Finnemore and Sikkink build on these discussions and shed light on the importance of framing in norms entrepreneurs' undertakings. Indeed, they suggest that "the construction of cognitive frames is an essential component of norm entrepreneurs' political strategies, since, when they are successful, the new frames resonate with broader public understandings and are adopted as new ways of talking about and understanding issues" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 897). In IR literature, both the notions of framing and strategic social construction have been used to depict the processes where agents use language to persuade others of their views. Once framed around a particular situation, frames and social construction can have structural influence on agent's behavior. Moreover, "in constructing their frames, norm entrepreneurs face firmly embedded alternative norms and frames that create alternative perceptions of both appropriateness and interest" (ibid.). This calls to attention the role of previous and already established norms, together with the presence of alternative interpretations and concurring views. In short, framing and strategic social construction processes are constantly evolving processes at the intersection of ideational, agential, and structural mechanisms and, as such, will be thoroughly considered in our case study and analysis. Finnemore and Sikkink also focus on persuasion as the prevailing mechanism that characterizes the stage of norm emergence (ibid., 895), arguing that "persuasion is central to most of the empirical case studies about normative influence and change" (ibid., 914). They define this mechanism as "the process by which agent action becomes social structure, ideas become norms, and the subjective becomes the intersubjective" (ibid.).

The authors also suggest that "ideational commitment is the main motivation when entrepreneurs promote norms or ideas because they believe in the ideals and values embodied in the norms" (ibid., 898). This attests to the centrality of ideational and normative mechanisms in the life cycle model, supporting the idea that "the human capacity for reflection or learning has its greatest impact on the manner in which individuals and social actors attach meaning to the material world and cognitively

frame the world they know, experience and understand” (Adler 1997, 322). According to Finnemore and Sikkink, transnational promoters of ideational and normative concerns resolve to combine multi-level strategies in order to have an ideational and normative influence on political life, creating what Matthew Hoffman has referred to as “a community of norm acceptors” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 898; Hoffmann 2007, 5). As emphasized, Finnemore and Sikkink consider that strategic social construction, which entails persuasive efforts and effective strategies, is an important means by which transnational actors can lead to the emergence of norms (1998, 910-11). The life cycle model supports the idea that during these processes, “the ingenuity and creativity of norm entrepreneurs matters as well for the capacity of norms to breach institutional structures and cultural frames” (Alger and Dauvergne 2019, 4). Accordingly, creative thinking can be central to promoting new norms, especially when they run counter to previously established ones.

Finnemore and Sikkink also suggest that norm entrepreneurs work with organizational platforms to promote their motives (1998, 898) and argue that “all norm promoters at the international level need some kind of organizational platform from and through which they promote their norms” (ibid., 899). They further suggest that “norms entrepreneurs and organizational platforms from which the entrepreneurs act” are the key elements in the creation and emergence of new norms (ibid., 896). In some cases, “platforms are constructed specifically for the purpose of promoting the norm” entrepreneurs are supporting, while in others, norm entrepreneurs must work with “standing international organizations that have purposes and agendas other than simply promoting one specific norm” (ibid., 899). Consequently, “those other agendas may shape the content of norms promoted by the organization significantly” (ibid.). The structural characteristics of organizations, such as their membership, calendar and *modus operandi* may lead them to pursue specific agenda and programs. For instance, the United Nations “has distinctive structural features that influence the kinds of norms it promulgates” (ibid.). This supports the idea that structural mechanisms, which includes institutional and organizational influences,

are important in accounting for the study of norm emergence. Finnemore and Sikkink's conceptualization of norm emergence can be synthesized in three broad categories of causal mechanisms: ideational, agential, and structural mechanisms. In light of these insights, we can move toward the operationalization of these three main categories of causal mechanisms.

### **2.3.3 Causal Mechanisms**

Causal mechanisms can be defined as "ultimately unobservable physical, social, or psychological processes through which agents with causal capacities operate, but only in specific contexts or conditions, to transfer energy, information, or matter to other entities" (George and Bennett 2005, 137). McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly have suggested that causal mechanisms can be seen as a "delimited class of events that alter relations among specified elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations" (2001, 24). Put simply, they can be "defined as a theory of a system of interlocking parts that transmits causal forces from X to Y" (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 29).

In line with these definitions, the remainder of this section will operationalize the causal mechanisms studied and explain how they work. As Checkel notes, "process tracers need carefully and fully to theorize their mechanisms" (2014, 90). Moreover, the importance of a detailed description of studied mechanisms also finds justification in Finnemore and Sikkink's proposition that "as contemporary researchers make their arguments about norms, culture, and ideas, they will need to specify ideational causal claims and mechanisms clearly, think seriously about the microfoundations on which theoretical claims about norms rest, and evaluate those claims in the context of carefully designed historical and empirical research" (1998, 890). We can thus benefit greatly from identifying "the precise causal mechanisms by which principled ideas and norms influence identities, preferences, and ultimately the behavior of actors" (Risse and Ropp 1999, 271) and more precisely, the processes of the emergence of norms themselves. As underlined, Finnemore and Sikkink's life cycle conceptualization of norm

emergence is built on three broad mechanisms – ideational, agential, and structural – where all three co-constituting each other and co-evolving together.

Finnemore and Sikkink's account of ideational mechanisms' influence on norm emergence emphasizes the role of strategic social construction, which can be broadly understood as the translation of ideas into *frames*. "Framing an issue constitutes a strategic construction, since language is used for instrumental purposes" (Risse 2013, 434). These frames would in turn impact agents' practices and discourses as well as institutional and organizational agendas. Finnemore and Sikkink suggest that the "international structure is determined by the international distribution of ideas" (1998, 894) echoing Wendt's suggestion that "social life is 'ideas all the way down' (until you get to biology and natural resources)" (1995, 74). Our analysis of Finnemore and Sikkink's model can therefore benefit greatly from constructivism's account of ideational causality (Björkdahl 2002, 12). Indeed, there is a strong emphasis in the constructivism literature on the influence of language and discourses, the selection of laws and the creation of narratives on the construction of reality. For instance, Adler's emphasizes the interplay between knowledge, discourses and practices by suggesting that ideas, norms and rules "structure and therefore *socially constitute* – 'cause' – the things people do" (Adler 1997, 329, emphasis in original). By building on Luhmann's work, he further suggests that "acts of communication are the elementary units of social systems" (Adler 2019, 62) and that ideas "have structural characteristics" and "are the medium and propellant of social actions" (Adler 1997, 325). Constructivism further suggests that understanding preferences, choices, and behavior all require close attention to discourses and practices in the creation of common knowledge and "an analysis of the social processes by which norms evolve and identities are constituted" (Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998, 675 and 681). Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner's work also highlighted that shared norms not only affect the behaviour, discourses and practices of agents, but also contribute to the constructing agents' identities (Battistella 2015, 319). As constructivism reminds us, "collective understandings, such as norms, endow physical objects with purpose and therefore help

constitute reality” (Adler 1997, 324). Accordingly, a comprehensive approach to norm emergence should include a focus on the role of ideas, discourses, and already established norms in the emergence of new ones. As outlined, this is central to Finnemore and Sikkink’s life cycle model.

The constructivism literature, and especially Finnemore and Sikkink’s life cycle model, calls for particular attention to the influence of ideas and how they are framed through strategic social construction on norm emergence. As such, we will investigate the presence of strategic social construction processes that may explain the causal forces at play between ideas – our “X” – and their resulting impact on the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution – our “Y”. Finnemore and Sikkink’s model suggests that strategic social construction is a cause of norm emergence. To test their view, we will trace the presence of the strategic social construction ideational mechanism in the studied outcome. This will be made possible by analyzing the recurring ideas and discourses on plastic pollution and test if their translation in the emergence of a norm in the scope of the Basel Convention have followed the ideational causal logic proposed. We will be attentive to the ideational and normative concerns of actors in their attempts to mobilize consensus through “persuasive communication aimed at convincing others to take their side” (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002, 12). We will also analyze and “think about the strategic activity of actors in an intersubjectively structured political universe” (Keck and Sikkink 1999, 90) and investigate whether strategic interaction leads to the construction of new standards of appropriateness. As appropriateness is ultimately determined intersubjectively (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 892 and 915), we will explore attempts and efforts to socially construct the appropriateness of responses to plastic pollution in the World Ocean and investigate their connection with the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention.

Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink have highlighted that “groups engage in “frame bridging” or “frame amplification” by building on already existing norms but attempting to expand the domain to which these norms apply” (2002, 16). This notably calls for paying attention to the role of previous norms in the

emergence of new ones. The authors further stress how “social movements and NGOs often take new ideas and turn them into frames that define issues at stake and the appropriate strategies for actions” (ibid., 12), with the aim of transforming “the terms and nature of the debate” (Keck and Sikkink 1999, 90). In most instances, “carrying this task out transnationally is far more daunting than doing so domestically, but where successful, such activity can have far-reaching effects” (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002, 13). As Kaplan noted, “the strategic character of decision making indicates that normative models may be useful” to study international relations (1961, 473–74). This further supports the idea that accounting for ideational mechanisms implies looking at strategic construction processes and normative concerns.

Looking at strategic social construction processes also calls to attention the role of persuasion, highlighting the intimate link between ideational and agential mechanisms in norm emergence. “International relations theorists have tried to conceptualize these processes by thinking about persuasion, legitimacy, socialization, and communicative action” (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002, 12). Moreover, they have suggested that “actors’ identities may also be reshaped through discursive processes of argumentation and persuasion” (Risse and Ropp 1999, 236). As highlighted by Finnemore and Sikkink, persuasion holds a significant place in these processes. According to Adler “persuasion is a struggle to define mutual understandings” (1997, 341). For instance, “when political actors interact, cooperatively or otherwise, they may be able to affect each other’s understanding so that they can have a shared definition of their situation; they can collectively identify beneficial courses of action and recognize them as norms” (ibid.). Observation of these dynamics is therefore also central to our study. Our analysis of norm emergence and the role of persuasion benefits from constructivism’s account of social causality which emphasizes the role of agents’ causal capacities in the construction of social realities (ibid., 329).

The life cycle model theorizes that persuasion is the central agential mechanisms. Intimately linked to ideational and structural mechanisms, the agential mechanism of persuasion stresses the importance of bargaining, argumentation and social interaction processes between agents in constructing

reality. Accordingly, it draws our attention to negotiation dynamics between actors prior to and during the Conference of Parties that led to the adoption of the Plastic Waste Amendments. It suggests that actors – our “X” in this case – have an influence on the studied outcome, our “Y”, following the logics of the persuasion mechanism. For instance, under the logic of persuasion, we may find patterns of influence between actors and see change in actors’ position which in turn influence their support of the emerging norm. Moreover, studying persuasion calls for paying attention to the processes of contestation between actors. Equally, analysing persuasion also invites studying whether collaborative efforts were mobilized. Testing the presence of persuasion in the processes that led to the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution within the scope of the Basel Convention may provide insights on the processes that led to the adoption of the Plastic Waste Amendments. It will also allow us to investigate Sikkink’s statement suggesting that “it is often the collaboration among norm entrepreneurs inside of governments, those within international organizations, and nongovernmental actors that leads to the emergence” of norms (1998, 518).

To do so, it is imperative to be attentive to agential mechanisms in norm emergence. Risse-Kappen reminded that *Ideas do not float freely* and Haas suggested that ideas “would be sterile without carriers” (Risse-Kappen 1994; Haas 1992, 27). In Finnemore and Sikkink’s words, “norms do not appear out of thin air; they are actively built by agents having strong notions about appropriate or desirable behavior in their community” (1998, 896). A focus on the role of agential mechanisms finds resonance in the life cycle model’s attention to norm entrepreneurs which suggests that agents are “the social constructors of their own practices and structures” and thereby have an impact on which norms emerge (Adler 1997, 325; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

Finnemore and Sikkink further suggest that “one prominent feature of modern organizations and an important source of influence for international organizations in particular is their use of expertise and information to change the behavior of other actors” and that “a number of empirical studies document



the ways that professional training of bureaucrats in these organizations helps or blocks the promotion of new norms within standing organizations” (1998, 899). This calls for taking into account the role of expertise and epistemic communities and in the study of agential mechanisms. It is worth noting Oran Young’ emphasis on the importance of political leadership in bargaining processes. Young distinguishes between entrepreneurial, structural, and intellectual leadership and notes that “leadership, after all, is thought by many to constitute one of the key elements of all politics” (Young 1991, 281 and 286). This supports Finnemore and Sikkink’s emphasis on the role of norm entrepreneurs as well as our view of the ability of state- and non-state actors to lead by example in world politics as they can “assume norm leadership” (Alger and Dauvergne 2019, 1).

We will also investigate the role and influence of structural mechanisms on the norm emergence processes. Our structuration position vis-à-vis the agents-structure problem in international relations is one key source of this focus. Indeed, as we perceive agents and structures as ontologically interdependent, we must pay attention to both equally. For instance, we suggest that it “might be fruitful to explore how international norms and institutions mediate the policy impact of transnational actors” and vice-versa (Risse-Kappen 1995, 13). Our focus on structural mechanisms also finds important emphasis in Finnemore and Sikkink’s model, underlining not only that structural mechanisms are important in explaining norm emergence but are also co-constituting forces in relation to ideational and agential mechanisms. For instance, Finnemore and Sikkink point out that “the persuasiveness of a normative claim in law is explicitly tied to the “fit” of that claim within existing normative frameworks; legal arguments are persuasive when they are grounded in precedent” (1998, 914-5). They further argue that “since normative contestation in law is so explicit and well documented, and since much of contemporary norm politics in the world has a strong legal component, [...] an examination of legal mechanisms for norm selection and dissemination will be instructive for IR scholars” (ibid., 915). In other words, their model suggests that processes of norm emergence take place in normative and legal contexts

already in place and that that “new norms never enter a normative vacuum but instead emerge in a highly contested normative space where they must compete with other norms and perceptions of interest” (ibid., 897). This calls for an analysis of the Basel Convention’s already established framework impact on how norms can be promoted within its structure. In other words, Finnemore and Sikkink invite analysts interested in their model to pay attention to the different institutional and organizational frameworks that may guide norm emergence. Accordingly, we will investigate the *rules of the game* of the Basel Convention and its broader institutional and organization structures that influence strategic social construction, persuasion efforts and ultimately norm emergence.

This call to account for how opportunity structures – also largely determined by previous norms, present incentives and institutions, and constantly evolving political contexts – may play an important role in the ability of norm entrepreneurs to support the emergence of a new norm. Referring to Tarrow’s 1998 work, Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink emphasized that “political opportunity structures are those consistent dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for or constraints on people undertaking collective action (2002, 17). For instance, institutions such as “the UN and its various organizations increasingly serve as fora where transnational actors and state officials regularly meet and interact” (Risse 2013, 436). World politics is influenced by “a significant international opportunity structure enabling transnational advocacy to have an impact” (Risse 2013, 435). As Klotz suggested, “by focusing on the connections between agents and structures, using concepts such as framing and (international) opportunity structure, we can better understand global normative contestation and change” (2002, 56).

In sum, we will test Finnemore and Sikkink’s model to determine whether their three main mechanisms are present in the processes that led to the studied outcome. Their model calls for the analysis of the co-construction and co-constitutive processes between actors, norms, and institutions and their influence on the definition of the appropriate discourses and practices for the governance of plastic

in the scope of the Basel Convention and beyond. These combinations present numerous advantages. For instance, “thinking about norms in relation to practices eliminates the duality between principled and strategic actions” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 35). We will also look at how the three mechanisms constitutive dynamics may explain the emergence of a norm, namely strategic social construction and framing, persuasion and bargaining processes, and institutional, organizational, along with the structural influences of opportunity structures and already established norms.

## **2.4 Methodology**

A compatible methodology and choice of research methods are needed for the comprehensive analysis of the studied mechanisms. Accordingly, we intend to test the life cycle model’s mechanisms and collect data on the processes that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention by the means of process tracing. As noted, “the choice of a methodology must be conditioned, not only by the state of the literature, but by the state of the world, as we perceive it, and notably by the character of the causal relations in the cases to be investigated” (Hall 2008, 306). We find in process tracing the tools needed to combine the literature’s attention to multifactored dimensions of norm emergence together with our view of the world inspired by a becoming ontology and processual epistemology. Moreover, the ability of process tracing to emphasize the role of causal mechanisms can reveal important patterns that will test the life cycle model explanation of norm emergence processes. Now that the three main mechanisms of the model are outlined and explained, we need to test their presence based on the indicators provided by Finnemore and Sikkink. For instance, to study the presence of ideational mechanisms in the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution within the Basel Convention, we will investigate the presence of framing processes through the analysis of actors’ ideas and discourses; to test the presence of agential mechanisms, we will explore the actions of norm entrepreneurs and their persuasive efforts; to examine the presence of structural mechanisms, we will look at the role of

organizational platforms and opportunity structures. By combining process tracing with an in-depth single case study approach, we aim to provide a fine-grained analysis of the micro-stages that characterize norm emergence, serving as a basis from which to test the life cycle model and possibly leading to opportunities to complement the literature's accounts for norm emergence processes.

#### **2.4.1 Process Tracing**

According to Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey Checkel, “the term “process tracing” originated in the field of cognitive psychology in the United States in the late 1960s or early 1970s”. Whereas “the very first usage of the term remains unclear; the earliest relevant citation on Google Scholar is Hobarth 1972, a Ph.D. thesis at the University of Chicago” (2014, 5). Following a logic of “cross-lineage borrowing” or “creative cross-fertilization” – processes where people bring insightful perspectives to their undertaking as they “borrow ideas across disciplines” (Adler 2019, 95; Tarrow 2010, 9) – the introduction of the term in the political science literature is credited to Alexander George’s 1979 work. George later collaborated with Andrew Bennet to shed light on the advantages of process tracing methodologies to better understand the mechanisms behind observed social phenomena. In their seminal book *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, they define process tracing as an “operational procedure” that allows scholars to “identify and verify the observable within-case implications of causal mechanisms”, emphasizing that process tracing is useful to build “explanatory causal theories” (George and Bennett 2005, 138). Widely recognized for its advantages for qualitative analysis, process tracing provides an adapted theoretical apparatus for “the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator” (Collier 2011, 823).

Process tracing holds a promising potential to provide the present study with the method needed to undertake an in-depth single case study analysis, test the life cycle model’s causal mechanisms, and provide answers to its research question. It comprises the essential methodological tools to study the

processes that led to the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution in the scope of the Basel Convention by combining thorough case study analysis and mechanism assessments. Answering our research question will benefit greatly from the case-centered focus of process tracing and its emphasis “on the temporal unfolding and dense interactions of causal factors” (Blatter and Blume 2008, 316). On one hand, process tracing is well-suited to bringing forth the advantages of a multiple-observation, single case study. On the other, it is particularly useful in gaining a better understanding of the complex interactions between actors, norms, and institutions over time and space. In both cases, it follows our attempt to contribute to the literature and provide a better understanding of the processes at hand.

Students interested in providing novel insights to the study of change find in process tracing a suitable method to analyze the “actions and events, traces of motivations (or other lower level mechanisms), evidence of (complex) interactions between causal factors, and/or information about restricting/catalyzing contexts/conditions, and detailed features of a specific outcome” (ibid., 319). “Because they are able to follow actors’ positions and actions, process tracing studies have helped to unravel the mechanisms of changes (in preferences, as well as institutional changes), while bringing time and context back into the explanations” (Trampusch and Palier 2016, 451), which is particularly relevant as the study of critical junctures can significantly inform our study. Indeed, we suggest that studying the decisive moments that led to the emergence of a norm in the scope of the Basel Convention may provide key insights to our analysis of the life cycle model and studied outcome, just as “each of the great social revolutions of the modern era has left an indelible mark on the dominant norms of international society” (Hurrell and Macdonald 2013, 73). Process tracing analysis is “extremely sensitive to the accurate identification of the precise timing of these key turning points” (J. S. Levy 2008, 12); sees in critical junctures the “key steps in the process, which in turn permits good analysis of change and sequence” (Collier 2011, 824); and can prove helpful in analyzing the strategic interactions that led to the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution and its integration in the scope of the Basel Convention. In short, “process-

tracing case studies can make a critical contribution in providing a more precise measurement of these critical junctures and tipping points in individual cases” (Tarrow 1995, 474 in J. S. Levy 2008, 12).

IR scholars have claimed that, “in the end, the precise direction of the causal arrows<sup>20</sup> – whether norms lead to a change in (collective) identities which in turn leads to a change in (instrumental) interests or whether interests lead to a change in norms which in turn lead to a change in identities – has to be determined through careful empirical process-tracing” (Risse and Sikink 1999, 10). Although process tracing “is not a panacea, [...] when applied in appropriate research situations, it can enable us to make strong within-case causal inferences about causal mechanisms based on in-depth single-case studies that are arguably not possible with other social science methods” (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 2). Put simply, process tracing is a valuable research method to study the role of norms in relation to actors’ discourses and practices and organizations’ agendas and programs. Accordingly, this method is particularly useful for the investigation of the complex processes that led to the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution as it bridges the advantages a single-case study with analysis of complex mechanisms. Apt to combine constructivist conceptual frameworks and empirical curiosity, it will allow us to test the explanatory power of the life cycle model through a “relatively positivist mode of enquiry” that produces revealing diagnoses of “temporal sequence of events or phenomena” (Hall 2013, 24; Collier 2011, 824).

Scholars have also stressed the suitability of process tracing for theoretical pluralism as it “can be particularly useful when several theories alluding to rather different causal processes have been proposed to explain the same phenomenon, because it mobilises multiple observations to reach fine-grained assessments about the presence of a specific causal process” (Hall 2008, 314; Kay and Baker 2015, 3). This allows researchers to account for the role of numerous variables and evaluate different theoretical approaches’ explanatory power. For the purpose of the present study, this means that process tracing will

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<sup>20</sup> This view is based on the premise that causality is a linear process, to be discussed in a further study.

allow us to thoroughly investigate the processes that led to the emergence of the studied norm by accounting for both the interplay between norms, actors, and institutions together with the explanatory power of the norm life cycle. Furthermore, by accounting for the interactions at play, process tracing “holds the promise of a rich account of “how” a complex political phenomenon like public policy emerges” (Kay and Baker 2015, 2). In short, process tracing is useful in combining theoretical pluralism, and ultimately in allowing “the analyst to address the inherent complexity of political phenomena” (Kay and Baker 2015, 4).

Valuable insights can be gained from Beach and Pedersen’s 2013 book *Process Tracing – Foundations and Guidelines*, where the authors distinguish between three different types of process tracing: theory testing; theory building; and explaining outcome (2013, 12). The first two are theory-centric while the third is case-centric. Generally speaking, the first asks: “is causal mechanism present and does it function as theorized?”; the second asks: “what is the causal mechanism between X and Y?”; and the third asks: “what mechanistic explanation accounts for outcomes?” (ibid.). Although our case study and conceptual framework could accomplish all three, a major share of our case study and analysis chapters will focus on theory testing process tracing to provide value-added understanding of the life cycle of norms model. Indeed, for the purpose of the present study, theory testing process tracing provides the grounds to test the explanatory ability of the first stage of the life cycle of norms model of Finnemore and Sikkink.

#### **2.4.2 Theory Testing Process Tracing**

Theory testing process tracing is a case-centric, theory centered and hypothetico-deductive approach. By studying case-specific situations, it aims to test the presence of mechanisms in the studied outcome(s). Built on pre-existing theories, it derives mechanisms which are then tested against empirical data. In other words, “theory-testing process-tracing deduces a theory from the existing literature and

then tests whether evidence shows that each part of a hypothesized causal mechanism is present in a given case, enabling within-case inferences about whether the mechanism functioned as expected in the case and whether the mechanism as a whole was present” (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 4). In some instances, existing empirical work can also be used, through inductive reasoning, to formulate some hypotheses on the main causal mechanisms at play. Moreover, according to George and Bennet, “when theories are fairly well developed, researchers can use case studies for theory testing” (2005, 115). This is what we intend to do with the life cycle model.

“In theory-testing process-tracing, we know both X and Y and we either have existing conjectures about a plausible mechanism or are able to use logical reasoning to formulate a causal mechanism from existing theorization” (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 13). For instance, in the case of agential mechanisms, X is norms entrepreneurs and Y is the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution in the scope of the Basel Convention. Between them, persuasion is the mechanism that captures the influence of norm entrepreneurs on norm emergence. In the operationalization of theory testing process tracing our objective “is not to provide a complete explanation for why one outcome occurs at a particular time and place, but to identify the most important elements in the causal chain generating this class of outcomes” (Hall 2008, 306). This implies that the analysts must focus not only focus on sequence of events, but also provide an account of the critical junctures that may have led to the studied outcome. Lastly, “in theory-testing process-tracing (versus explaining outcome process tracing), no claims are made about whether the mechanism is sufficient; rather, inferences are made only about whether the postulated mechanism is present or absent in the single case” (ibid., 19).



### 2.4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Following George and Bennet, the use of process-tracing entails that “the researcher examines histories, archival documents, interview transcripts, and other sources to see whether the causal process a theory hypothesizes or implies in a case is in fact evident in the sequence and values of the intervening variables in that case” (2005, 6). Accordingly, the collection of data and analysis of this research was based on the extraction of key information from official documentation and archives of the Basel Convention and relevant organizations and institutions as well as insights from the state of the literature on the issue at hand. Also, interviews with actors playing a key role in the global environmental governance of plastic pollution in the World Ocean were conducted. In short, we gathered evidences on norm emergence based on interviews and explore “documents, treatises, and behavioral events [...] as data sources” (Raymond 1997, 219). Documents investigation, combining academic literature and organizations’ publications, provided important contextualization and information on critical junctures. For instance, treatises analysis allowed us to investigate “their role in revealing the content of international legal norms” (ibid., 220). The sequence of events is identified by investigating both organizations’ reports and interviews.

The interviews were held with actors from different organizations, various geographical areas, and diverse backgrounds; with government representatives; NGOs; epistemic communities; and international organizations. Investigating the role and influence of both state- and non-state actors was key to offering a comprehensive investigation of the processes that led to the emergence of the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention. As Sikkink did in the late 1990s, we suggest that scholars of IR have much to gain in seeing “the international system as an international society made up not only of states, but also of non-state actors that may have transnational identities and overlapping loyalties” (1998, 520). In other words, institutions – as rules of the game (North 1990, 3; Young 1994, 3) – international organizations, states, and all types of transnational actors that make up the global civil society (such as NGOs, epistemic communities, the media, multinational corporations, activists, and

advocacy networks) are of great relevance to understanding the emergence of norms in world politics. Simply put, “international institutions do matter, world politics is much more than intergovernmental politics and include a wider range of actors than states, and world politics is not only about power and material interests but is also about nonmaterial interests, ideas, knowledge, and discourses” (Zürn 1998, 619). The influence of local groups and epistemic communities on national governments, transnational activism and international fora as well as the leadership role of individuals, international organizations, and national governments is leading change in global governance practices and policies.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner and investigated the various dimensions of the guiding question of this research. A flexible set of questions were proposed, and interviewees were free to answer and stress any particular point they wished to emphasize. Interviewees ranged from activists to national decision-makers and international scientists and were asked questions on their knowledge of the processes and dynamics that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention, if they collaborated to support a certain position, what motivated their decision to work on the Basel Convention and if there were turning points or key factors that explain the adoption of the amendments. Careful attention was paid to the information shared. Our collection of new primary data is detailed in chapter 4 and analyzed in chapter 5. By shedding new light on the processes of norm emergence in world politics, it enabled the analysis and evaluation of Finnemore and Sikkink’s theorization of norm emergence. In order to build common ground before moving to theory testing process tracing, chapter 3 lays the foundation for further discussion on plastic pollution in the World Ocean and its governance.

## **Chapter 3 – Governance of Plastic Pollution and the World Ocean**

“The decisions we face today about the future of the oceans (and the planet as a whole) are by far the most complex we have ever faced” (Costanza 1999, 205).

### **3.1 Governance of Transnational Environmental Issues**

The profound interdependency between society and nature, exacerbated in the last decades by the growing environmental burden of human activities and their intrinsic consequences for human livelihood and ecosystems health, increasingly brings global environmental governance to the front stage of world politics (Chasek 2000; Jasanoff and Martello 2004; Corry and Stevenson 2018). As “no one country can protect the world’s common environment resources unilaterally” (Haas 2007, 1), transnational issues – those by which definition span beyond national borders – are challenging global governance at an unprecedented scale and rate. Plastic pollution in the World Ocean is a distinct example that illustrates how these issues are pressuring planetary-wide ecosystems. As “a global problem causing negative impacts in the marine environment”, plastic pollution pressures ecosystems on which humans depend (Pettipas, Bernier, and Walker 2016, 117). The cumulative impact we have on the World Ocean puts global governance’s ability to provide solutions in an inter temporal and spatial manner to test and questions how the world community deals with past decisions, present options and takes future generations into account.

### **3.2 The Vital Role of the World Ocean**

The World Ocean comprises the “ensemble of interconnected oceans and seas” (Jacques 2013, 453), covers more than 70% of the earth’s surface, and contains 97% of the earth’s water (IPCC 2019, 5). “The World Ocean is a system of systems” (Jacques 2013, 453). It is the unit that includes the world’s

“coastal systems, inter-coastal and inter-tidal systems, open ocean and deep ocean systems that all work together” (ibid.). It is known to have played a determinant role in the development of life on earth and is key to the current global “life support system” (Borgese 1998, 12). The World Ocean plays a major role in our planet’s vital natural cycles and is particularly key to the transfer of vital nutrients between ecosystems, “the functioning of the hydrological cycle [and] the absorption of carbon dioxide as part of the carbon cycle” (Evans et al. 2019, 2). The World Ocean also regulates “the global climate by serving as an enormous thermal mass for heat storage and as a reservoir for CO<sub>2</sub>” (Costanza 1999, 200). It is also central to the atmospheric and thermodynamic cycles along with the oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, and sulfur cycles, just to name a few. Needless to say, as home to a large share of our planet’s biodiversity, as a vital source of nutrients and food and for its role in regulating the planet’s natural cycles, the World Ocean is a fundamental contributor to life on earth.

The vital role of the World Ocean has long been recognized (Borgese 1998, 5; Evans et al. 2019, 2). From 1967 onwards, Elisabeth Mann Borgese and Arvid Pardo, respectively known as the “Mother of the Oceans” and “Father of the Law of the Sea” worked to promote the notion of the ocean as the “common heritage of mankind” (Taylor 2019, 142). Advocating for a holistic approach to the World Ocean and emphasizing key scientific discoveries, such as the popularization of Jacques Cousteau and Walter Munk’s work, Borgese and Pardo managed to provide the United Nations Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) with an overarching structure that accounts for the relations and interdependencies that characterize the World Ocean and human societies (Taylor 2019). Their efforts contributed to shaping the multidimensional and emerging order in ocean governance and called for “profound change in the ways we deal with each other and with nature” (Borgese 2000, 1).

The World Ocean is also a source of curiosity. The nonlinear relationships between its elements and those of interconnected systems draw the attention of many natural and social sciences scholars. On one hand, oceanographers study the characteristics of the World Ocean and water-related movements

such as the tidal forces; chemists track changes in the acidity of marine ecosystems; meteorologists put much emphasis on how the World Ocean influences the planet's climate; and biologists shed light on how life is developing and depends on it. On the other hand, social scientists such as anthropologists and historians take into account societies' relationships with the Ocean, while political scientists and international relations scholars investigate its governance as a global common. In parallel of these traditional sciences, Peter Jacques suggests that the new field of study of social oceanography may bring promising insights to the study of the social and marine life. In it he sees an integrated marine social science "that brings social science methods to bear to understand the causes *and* consequences of coupled human-marine systems" (Jacques 2013, 462, emphasis in original).

We can think of the World Ocean "as a link between distant peoples and distant times" (Evans et al. 2019, 6). Indeed, it is a "unifying element in the culture of many coastal countries" (Costanza 1999, 203) and provides "opportunities for people of the world" (Jacques 2013, 453). The vital role of the World Ocean goes beyond calculation as illustrates "the vast preponderance of the non-quantifiable components of the system" (Borgese 1998, 12). In his article *The Ecological, Economic and Social Importance of the Ocean*, Robert Costanza argues that most indices and indicators "do not adequately incorporate international resources like the ocean" (1999, 199-203). Therefore, they keep apart resources that cannot be overestimated for the world society. Costanza adds that the World Ocean is "too important to humanity's survival to allow [its] continued exploitation as if [it] were infinite" (ibid., 211). In short, there is a growing "concern that a cost-benefit analysis alone cannot adequately reflect the true societal and environmental costs of marine debris" (Tessnow-von Wysocki and Le Billon 2019, 97). Adopting a holistic approach to the effects of plastic pollution on the World Ocean may prove to be essential to orient the governance of the World Ocean in a direction that takes its vital role for life on earth into account.

Since plastic longevity is estimated between "hundreds to thousands of years depending on the type of polymer" (ibid.) marine plastic pollution raises issues of intragenerational and intergenerational

justice. Moreover, because the World Ocean's resources are depletable and can be disturbed by human activities, it is an illustrative case for the study of the global common problem of our time. The World Ocean's complex relations of interdependence implies that "when one element is altered, it changes other parts of the system, sometimes in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways" (Jacques 2013, 454). In spite of this, the amount of plastic reaching the World Ocean is on track to double from 2010 to 2025 (Dauvergne 2018b, 22) and "the threats to the World Ocean continue to systematically worsen" (Lobo and Jacques 2017, 27).

### 3.3 Governance of the World Ocean

According to Peter Jacques, "the first era of world politics and the oceans spanned 8,000 BCE - 1492"; the second era began when predominantly European countries "used the oceans as a highway to other lands"; and the third covers the post-Second World War period "of global market capitalism operating as part of a system of nation-states" (2013, 455). The author further suggests that *Mare liberum*<sup>21</sup>, established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was the first global ocean principle creating an open system "that had rules limiting neither access nor use" (ibid.). Following this, the governance of the World Ocean has been guided by the principle that it is "under no country's exclusive jurisdiction" (Costanza 1999, 211). In other words, prior to the entry into force of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1994, the World Ocean could be "used as if it was infinite" (Costanza 1999, 211). This open-system regime, which has allowed polluters to discharge "whatever they wanted in the ocean without any direct consequences" (Jacques 2013, 455-456), is an important explanation of what led to issue studied here. As attention began shifting in the 1970s (Haas 2001, 317), the governance of the World Ocean began

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<sup>21</sup> Latin for "freedom of the seas" (Jacques 2013, 455).

moving towards the inclusion of global environmental concerns. In its third round of negotiations (1973-1982), UNCLOS “produced a landmark treaty that closed down much of the open system by setting up national sovereign control of coast out to 12 miles, and management of resources (but not sovereign control) out another 188 in exclusive economic zones” (Jacques 2013, 455-456).

Nonetheless, the interconnectedness between the global hydrological system of the world makes the World Ocean dependent on the activities that takes place in each of its parts. In other words, the World Ocean spans beyond the 200 nautical miles of each nations’ exclusive economic zones (EEZ) regulated under UNCLOS. Activities within EEZ can significantly affect other parts of the system, just as rivers can transport pollution across countries. In other words, the health of the World Ocean – and the global environment as a whole – depends on the environmental consciousness behind local, regional, and national activities. Although the framework provided by UNCLOS built a common governance approach, national practices still have transnational consequences. Moreover, the recent development in ocean governance does not preclude the fact that “today, institutions around the world primarily treat the ocean as a highway for commerce” (Jacques 2013, 456) and that “if human impacts on the ocean continue unabated, declines in ocean health and services are projected to cost the global economy 428 billion USD yr<sup>-1</sup> by 2050, and 1.979 trillion USD yr<sup>-1</sup> by 2100” (Haas 2001, 317).

Many international organizations and conventions are now aiming to contribute to global efforts to adapt global governance of the World Ocean and “deal with the complexities of both the ocean system itself and the humans involved” (Costanza 1999, 204). Elinor Ostrom’s work on global commons is of particular interest. In an article entitled *The Struggle to Govern the Commons*, Ostrom and her colleagues underscore the difficulty in overcoming challenges caused by global “critical problems, such as transboundary pollution” (Dietz, Ostrom, and Stern 2003, 1907). In light of growing recognition of global interdependencies, the governance “of large-scale resources that depend on international cooperation, such as fresh water in international basins or large marine ecosystems” (Ostrom et al. 1999, 278), is

gaining increasing transnational attention and global guidelines are emerging (Jacques 2013, 455). As Peter Dauvergne emphasizes, “the general consensus of ocean governance scholarship is that current international instruments, state policies, nonstate rules, and consumer norms are simply not strong enough, nor comprehensive enough, to protect and conserve marine ecologies at a global scale” adding that “this is especially true for the threat of marine plastic pollution” (2018b, 23).

From the adoption of the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter (MARPOL) and the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter (The London Convention) in 1972 by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), to the groundbreaking international agreement on the United Nations Law of the Seas in 1982 and the inauguration of the UN Environment Global Plan of Action (GPA) for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based activities in 1995 (to which we will come back), the international community has mobilized significant efforts to adapt the global governance of the World Ocean. These efforts have aimed to build governance frameworks that are in accordance with the complexity of the marine environment and its inter-linkages with societies. Additionally, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Convention (BRS) worked on the impact of wastes on marine biodiversity and human health (Barboza, Cózar, et al. 2019, 319-20), and the Honolulu Strategy promotion of the Global Partnership on Marine Litter (GPML) all contributed to set appropriate norms for the governance of the World Ocean on the international agenda.

More recently, the United Nations oriented its 2015-2030 global agenda towards the achievement of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Life Below Water, the 14<sup>th</sup> SDG, aims to “conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development” (United Nations 2015, 26). Its first target (14.1) aims to directly address marine pollution in all its forms and to significantly reduce land-based pollution as well as nutrient and marine debris by 2025 (ibid.). The recognition of the interlinkages between the World Ocean and sustainability of life on earth further encouraged the United



Nations' General Assembly (UNGA) to launch the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development for the 2021-2030 period. The establishment of the Decade will open windows of opportunity for actions as it will support researchers and other stakeholders in their efforts to ensure the World Ocean's health to achieve the SDGs and offer an "opportunity to progress the development of a science policy interface for sustainable use of the global ocean" (Evans et al. 2019, 6).

### **3.4 Plastic Pollution in the World Ocean**

"Plastic waste is now so ubiquitous in the environment that it has been suggested as a geological indicator of the proposed Anthropocene era" (Geyer, Jambeck, and Law 2017, 1).

#### **3.4.1 Definitions**

Generally speaking, pollution can be defined as "a broad category of contamination or disruption to ecological and social processes" and as "anything that takes up the capacity of the ecological systems to cycle or function" (Jacques 2013, 454). Marine litter can be defined as "any persistent manufactured or processed solid material which is discarded, disposed of, or abandoned in the marine and coastal environment" (UNESCO 1988, 54). Additionally, we can refer to the widely used definition of marine pollution closely inspired by the work of the *ad hoc* working group of the Scientific Committee of Ocean Research (SCOR) which defines marine pollution as the "introduction by man of substances into the marine environment resulting in such deleterious effects as harm to living resources, hazards to human health, hindrance to maritime activities including fishing, and reduction of amenities" (SCOR 1967, 25; Tomczak 1984, 317). We can also build on the definition resulting from the collaboration between the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) and members of an ecological epistemic community around the Mediterranean Sea which suggested that pollution of the marine environment "means the introduction by man, directly or indirectly, of substances or energy into the marine environment resulting

in such deleterious effects as harms to living resources, hazards to human health, hindrance to marine activities including fishing, impairment of quality for use of sea-water and reproduction of amenities” (Haas 1989, 386). All these definitions show efforts to take into account the environmental and social impacts of pollution and to provide common ground which we can build upon to investigate the beyond-borders issues created by plastic pollution in the World Ocean.

Plastic is a term “applying to a wide range of materials”, encompassing “polymers that soften on heating, and can be moulded” in different shapes and sizes with various properties determined by their chemical composition and the additives there are mixed with (Thompson, Swan, Moore, and vom Saal 2009, 1973; GESAMP 2015, 14). Types of polymers vary greatly, with approximately 50 different basic types included in more than 60,000 plastic formulations, usually made from combinations of chemical additives (Barboza et al. 2019, 305). In most cases, “synthetic polymers are typically prepared by polymerization of monomers derived from oil or gas, and plastics are usually made from these by addition of various chemical additives” (Thompson, Swan, Moore, and vom Saal 2009, 1973). The characteristics and applications of plastics are numerous and their widespread use is often justified by the fact that “they are inexpensive, lightweight, strong, durable, corrosion-resistant, with high thermal and electrical insulation properties” (ibid.). Indeed, “plastic materials are extremely versatile due to their low density, low thermal and electric conductivity, resistance to corrosion, which allow these materials to serve as water and oxygen barrier, while their low price also contributes for their easy widespread manufacture, where they are used in a wide range of applications from food packaging to medical and technological applications” (Frias and Nash 2019, 145). Unfortunately, the fact that most plastics are durable, corrosion-resistant, and often have thermal and electrical insulation properties implies that their degradation may take decades if not centuries (ibid.; Barboza, Cózar, et al. 2019, 305). For instance, “plastic bags can take up to 1000 years to break down” (Clapp and Swanston 2009, 318).

The literature points to different categorisations of plastic debris. A widely used categorisation comes from the work of the Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP) as it differentiates between mega, macro, meso and micro plastics (2016, 18). GESAMP's definitions of marine litter focus primarily on the size of debris. Megaplastics are defined as plastic debris exceeding 1 metres in size; macroplastics range from 2.5 centimetres to 1 metre in size; mesoplastics range from 5 millimetres to 2.5 centimetres; and microplastics are defined as plastic debris smaller than 5 millimetres (ibid.). Some authors (e.g. da Costa et al. 2016; Gigault et al. 2018) include the category of nanoplastics which are defined as plastic debris smaller than 1  $\mu\text{m}$ . Although more detailed categorisations are central for tracking, measuring, and assessing plastic wastes in the environment, for the sake of simplicity, many studies differentiate only between macro and micro plastics. Microplastics are of great concern for much of the literature on the issue, as they are considered "the most abundant plastic in the ocean" (Pettipas, Bernier, and Walker 2016, 117). João Frias and Roisin Nash proposed to define microplastic as *"any synthetic solid particle or polymeric matrix, with regular or irregular shape and with size ranging from 1  $\mu\text{m}$  to 5 mm, of either primary or secondary manufacturing origin, which are insoluble in water"* (2019, 146, emphasis in original). Microplastics come in two forms – primary and secondary (Pettipas, Bernier, and Walker 2016, 117). Primary microplastics "are generated from industrial and domestic products that contain particles already in the micro or nano size [while] secondary microplastics result from the fragmentation of larger plastic items into smaller fragments" (Barboza, Frias, et al. 2019, 330). In other words, primary microplastics are manufactured small plastic granules, such as scrubbers in cosmetics, and secondary microplastics can be defined as small plastic granules resulting from the degradation of larger plastic (Pettipas, Bernier, and Walker 2016, 117).

### 3.4.2 Global Plastic Production

The beginning of the “Plastic Era” started with the discovery of the first synthetic polymers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Barboza et al. 2019, 305); polystyrene (in 1839) and PVC (in 1872) (Thompson, Swan, Moore, and vom Saal 2009, 1974). However, “the first truly synthetic polymer”, Bakelite, was developed in 1907 by the chemist Leo Baekeland (ibid., 1973). From then on, plastic has been introduced progressively in many sectors, with an initial focus on military purposes until the end of World War II (Geyer, Jambeck, and Law 2017, 1). Many now argue that “within the last few decades, plastics have revolutionized our daily lives” (Thompson, Swan, Moore, and vom Saal 2009, 1973).

Investigating the history of plastics highlights that they “have become increasingly dominant in the consumer marketplace since their commercial development in the 1930s and 1940s” (Jambeck et al. 2015, 768). In 1930, the first plastic items were introduced, and “by the end of the 1940s manufacturers were molding plastic into toothbrushes, records, and Tupperware, and by the 1950s and 1960s into bags, clothing and toys” (Dauvergne 2018b, 24). From the 1950s onward, the production of plastic reached large-scale proportions, usage expanded way beyond military purposes, and further discoveries, such as polypropylene in 1954, were realized (Thompson, Swan, Moore, and vom Saal 2009, 1974). In 1950, the global production of plastic was estimated at 2 million metric tons (Geyer, Jambeck, and Law 2017, 1). Twenty years later, this number reached 35 million metric tons (Dauvergne 2018, 24). This trend has not slowed: by the end of the 1970s, it doubled to reach 70 million metric tons; by 1990, it rose to 120 million metric tons; by 2000 it exceeded 200 million metric tons (ibid.); by 2010 it reached 265 million metric tons (Plastics Europe 2011, 5); and in 2018, it reached a staggering 360 million metric tons (Plastics Europe 2019, 14).

This trend has led to large scale “industrial production processes [which] generate a ubiquity of plastic” (Jacques 2013, 462). However, many have suggested that this not on track to change, as “revenues of the global plastic industry now exceed US\$600 billion a year – and are growing quickly” (Dauvergne

2018a, 592). Packaging, followed by construction and other sectors such as electronics, agriculture, textiles and automobiles, is “the largest market for plastic resins” (Jambeck et al. 2015, 768). It is now estimated that “about 4% of fossil-fuel extracted annually is presently used as raw materials for plastics” and “a further 3-4% is expended to provide energy for their manufacture” (Lebreton and Andrady 2019, 2; Thompson, Swan, Moore and Vom Saal 2009, 1975) and that this could reach 20% by 2050 (Dauvergne 2018b, 2).

Over one third of plastic is produced for single-use and packaging – “most of which are discarded within a year or so of manufacture” (Lebreton and Andrady 2019, 2). As a result – and because of the interlinkages between the marine and terrestrial ecosystems – the accumulation of land-based plastic pollution is of growing concern for the World Ocean. Indeed, many authors point out to the “important part of marine plastic pollution originates from the land and is transported by streams and rivers to seas and oceans” (van Wijnen, Ragas, and Kroeze 2019, 393). Peter Jacques underlines that plastic enters the World Ocean “through several means including wind, rivers, and sewer systems” and “the vast majority of ocean pollution comes from on-land sources” (Jacques 2013, 454 and 461). Following suit, Jambeck et al. (2015) built a widely cited approach to estimate the proportion of mismanaged waste generated by coastal populations that enters the World Ocean, suggesting that between 4.8 million and 12.7 million metric tons of plastic are entering the World Ocean each year (Jambeck et al. 2015, 768). Coastal populations are particularly subject to suffer from change in the ocean’s health (IPCC 2019, 5), and with “about two-thirds of the world’s population live within 60 kilometers of the coast” (United Nations 2016b), the livelihood and activities of those populations can be significantly impacted by the ocean health (Costanza 1999, 204).

Some authors have further underscored that “improving waste management infrastructure in developing countries is paramount and will require substantial resources and time”, noting that these countries “we will not reach a global “peak waste” before 2100” at the current pace, and that “the most

effective mitigation strategies must reduce inputs” (Jambeck et al. 2015, 768-70). Their view also suggest that cooperation, technology transfer, innovation, and infrastructures development coupled with policies that incentivize the reduction of plastic production and waste will all be key to addressing this pressing issue. This is especially true as once discarded in the environment, “plastic debris disperse and accumulate in marine habitats all over the world” (Barboza, Frias, Booth, Vieira, Masura, Baker, Foster and Guilhermino 2019, 329). In other words, “it is clear that *everything* we do inland has consequences for the ocean, and we cannot effectively divorce our energy, agricultural, or manufacturing policies from the marine systems” (Jacques 2013, 462, emphasis in original).

### **3.4.3 What is at Stake**

According to the GESAMP, “scientific interest in the fate and effects of plastic litter began in the 1960s, following the beginning of increased industrial manufacture of plastics in the 1950s” (2019, 5). “The problem of plastics at sea first emerged on the international agenda in the 1960s in relation to the ingestion of plastic items by sea birds” (Tessnow-von Wysocki and Le Billon 2019, 95) and “reports of plastic pollution in the ocean first appeared in the scientific literature in the early 1970s” (Jambeck et al., 2015, 768). These concerns led to “international efforts to govern marine plastic pollution” (Dauvergne, 2018b, 25) and attest that “the international community is now realising that the increasing growth in the amount of plastic pollution in the ocean is reaching a critical point” (Raubenheimer and McIlgorm 2018, 285). Studies show that plastic related problems in the ocean have reached “a scale never before admitted” as they are now present in sediments, the water column and in the digestive systems and tissues of marine organisms (Barboza, Frias, et al. 2019, 329), suggesting that we have “crossed planetary boundaries” and that large scale and cross-sectoral solutions are needed (Jacques 2013, 461-462).

Undeniably, plastic pollution is now pressuring vast ecosystems. Recent studies show that “plastic makes most (60%-80%) of all marine litter found worldwide” (Barboza, Cózar, et al. 2019, 305). As “plastic

debris has accumulated in natural habitats from the poles to the equator” (Thompson, Swan, Moore, and vom Saal 2009, 1975), “around 4900 Mt – 60% of all plastics ever produced – were discarded and are accumulating in landfills or in the natural environment” (Geyer, Jambeck, and Law 2017, 2). Moreover, “if current production and waste management trends continue, roughly 12,000 Mt of plastic waste will be in landfills or in the natural environment by 2050” (ibid., 1). More precisely, recent estimations suggest that around 150 million metric tons of plastic have accumulated in the World Ocean (Tessnow-von Wysocki and Le Billon 2019, 94). While a “high degree of scientific uncertainty still exists regarding how much plastic has made its way into the oceans, [other studies suggest that] a reasonable estimate would be around two hundred million metric tons, or just over 2% of total global production since 1950” (Dauvergne 2018b, 24). In either case, this means that a significant amount of plastic has accumulated in the World Ocean and may pose serious threats to marine life. Indeed, “the ubiquity of this debris in the marine environment has resulted in numerous accounts of species ingesting and becoming entangled in plastic” (Thompson, Swan, Moore, and vom Saal 2009, 1975). As emphasized by Peter Dauvergne, “to sound the alarm, researchers at the Ellen MacArthur Foundation have even gone as far as calculating that, if trends continue, by 2050 the oceans could end up containing more plastic (by weight) than fish” (2018b, 24).

Plastic pollution is now ubiquitous and can be found in marine and coastal ecosystems, “from the air we breathe to the bottom of the Mariana Trench” (Raubenheimer, McIlgorm, and Oral 2018, 210), to surface waters, mangroves, coral reefs, beaches and sea ice (Barboza, Cózar, et al. 2019, 307). Additionally, in their study of macro and micro plastic pollution in the World Ocean, Barboza and his colleagues stress how plastic pollution in marine environments can “interact with the ocean life and thus poses a threat to wildlife and to environment” (ibid, 324). Thus, it can contribute to important habitat destruction and ecosystem disruption (Pettipas, Bernier, and Walker 2016, 117). Plastic is pervasive and affects how the World Ocean provides inestimable environmental, social and educational contributions to life on earth (Jacques 2014, 453). While studies have recently begun reporting plastic debris in remote

areas and in the deep sea (Thompson, Swan, Moore, and vom Saal 2009, 1974), “the fate of plastic particles that become dense enough to sink below the sea surface is unknown” (Law et al. 2010, 1187). “In the marine environment, photodegradation and oxidative and hydrolytic degradation cause many common plastics to become embrittled and suffer mechanical breakdown on time scales of months” (Law et al. 2010, 1187). Moreover, their chemically engineered durability and slow rate of biodegradation allow these synthetic polymers to withstand the ocean environment for decades or longer. Accordingly, the transboundary movement of plastic waste and microplastics is becoming a major concern as their property of durability makes their particles remain for long periods of time (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2019b).

In short, the impact of plastic in marine environment are “wide-ranging and include entanglement of marine fauna, ingestion by seabirds and organisms ranging in size from plankton to mammals, dispersal of microbial and colonizing species to potentially non-native waters, and concentration and transport of organic contaminants to marine organisms at multiple trophic levels” (Law et al. 2010, 1185). While plastic debris was already recorded in the guts of seabirds back in the 1960s, the first reports of entanglement by wildlife date back to the 1970s along with plastic pellets and fragments in marine habitats (Thompson, Swan, Moore, and vom Saal 2009, 1974). The ingestion of plastic debris is now “well documented in seabirds and [many] marine animals, and manipulative feeding experiments have revealed ingestion of microplastics by much smaller organisms” (Law et al. 2010, 1187). For instance, “a recent study found the presence of microplastics in two species of zooplankton, which are known to be located on the bottom of the food chain” (Tessnow-von Wysocki and Le Billon 2019, 97).

On one hand, “even as marine plastic pollution has been escalating, so has the consumption of the main causes of this pollution” (Dauvergne 2018, 28). On the other, “the problem has been compounded by overloaded waste management and recycling systems that are unable to cope with rising plastic production” (Tessnow-von Wysocki and Le Billon 2019, 94). In his article on pollution in the



environment, Peter Haas emphasizes that “ecosystems transfer pollutants geographically” with possible widespread effects on the environment (2001, 313). He underlines that “efforts to cope with environmental threats must be comprehensive if they are to address the complex array of causal factors associated with them” (ibid.). The negative effects of marine plastic pollution “often span beyond national borders, and as such, a solution to marine plastic pollution requires international cooperation” (Tessnow-von Wysocki and Le Billon 2019, 94). What is becoming increasingly evident is that “most environmental problems require joint action because they are typically created by large number of countries, and because many of their consequences extend beyond the jurisdiction of any one country” (ibid.).

In sum, when it comes plastic pollution, the stakes are high for the World Ocean, marine ecosystems, and present and future generations. Indeed, “marine plastic pollution constitutes a major transboundary problem and requires immediate collective action, given its negative economic, social and environmental impacts and potential human health effects” (ibid., 97). For instance, “the risk of microplastics has become a major concern for the ocean as they are highly persistent and have accumulated in many different marine environments, including the deep sea” (IPCC 2019, 515-516). Microplastics are seen as a growing concern with “the two biggest sources of microplastic pollution are the washing of synthetic clothes (e.g., polyester and nylon) and the wear-and-tear of synthetic clothes rubber tires, which together account for two-thirds of the primary microplastic now flowing into the oceans” (Dauvergne 2018b, 24). However, “despite overwhelming evidence of the threat of plastic in the marine environment, there remains inadequate or limited policies to address their mitigation” (Pettipas, Bernier, and Walker 2016, 117). What has become clear it that “the properties of plastic itself, including its longevity, toxicity, malleability, and propensity to disintegrate into microplastics, make governance particularly challenging” (Dauvergne 2018b, 22).

### 3.5 The Multilateral Governance of Plastic Pollution

**Figure 1. The Multilateral Governance of Plastic Pollution**

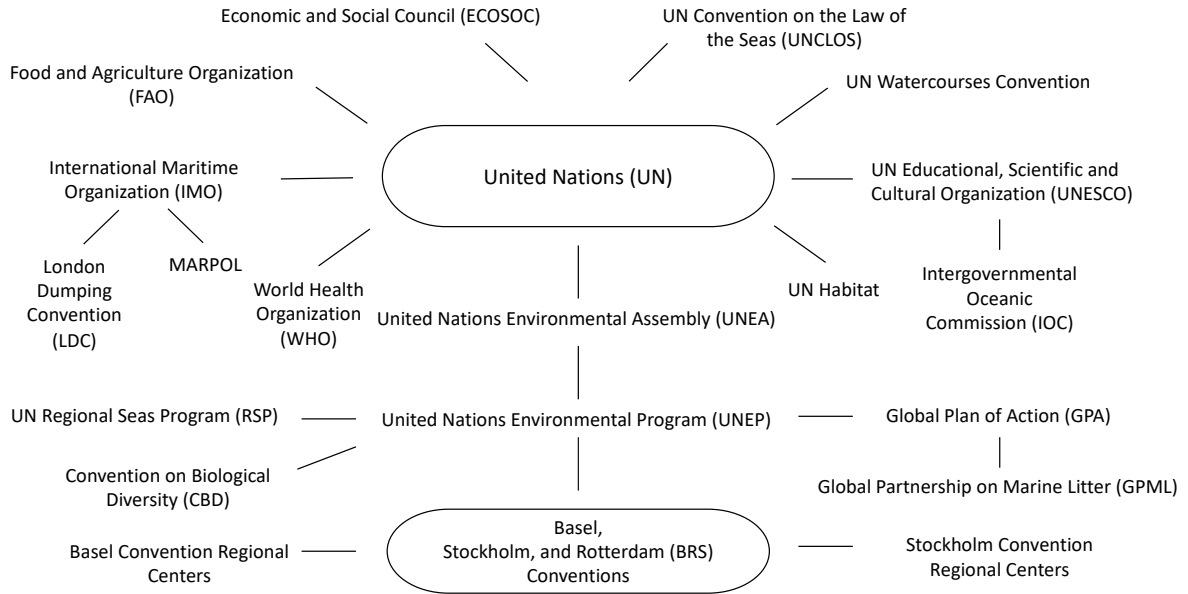


Figure 1 provides an overview of the global governance of plastic pollution at the time of writing. The United Nations was founded in 1945 after its fifty-one founding members and their respective governments signed and approved the UN Charter (United Nations 2015a). One of the first sessions of the newly created United Nations, led to the establishment of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1945. The FAO has recently engaged in effort to address the issues of plastic pollution and, more specifically, microplastics and its impact on fisheries (FAO 2017). Around the same time, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was established and has since focused on economic, social and environmental issues with a growing emphasis on sustainable development. In partnership with numerous organizations and stakeholders, it supports Agenda 2030 which includes concerns for the World Ocean and targets the detrimental impacts of plastic pollution (United Nations 2015b). The World Health Organization (WHO), created in 1948, began fostering research and action to prevent the negative impacts of plastic pollution for human health (WHO 2020). The UN Human Settlement Programme (UN Habitat)

has been focusing on “socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities” since the end of the 1970s and has been working on waste flow analysis, inventories, and hotspot identification that help trace the distribution and movement of plastic (UN Habitat 2020). The UN Watercourse Convention (which opened for signature in 1997 and was entered into force in 2014) calls upon Parties to cooperate and take all necessary measures to protect the marine environment (UN Watercourses Convention 2020). In the years to come, this convention’s importance for the governance of plastic pollution is bound to grow as it is estimated that “municipal, industrial and agricultural wastes and run-off account for as much as 80 per cent of all marine pollution” and “river export is considered the most important source of microplastics in the marine environment” (UNEP 2017a; van Wijnen, Ragas, and Kroeze 2019, 400). While the creation of the United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) goes back to 1945, its body focusing on marine science, the Intergovernmental Oceanic Commission (IOC), was established in 1960. It has since been considered “the competent organization for marine science within the UN system” and has contributed to research programs on the marine environment by sponsoring initiatives such as the joint Groups of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP) (IOC-UNESCO 2013). The International Marine Organization (IMO) entered into force in 1958 to regulate shipping activities and covers pollution from ships (IMO 2020b). Under the IMO, important conventions and their respective protocols address marine pollution: the London Convention, the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter (adopted in 1972, entered into force in 1975, and modified through a Protocol in 1996 which entered into force in 2006), and MARPOL, the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (signed in 1973, modified through a 1978 Protocol, both entered into force in 1983) (ibid.; IMO 2020b). The governance of plastic pollution under the IMO deals primarily with sea-based sources of pollution. The sustained discussion on the governance of the World Ocean culminated in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which was adopted in 1982 and entered into force in 1994. It was then considered as

“unprecedented attempt by the international community to regulate all aspects of the resources of the sea and uses of the ocean, and thus bring a stable order to mankind's very source of life” (UNCLOS 2012). It still plays a major role in regulating marine pollution. Furthermore, the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) is at the center of the global governance of plastic pollution in the World Ocean. Its Assembly – the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), created in 2012 at RIO+20 – also contributes to setting the global agenda on this matter. Under the UNEP, the Global Plan of Action (GPA) for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-Based Pollution, is considered “the only global intergovernmental mechanisms directly addressing the connectivity between terrestrial, freshwater, coastal, and marine ecosystems” (Barboza, Cózar, et al. 2019, 317) and steers the efforts of the Global Partnership on Marine Litter (GMPL) to address the issue. The GMPL “is designed to encourage all sectors of governance, business, commerce and society to work together to bring about a reduction in the input of marine litter, especially plastics, into the ocean” (GESAMP 2015, 10). The Regional Seas Programme (RSP) is under UNEP’s ecosystem division and aims at bringing all regions of the world in efforts to foster “globally comprehensive initiatives for the protection of marine and coastal environments” (UNEP 2017d). The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which entered into force in 1993, pays growing attention to the impact of plastic pollution on marine biodiversity (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2014). Lastly, the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions and the Basel and Stockholm Regional Centers all work under the auspice of the UNEP and have increased their attention to plastic pollution.

This brief overview of the global governance of plastic pollution suggests that this issue is still in its infancy, as conventions and organizations have only recently started to include a sustained focus on the issue and related concerns. It is also fragmented – as no one convention encompasses the whole life cycle of plastic. Finally, it is still in development, as illustrated by the recent Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention and the ongoing negotiations for a global treaty (Raubenheimer, McIlgorm, and Oral 2018; Raubenheimer and Urho 2020).

## Chapter 4 – Case Study

### 4.1 The Basel Convention

#### 4.1.1 History

The 1970s marked a turning point in global environmental governance. The momentum brought by transnational environmental activism and the increasing awareness of states about environmental issues encouraged further reliance on international institutions to address beyond-borders environmental problems. From the 1970s onwards, we witnessed the consolidation of environmental concerns in international diplomacy, a significant increase in the number of national environmental bodies, and the progressive strengthening of environmental regulations around the world. The 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), which took place in Stockholm, is considered a cornerstone of contemporary international environmental diplomacy. UNCHE led to the creation of the United Nations Environmental Programme and was ground-breaking in the UN system for being the first conference to have a parallel NGOs forum – “marking the beginning of the formal involvement of NGOs and civil society in international conference diplomacy” (Haas 2001, 311). In Peter Haas’ words, UNCHE also marked the moment “when the international community first became aware of the widespread impact of human behavior on the natural environment” (ibid., 310). Although the convergence of transnational actors’ demands with the growing awareness of national governments in the 1970s opened the way for new and increased national environmental programs, in practice, global measures were lacking. This prompted members of the international community to look for solutions beyond national jurisdictions. For instance, the discovery of major deposits of toxic wastes in Africa in the 1980s incentivized activists’ demands for stronger regulation in the traffic of hazardous waste and its disposal (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2011b). This paved the way for the creation of a global convention to control the transboundary movement of hazardous waste: the Basel Convention.

To answer the increasing public awareness and resistance to the mismanagement of hazardous wastes, the United Nations Environment Programme prioritized the issue for the first Montevideo Programme on Environmental Law<sup>22</sup> in 1981. This, however, did not prevent a lack of uniformity in national regulations and several gaps in implementation which “led some operators to seek cheap disposal options for hazardous wastes in Eastern Europe and the developing world, where environmental awareness was much less developed, and regulations and enforcement mechanisms were lacking” (ibid.). The need for a comprehensive global regulatory system to establish uniform obligations and standards was becoming evident (Kummer 1992, 532). Hence, in 1987, following a joint proposal by Switzerland and Hungary, the Governing Council of the UNEP authorized its Executive Director to bring together an “Ad Hoc Working Group of Legal and Technical Experts” with the responsibility of drafting guidelines for “a global convention on the control of transboundary movements of hazardous wastes” (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2011b). Building the Montevideo Programme outcomes and the 1987 Cairo Guidelines developed to guide governments in their management of hazardous wastes, the Working Group held five negotiation sessions between 1988 and 1989. Their goal was to prepare the Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Global Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes (Kummer 2000, 38-42). The Conference of Plenipotentiaries, which took place in Basel, Switzerland in March 1989 and brought representatives from 116 states to discuss the draft of the Convention proposed by the Working Group (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2011b). With the aim of assisting governments in the development of their waste management policies and provide a global framework for the management of hazardous wastes, the Basel Convention was adopted unanimously on March 22, 1989 during the Conference of Plenipotentiaries and entered into force on the May 5, 1992

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<sup>22</sup> The Montevideo Programme aims to advance and help achieve UNEP’s mandate by providing periodic review of UNEP’s activities as well as guidance and assistance for the development of environmental law (UNEP 2017e) (UNEP 2017).

(Kummer 1992, 530). As of September 2020, there are 187 Parties to the Convention<sup>23</sup>, comprised of 186 states and the European Union (United Nations 2020). With the recent ratification of the Convention by Tuvalu (August 20, 2020), the entry into force of its accession on November 18, 2020 will bring the number of Parties to the Convention to 188 (Interview with K. R., August 13, 2020).

#### 4.1.2 Scope

The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal “constitutes the first attempt at comprehensive regulation of international transport and disposal of hazardous wastes on a global level” (Kummer 1992, 530). With regards to plastic pollution, the Convention required solutions to the “strikingly high levels of marine pollution from some countries” and the fact that too many actors still try to deflect “the environmental costs [of their activities] into low standard jurisdictions and the global commons” (Dauvergne 2018b, 22). More generally, the Convention was “seen by many primarily as an opportunity to put a stop to illegal international waste traffic from North to South” (Kummer 2000, 43). Indeed, the founding principles of the Convention aim to both reduce the generation and movement of hazardous and other wastes to a minimum and promote and facilitate their environmentally sound management and disposal (Kummer 1992, 539). The Convention also supports the proximity principle, which aims to encourage local management and treatment of wastes.

The Convention’s first article positions the scope of the Convention by differentiating between the transboundary movement of hazardous wastes (presented in Annex I and III of the Convention) and

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<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that the United States and Haiti have both signed, but not ratified, the Convention. Moreover, while Fiji, Grenada, San Marino, the Solomon Islands, South Sudan and Timor-Leste are all members of the United Nations, they are not Parties to the Basel Convention. The Cook Islands and the State of Palestine are Parties of the Basel Convention but not member of the UN. These points are taken from the comparison of [UN Member States List](#) with [Basel Convention Parties List](#) as of September 18, 2020.

“other wastes” (listed in Annex II) (UNEP 1989, 4). Most plastics fall into this latter category “unless they display certain defined characteristic that would deem it “hazardous”” (Raubenheimer and McIlgorm 2018, 286). Article 1 also specifies that wastes deriving from the operations of ships and radioactive materials are excluded of the scope of the Convention to avoid overlapping with other international instruments – such as the MARPOL Convention and the Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management. Article 2 defines the key terms of the Convention. It describes one of its guiding principles: the environmentally sound management of waste. This principle calls for “taking all practicable steps to ensure that hazardous wastes or other wastes are managed in a manner which will protect human health and the environment against the adverse effects which may result from such wastes” (UNEP 1989, 5-6). Articles 3 to 7 respectively clarify the procedures to include national definitions of hazardous wastes in the Convention’s lists; present the General obligations of parties; provide guidance to parties in designating Competent Authorities and Focal Points; indicate regulations and procedures of transboundary movement of waste between Parties; and specify the procedures for the transboundary movement of waste from a party through states that are not parties to the Convention (ibid., 7-14). Article 8 details the Duty to Re-import in case of a transboundary movement of waste without the consent of the states concerned (ibid., 16). As this article places the burden to re-import on the exporters (if procedures are not respected), we have witnessed cases where countries have had to re-import plastic waste exported without prior approval from the receiving country<sup>24</sup>. Article 9 of the Convention covers illegal traffic (ibid., 17-18), collaborating with the International Criminal Police Organization’s (INTERPOL), and environmental crime program. Recently, INTERPOL’s efforts at sea led to the discovery of thousands of illegal plastic waste dumping activities (INTERPOL 2020). Article 10 proposes guidelines for international cooperation. It calls for Parties to

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<sup>24</sup> This has especially been the case since China’s decision to stop the bulk of its importation of plastic in 2017, through its National Sword Policy.



cooperate with each other to “achieve environmentally sound management”; support technological innovation and transfer; monitor the environmental effects of waste; and develop best practices and technical guidelines (UNEP 1989, 19). Article 11 covers the standards for Bilateral, Multilateral and Regional Agreements; Article 12 suggests further Consultation on Liability<sup>25</sup>, Article 13 details recommendations for the transmission of information; Article 14 focuses on voluntary funding; Article 15 outlines the procedures for the organization of the Conference of Parties; Article 16 details the coordinating functions of the Secretariat; Article 17 outlines the provisions for the proposition of Amendments with their adoption being the objective of Article 18 (ibid., 20-30). Finally, articles 19 to 24 present the procedures and processes of verification, settlement of disputes, signature, ratification, acceptance, approval, and accession, while Articles 25 to 29 outline the official entry into force of the Convention, decisions on Reservations and Declarations, withdrawal procedures, the depository of the Convention, and the authentic texts of the Convention (ibid., 31–41).

To understand the scope of the Convention, it is also important to examine its annexes. Annex I categorizes the wastes to be controlled; Annex II includes wastes requiring special consideration; Annex III lists hazardous characteristics; Annex IV presents disposal operations; Annex V A and B clarify the documents and information to be provided by Parties when engaging in transboundary movements of wastes; and Annex VI elaborates upon the arbitration procedures for the first ten articles of the Convention (United Nations 1989, 42-55). As Katharina Kummer has noted, the Basel Convention represented “the maximum degree of consensus that was politically possible at the time of its adoption” (1992, 560).

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<sup>25</sup> This provision led to the adoption of the Protocol on Liability and Compensation for Damage resulting from Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal in 1999.

### 4.1.3 Overarching Structure

The Basel Convention falls under the auspices of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). Accordingly, it operates within the United Nation's system and its environmental program. In short, the Basel Convention is at the heart of UNEP's work on transboundary wastes and works closely with other organizations and conventions to address interconnected issues and achieve its objectives. On many issues, including plastic pollution, it attempts to not overlap with regional and international conventions and organizations. As noted, with regards to pollution of the marine environment, the Basel Convention collaborates closely with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). Indeed, UNCLOS supports a General Obligation (Part XII, Articles 192 and 194) demanding that states take all necessary measures to prevent "pollution of the marine environment from any source" (Lentz 1987, 361) and take appropriate measures to preserve the marine environment (Dauvergne 2018b, 25). Additionally, Annex V of the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) prohibits the dumping of any plastics into the oceans (ibid.).

The London Dumping Convention (LDC) similarly focuses on the prevention of marine pollution caused by dumping of waste and garbage loaded onto ships thereby strengthening the international efforts to prevent marine pollution (Lentz 1987, 363). In this light, the Basel Convention established a resolution (the second of the eight resolutions adopted in 1989) recognizing the role of the London Convention regarding the dumping of waste at sea, as well as the importance of cooperation between the two instances. Also relevant is the seventh resolution of the Basel Convention, which calls for fostering cooperation between the IMO – "the international governmental organization responsible for coordinating shipping agreements" (Jacques 2013, 457) – and the UNEP to review existing practices and regulations with regards to maritime transport of waste (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2013). Recently and of particular interest, the Basel Convention engaged into synergies process with the

Stockholm and Rotterdam Convention. This initiative and its implications for the governance of plastic pollution will be outlined after briefly describing the internal structure of the Basel Convention.

#### **4.1.4 Secretariat and Regional Centers**

As mentioned, Article 16 of the Convention details the mandate of its Secretariat. Based in Geneva, the Secretariat prepares meetings, writes reports, assists with the implementation of the Convention and coordinates the transfer of information between Parties (UNEP 1989, 26–27). It also plays a key role in the development of international cooperation, fostering and supporting the clauses of Article 13 (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2011a). Moreover, Parties to the Convention “may also request the Convention secretariat to assist them in identifying cases of illegal traffic” (Kummer 1992, 553). In addition, fourteen Regional and Coordinating Centres<sup>26</sup> contribute to and collaborate toward achieving the Convention’s objectives and assist the Secretariat by providing technical assistance, training, and technology transfers to Parties (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2011c).

#### **4.1.5 Synergies Among the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions**

In 2007, the first meeting of an Ad Hoc Joint Working Group of the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions fostered the ongoing discussions aimed at creating synergies and enhancing cooperation amongst the three conventions. Subsequently, the Conference of the Parties of the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions adopted the “synergies decisions” (decisions BC-IX/10, RC-4/11, and SC-4/34) which aims to enhance “cooperation and coordination among the three conventions” (Secretariat of the BRS Conventions 2012). The interlinkages between the scope and objectives of the

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<sup>26</sup> Located in Argentina, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Nigeria, Panama, Russian Federation, Senegal, Slovak Republic, Samoa, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay.

Conventions encouraged the parties to combine their efforts and actions to achieve their overarching goal of protecting the human health and the environment. Indeed, whereas the Rotterdam Convention supports the implementation of the prior informed consent principle in the trade of specific hazardous chemicals and pesticides, the Stockholm Convention focuses on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). In 2010, “several years of deliberations through a Party-led process culminated in the successful simultaneous extraordinary meetings of the Conferences of the Parties to the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions (ExCOPs) took place in Bali” (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2011a). The synergies process and ExCOPs decisions of the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions are considered by the Secretariat of the Basel Convention as “a “first” in the history of international treaties” (ibid.). Paving the way for increased cooperation between the conventions, the synergies process was a step forward for a comprehensive governance framework of transboundary waste. Moreover, in 2013 the parties agreed upon the creation of a Joint Executive Secretary – to be appointed for the UNEP-administrated part of the BRS Conventions – and the administrative aggregation of their activities. At this point it became clear that “the conventions have joined forces to better address the challenge of environmentally sound management of hazardous substances at different stages of their life cycle” (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2011a). That same year, they also organized the first of a series of Joint COPs which are now organized every two years. According to Karen Raubenheimer and Alistair McIlgorm, “the Stockholm and Basel Conventions are international binding instruments that offer the best opportunity to reduce the impacts of plastics and plastic waste globally” (2018, 285). The 2019 Joint COPs held in Geneva under the theme “Clean Planet, Healthy People: Sound Management of Chemicals and Waste” led to the studied Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention. To understand how it was adopted, we must first attention to the previous amendments of the Basel Convention, as these inform the development of the Convention and the process tracing of this study.

#### 4.1.6 Past Amendments and Developments

The adoption of the 1995 “Ban Amendment” was an important milestone prohibiting most developed countries from the “exports of all hazardous wastes covered by the Convention that are intended for final disposal, reuse, recycling and recovery” to all other countries (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2011a). This far-reaching agreement only entered into force recently, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2019. Other milestones were achieved after 1995 such as the Protocol on Liability and Compensation for Damage resulting from Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal (adopted during the 5<sup>th</sup> COP in 1999), which “regulates civil liability for damage resulting from the transboundary movement of hazardous wastes and other wastes, including incidents occurring as a result of illegal traffic” (ibid.). Three years later, the 6<sup>th</sup> COP further advanced the implementation of the Convention by focusing on capacity building and training projects with the adoption of the 2002-2010 Strategic Plan (ibid.). That same year, the Basel Convention adopted technical guidelines for plastic waste (we will come back to this topic) (Raubenheimer and McIlgorm 2018, 288). Also noteworthy are the 9<sup>th</sup> COP adoption of the Bali Declaration that recognizes the importance of waste management in preventing damage to people’s health and livelihoods and the inauguration of the Basel Waste Solutions Circles in 2009, “an initiative showcasing projects at all levels that contribute in a concrete manner to the implementation of the Bali Declaration” (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2011a). These efforts have shown an increasing willingness to engage a greater range of stakeholders and widen the scope of the Convention. In sum and according to Katharina Kummer, “developments subsequent to the adoption of the Basel Convention show an increased acceptance of its fundamental concepts by states” (Kummer 2000, 46).

## 4.2 Tracing the Processes Leading to the Plastic Waste Amendments

### 4.2.1 Increasing Awareness: From 1950 to 2010

The beginning of large-scale industrial production of plastic in the 1950s and the resulting growing presence of plastic products in different sectors continued to increase until the 1970s with little consideration of an environmental standpoint<sup>27</sup>. However, along with the increasing environmental awareness in the 1970s, this issue became more of a focal point. One important milestone was the establishment of UNEP in 1972 and its Regional Seas Programme in 1974. Currently comprising 18 Regional Seas Programme, the initiative encourages the development of action plans to steer solutions for coastal and marine ecosystems (UNEP 2017f). Considered as one of UNEP's "jewels", the Mediterranean Action Plan (the Med Plan), established in 1975 and covering the Mediterranean Region, is considered an exemplary case of interstate cooperation (Haas 1989, 378). Peter Haas' study distinctively shows how the "Med Plan's successful creation was promoted by a community of ecologists and marine scientists" who worked at the UNEP's secretariat (ibid., 380). This reminds us that "epistemic communities often work in conjunction with broader policy networks, functional bureaucrats, transnational scientists, NGOs, and international civil servants" (Haas 2001, 324). In his view, "the success of the Med Plan is attributable to the involvement of ecologists and marine scientists who set the international agenda and directed their own states toward support of international efforts and toward the introduction of strong pollution control measures at home" (Haas 1989, 384). Moreover, his study shows that "the countries that have been most supportive of the Med Plan are those in which the epistemic community has been strongest" (ibid., 388). This suggests that epistemic communities can play a key role during the agenda setting and consensus formation processes that leads to international agreements and cooperation.

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<sup>27</sup> As noted in the third chapter, the global production of plastic was roughly 2 million metric tons in 1950 and reached 35 million metrics tons in 1970 (Dauvergne 2018b, 24; Geyer, Jambeck, and Law 2017, 1).

Among other things, the increasing awareness from the 1970s onward also encouraged “the 1972 London Dumping Convention, Annex V to the MARPOL Convention, and the 1978 MARPOL Protocol [to] cite plastic pollution as unlawful in international waters” (Joyner and Frew 1991, 33). These conventions focused primarily on provisions and measures to address plastic pollution from sea-based sources, which is considered second in importance behind land-based sources of pollution. Recent estimates suggests that “land-based sources of plastic debris contribute 80% of the plastic debris in the marine environment” (Campbell et al. 2016, 533–34; Li, Tse, and Fok 2016, 335; UNESCO 2017). Moreover, it is considered that “of primary microplastic pollution, around 98% is from land sources, especially from rivers, road runoff, storm drains, and wastewater discharge” (Dauvergne 2018b, 25). In this light, Pettipas, Bernier, and Walker argue that “overall, the global marine plastic pollution issue is ultimately a land-based problem, wherein the solutions will lie” (2016, 121–22). Nonetheless, efforts to address the issue by the London Convention and MARPOL are still relevant as they both contribute to addressing a part of the problem and raise awareness on the issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean.

The adoption of UNCLOS in 1982 called upon states to undertake all necessary actions to prevent pollution of the marine environment from both sea-based and land-based sources (Barboza, Cózar, et al. 2019, 316–17). That same year, the UN Fish Stocks Agreement was introduced under UNCLOS to “reduce the impact of fishing gears, gear marking, and the retrieval of abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear” (ibid., 317). Also noteworthy are the annual meetings of the Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Pollution (GESAMP) which started in 1969 and continue to this day. GESAMP’s work invigorated awareness, encouraged research, and helped inform the state of the World Ocean’s health by identifying the main sources of pollution. As early as the first session in 1969, the presence of plastic objects in the marine environment was recognized, and the second session, in 1970, underlined that, “plastic bottles and containers thrown overboard and washed ashore are a common feature of beaches in many parts of the world” (GESAMP 1969, 14, 1970, 14). While GESAMP reports have over time

increasingly paid attention to plastic pollution, it was only in 2010 that GESAMP produced a report specific to this issue. Nonetheless, during the 1950-2010 period, scientists started to question, track, and measure the impact of plastic pollution in the World Ocean. The number of articles on the topic of plastic pollution published per year in the Web of Science core collection has risen from 2 to 36 from 1967 to 2000 and reached 74 in 2010<sup>28</sup>.

The research produced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was sufficiently conclusive for Sally Ann Lentz to assert in 1987 that “serious problems caused by the presence of plastic and other synthetic materials in the marine environment are well demonstrated” (1987, 361). This suggests that recognition of the issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean dates back to before the creation of the Basel Convention and that the rising awareness during that period was mainly the result of both scientific research and efforts to develop “legally binding international agreements in ocean governance” to prevent dumping of wastes at sea (Tessnow-von Wysocki and Le Billon 2019, 98). In 1995, the Washington Declaration adopted the Global Programme of Action for the protection of the marine environment from land-based sources that would, under the auspice of UNEP, look for solutions to address, among other things, marine litter at all levels (GESAMP 2015, 9).

Since the entry into force of the Basel Convention in 1992, the recognition of the negative impacts of plastics on the environment have gained growing attention in the scope of the Convention, with some plastics listed as “hazardous wastes” and others as “other wastes” in the household wastes categorization. Simultaneously, concerns for the marine environment have been part of the Convention’s original scope. For instance, the fourth point of Article 15 recommends that “the Parties at their first meeting shall consider any additional measures needed to assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities with respect to

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<sup>28</sup> The main fields contributing to the publication of these articles range from environmental sciences, oceanography and marine freshwater biology to chemistry, chemical engineering, toxicology and public environmental occupational health. The number of articles would eventually surpass 200 in 2015 and reach over 900 in 2019 (search on 17 September 2020).



the protection and the preservation of the marine environment in the context of this Convention” (UNEP 1989, 24). Nonetheless, the initial scope of the Convention focused primarily on regulating the transboundary movements of hazardous wastes; plastic pollution, was not among the highest concerns.

Over the years, new solutions and approaches have been crafted to address plastic pollution. For instance, calls for strengthening research on plastic waste were voiced during the 4<sup>th</sup> COP of the Convention in 1998. Moreover, work on the “classification of post-consumer materials such as plastics” was initiated and technical guidelines for wastes resulting from surface treatment of plastic was encouraged (UNEP 1998, 13-14 and 54-55). The 5<sup>th</sup> COP supported these calls and in 1999 adopted decision V/25 which emphasized the need to “draft technical guidelines for the identification and environmentally sound management of plastic waste and for its disposal” (UNEP 1999, 17). The Technical Working Group of the Convention amalgamated existing research and expert testimony in order to submit the technical guidelines for consideration by the 6<sup>th</sup> COP (*ibid.*, 17). In 2002, the 6<sup>th</sup> COP reviewed and adopted technical guidelines for the sound management and disposal of plastic waste (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2019d). The 6<sup>th</sup> COP also underlined its “appreciation [for] the roles played by Parties, non-governmental organizations and industry in the preparation of the Technical Guidelines” and invited Parties to use and integrate these guidelines into their practices (UNEP 2003, 136; Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2019d).

In the years that followed, much of the discussion on plastic pollution took place outside the Basel Convention’s COPs and OEWG meetings. Indeed, the rare mentions of plastic from the 7<sup>th</sup> COP to the 12<sup>th</sup> focused solely on particular issues such as the management of plastic-coated cable scrap and waste resulting specifically from surface treatment of metals and plastics. However, during the 8<sup>th</sup> COP in 2006, the CEO of a Japanese mining, smelting, and waste treatment firm recommended the implementation of a certification program for waste management facilities that contribute to recycling by collecting and separating materials such as plastics. He further suggested that this would facilitate procedures for

transboundary movement of wastes and that this system would make it “easier to trace the materials and products through their life cycles” (UNEP 2007, 16). During a forum on “prevention, minimization and recovery of wastes” during the 10<sup>th</sup> COP in 2011, the Chinese Vice-Minister of Environment voiced that failure to recycle plastic represents “a waste of resources and a source of secondary pollution” (UNEP 2011b, 2). Both of their calls have, however, been largely ignored inside the Basel Convention’s work programme. Indeed, not only has plastic remained mostly unaddressed by the 2004-2015 COPs in favor of attention to the management of hazardous waste, the development of the environmentally sound management principle, and the creation of partnerships and cross-sectoral cooperation on other matters. Plastic was also omitted from the work programme of the OEWG-3 to the OEWG-9; from 2003 to 2014.

Nevertheless, as noted, other fora began paying attention to marine plastic litter. For instance, in 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development led to the establishment of “a regular process under the United Nations for global reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment, including socio-economic aspects, both current and foreseeable, building on existing regional assessments” (United Nations 2002, 21), as we will see, later leading to the World Ocean Assessment (WOA) process.

In 2005, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) drew attention to the “lack of information and data on the issue” and called for further cooperation and coordination on issues related to oceans and seas (Raubenheimer and McIlgorm 2018, 286; United Nations 2005b, 14). Additionally, that same year, the UNGA adopted Resolution/60/31 on sustainable fisheries which “calls upon states to take action to address the issue of lost or abandoned fishing gear and related marine debris” and highlights the fact that “marine debris is a global transboundary pollution problem” (Karasik et al. 2020, 157; United Nations 2006, 3). In addition, during the UN Open-ended Informal Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea in 2005 saw “many delegations [point] to inadequate waste management, deficiencies in the implementation of existing standards and lack of awareness of the issue as the main reasons for the increase in marine debris” (United Nations 2005, 24).

Between 1950 and 2010, organizations such as WWF, Ocean Conservancy, and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation also contributed to highlighting the issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean and increasing the awareness of both citizens and decision-makers (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). Indeed, “NGOs were very active. WWF was probably the most active, then CIEL, and EIA. In parallel, Ocean Conservancy are doing groundwork” (Interview with N. U., 4 September 2020). As the evidence of the harmfulness of plastic pollution accrued and leaders started looking for solutions, it was recognized by NGOs that adapted global governance was needed to address its transboundary character (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020). Indeed, “plastic is such a broad problem; it covers so many sectors, so many parts of the value-chain” (Interview with K. R., 13 August 2020). As a result, “the international society recognized that the issue needs to be solved. From there, a momentum has been growing” (Interview with Japan, 11 September 2020). Indeed, the recognition of the harm caused by the numerous types of plastic in the Ocean has caused a surge in attention to the issue (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020). According to Niko Urho, “it really gained and gains the attention of the people and the media because it is a visible problem” (Interview with N. U., 4 September 2020). This overview of the 1950-2010 period demonstrates that issues related to plastic pollution in the World Ocean have long been studied and are gradually being included in international conventions and forums’ scopes.

#### **4.2.2 Growing Momentum: From 2011 to 2019**

The last ten years has produced “a growing amount of academic literature looking specifically to plastic waste governance” and efforts were made to put this issue on the international agenda (ibid.). In 2011, the Fifth International Marine Debris Conference led to the development of a Global Framework for Prevention and Management of Marine Debris, also known as the Honolulu Strategy. While the first four International Marine Debris Conferences focused on increasing cooperation and coordination, the

Honolulu Strategy was ground-breaking in providing a framework of action for countries and stakeholders to address the detrimental implications of plastic in the marine environment – including habitat destruction, transport of chemicals and invasive species, entanglement, entrapment, food chain implications such as ingestion of plastic debris by marine species, along with their respective environmental, social, economic, and health impacts (UNEP and NOAA 2011). The framework aims to facilitate the reduction of the amount and impact of land-based, sea-based, and shoreline-based sources of marine debris. Widely referred to in the years that followed, it offers “a comprehensive and global collaborative effort to reduce the ecological, human health, and economic impacts of marine debris worldwide” (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2017). In 2011, COP-11 of the Convention on Migratory Species adopted Resolution 10.4 on marine debris which calls upon Parties to contribute to the identification of areas of concerns, foster cooperation and technology transfer, and develop national plans of action to “address the negative impacts of marine debris in waters within their jurisdiction” (UNEP 2011a).

In 2012, twenty years after the 1992 Earth Summit that took place in Rio de Janeiro, the General Assembly of the United Nations met in Rio de Janeiro for its 66<sup>th</sup> session and the high-level Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development. The outcome document of the meeting, *The Future We Want*, emphasises the importance of oceans and seas for sustainable development. It notes that “the health of oceans and marine biodiversity are negatively affected by marine pollution, including marine debris, especially plastic, persistent organic pollutants, heavy metals and nitrogen-based compounds, from a number of marine and land-based sources, including shipping and land run-off” (United Nations 2012, 31). This demonstrated both awareness and commitment toward the issues related to marine pollution including the issue of plastic pollution. Moreover, the document highlights the parties’ commitment “to take action to, by 2025, based on collected scientific data, achieve significant reductions in marine debris to prevent harm to the coastal and marine environment” (ibid.). This commitment is obviously linked to

target 14.1 of the SDGs that would be adopted three years later, in 2015. The Future We Want outcome document also recognizes the “importance of a life-cycle approach”, the challenges posed by plastic waste, and the necessity to further implement “policies for resource efficiency and the environmentally sound management of waste” to achieve sustainable development (ibid., 42). In sum, Rio+20 marks an important point in the global agenda-setting process and attests to the globally growing recognition of the issues posed by plastic pollution in the World Ocean (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020).

The Third Session of the Intergovernmental Review Meeting on the Implementation of the Global Program of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-Based Activities (the Draft Manila Declaration) which took place six months before Rio+20, further promoted the Honolulu Strategy and its call for the establishment a Global Partnership on Marine Litter (GMPL) (UNEP 2012b). The GPML would ultimately be launched at Rio+20, under the auspices of the UNEP (Pettipas, Bernier, and Walker 2016, 118). The GPML aims to serve as one of the principal focal points for UNEP’s Global Action Plan to address plastic pollution along with UNEP’s Regional Seas Programme. The GPML “has operated as a key actor since its launch in June 2012 at Rio+20 in Brazil, bringing together international agencies, governments, academia, the private sector, civil society and individuals” (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2017). Also in 2012, the COP-11 of the Convention on Biological Diversity adopted decision XI/18, Marine and Coastal Biodiversity: Sustainable Fisheries and Addressing Adverse Impacts of Human Activities, Voluntary Guidelines for Environmental Assessment, and Marine Spatial Planning, which stressed the need to “address the impacts of marine debris on marine and coastal biodiversity” (UNEP 2012, 5).

In 2014, the COP of the Convention on Migratory Species met in Quito and discussed, among other things, rising concerns related to marine debris. The 11<sup>th</sup> COP of the Convention adopted Resolution 11.30 which stresses “that despite the knowledge gaps relating to marine debris and its impacts on migratory marine wildlife, immediate action should be taken to prevent debris reaching the marine environment”

(UNEP 2015, 2). In June of the same year, the UN Environmental Assembly held its first session. As soon as UNEA-1 started, Norway took the lead on the issue of marine plastic pollution and requested a comprehensive assessment of the sources that contribute to plastic pollution (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). UNEA-1 adopted Resolution 1.6 on Marine Plastic Debris and Microplastics which first recalled past progress – such as the Honolulu Strategy, the outcome of Rio+20, the creation of the GPML, and the CBD’s COP-11 call to address the impact of marine debris on biodiversity – and invited “governments, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, industry and other relevant actors” to cooperate in their implementation (UNEP 2014, 21). Furthermore, it “emphasizes that further urgent action is needed to address the challenges posed by marine plastic debris and microplastics, by addressing such materials at source, by reducing pollution through improved waste management practices and by cleaning up existing debris and litter” (ibid.).

2015 was an important year for the governance of the global commons and the World Ocean was no exception. Indeed, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2015d). With the broad aspiration of “transforming our world”, the 2030 Agenda is oriented towards the achievement of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (ibid.). As previously noted, the 14<sup>th</sup> SDG, Life Below Water, attempts to “conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development”. Its first target (14.1) aims to address marine pollution in all its forms and significantly reduce land-based pollution as well as nutrient and marine debris by 2025 (ibid., 26). Additionally, in 2015, GESAMP published the first part of its studies of the Sources, Fate and Effects of Microplastics in the Marine Environment: A Global Assessment which highlighted how “microplastics in the ocean [is] an emerging issue of international concern” (GESAMP 2015, 9). The report further noted that “there is growing acceptance, especially at an institutional level, that land- or sea-based inputs of plastic waste to the ocean should be reduced” (ibid., 66). In December of that year, the UNGA also adopted Resolution 70/235, drawing on UNEA-1 Resolution 1/6 of 2012 encouraged further

cooperation between States while urging them to reduce marine debris and reemphasized concerns “that the health of the oceans and marine biodiversity are negatively affected by marine debris, especially plastic, from land-based and marine sources” (UNGA 2015, 30 and 33–34).

2015 was also the year of the publication of the Global Waste Management Outlook document, a collaboration between the UNEP and the International Waste Management Association, that “primarily focused on the ‘governance’ issues which need to be addressed to establish a sustainable solution – including the regulatory and other policy instruments, the partnerships and the financing models” (UNEP 2017b). Based on the IPCC’s work, the report notably highlights that using recycled rather than producing plastic resin from primary raw materials can reduce energy consumption in the production process by more than 70% and, by thus, reduce greenhouse gas emission (UNEP and ISWA 2015, 14).

At the beginning of 2016, the First Global Integrated Marine Assessment, also known as the first World Ocean Assessment (WOA) was released. This report consolidated the last decades of research and brought together hundreds of scientists and experts to reinforce collaboration between policy and science (United Nations 2016a). Moreover, it highlighted the many impacts of plastic in the World Ocean along with the challenges associated to addressing them. 2016 also saw UNEP publish *Marine Plastic Debris and Microplastics – Global Lessons and Research to Inspire Action and Guide Policy Change*, concurring with the first WOA’s findings and highlighting pathways to strengthen science-policy interface and implement solutions to address plastic entering the World Ocean (UNEP 2016a). Furthermore, the report examined the effectiveness of regional and international approaches. Among the main conclusions was the fact that global governance was too fragmented and could not adequately address marine plastic pollution in its current form (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). This was accomplished by studying existent regional and international approaches to determine if they are effective measures to limit plastic pollution (ibid.). That same year, the United Nations Environment Assembly of the United Nations Environment Programme second session (UNEA-2) was held and reemphasized the importance of examining whether

resources are missing in order to govern plastic pollution. Attention was reinstated to the issue of plastic pollution, the recent research produced and initiatives taken (such the successful UN World Ocean Day with the theme “Healthy Oceans, Healthy Planet” and UNEP’s massive open online course on marine litter) were welcomed (UNEP 2016b). Additionally, Resolution 10 on Oceans and Seas and Resolution 11 on Marine plastic litter and microplastics were agreed upon (ibid.). 2016 also saw the tenth meeting of the OEWG of the Basel Convention, calling for consideration by the next Conference of Parties (COP-13) of the recent progress in the governance of the global commons. For instance, representatives at OEWG highlighted the relevance of UNEA-2 resolution on marine litter and microplastics to improve the sea-land interface and referred to the need to contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNEP 2016c, 14 and 20). Also, before the end of 2016, COP-13 of the Convention on Biological Diversity adopted decision XIII/10 addressing the impacts of marine debris on marine and coastal biodiversity. The United Nations General Assembly would also agree upon Resolution 71/257 on Oceans and the Law of the Sea, calling upon states “to implement UNEA Resolution 2/11 on marine plastic litter and microplastics” and encouraging them to take action to address the detrimental impacts of plastic pollution in the marine environment (Karasik et al. 2020, 160–61). Needless to say, the momentum was growing, and a wide range of initiatives were being launched, including the documentary film *Plastic China*, which as we will see, was the seed for a turning point in 2018.

The third UNEA (UNEA-3) took place in 2017 and was regarded by all interviewed actors as a catalyzing point for the growing global momentum to address plastic pollution in the World Ocean. UNEA has made a place for itself at the global policy level and a strong notion of making progress has ensued (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020; Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). In Raubenheimer’s words, UNEA-3 saw the “world came together to work on plastic” (Interview with K. R., 13 August 2020). As a result, “the UNEA-3 Resolution has set a global objective of zero discharge to the oceans” (ibid.). UNEA-3 also began referencing the fact that there are other relevant treaties, such as the



Basel Convention, where progress could be made. It noted that while these treaties do not directly address marine plastic pollution, they could take some steps forward within their area of competencies. It was recognised that the Basel Convention could support progress in the area of plastic waste trade (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). Indeed, in the UNEA-3 report, the Basel Convention was pointed to as an already available instrument to regulate plastic waste trade and plastic national management (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020).

UNEA-3 further adopted a resolution on marine litter and microplastics which not only acknowledged past efforts, but emphasized the relevance of the report on the effectiveness of international and regional frameworks that were called for at UNEA-2 (UNEP 2018, 1). The discussions on plastic pollution at UNEA-3 focused on furthering the issue within the UNEA context. According to one interviewee, this was predominantly a result of Norway's leadership which "brought this issue to UNEA to really help UNEA itself to mature during the process" and "hopefully start to create this global governing body for the environment that has some teeth" (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). UNEA-3 subsequently created a working group to identify needs at the international level and prepare recommendation for UNEA-4, resulting in an ad hoc open-ended expert group on marine litter and microplastics (AHEG) "to further examine the barriers to and options for combating marine plastic litter and microplastic from all sources" (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2019a). From this point on, AHEG's focused on "taking stock of existing activities and action to reduce marine plastic litter and microplastics, identify technical and financial resources or mechanisms for supporting countries in this respect, encourage relevant partnerships, and analyze the effectiveness of existing and potential response options and activities" (ibid). Moreover, the Basel "Secretariat is collaborating closely with the AHEG in delivering on these mandates" (ibid.). In sum, the attention of leaders was significantly spurred from the UNEA-3 onwards.

In order to address the challenges of plastic pollution in the World Ocean, COP-13 of the Basel Convention (2017) agreed on decisions BC-13/2 and BC-13/3 to support past initiatives and include new activities to address marine plastic litter and microplastics in the work program of the Open-ended Working Group for the biennium 2018-2019. That same year, decisions BC-13/11 and SC-8/15 engaged the Stockholm and Basel Conventions' regional centers to cooperate in order to prevent marine plastic pollution. The UNEP also launched its Clean Seas Campaign to draw attention and steer actions at all levels to address marine plastic pollution (UNEP 2017a). The Clean Seas Campaign initiative incited commitments from civil society actors, the industry, and countries to further address the issue and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.

The following year, the UNEP published a report entitled *Combating Marine Plastic Litter and Microplastics: An Assessment of the Effectiveness of Relevant International, Regional and Subregional Governance Strategies and Approaches* which looked at 18 international and 36 regional instruments among which "the Basel Convention is featured prominently" (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). This encouraged "a compilation of activities related to marine plastic litter and microplastics undertaken by the Basel Convention regional and coordinating centers and the Stockholm Convention regional and subregional centers" to review past practices and promote adapted ones (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2018a). Indeed, "many people involved with the Basel Convention and looking at the plastic crisis began thinking about what can be done within the Basel Convention" (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). This resulted in a variety of options outlining different ways Basel could work on plastic, and showed which activities were already in place under the Convention (ibid.; Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2018b). Building on this growing momentum, that same year, Norway submitted a proposal to the Basel Convention's OEWG to amend Annex IX of the Basel Convention, noting that they would submit a further proposal by the September meeting. Accordingly, OEWG-11 in 2018, which took place in Geneva from September 3 to 6, 2018, considered the Plastic Waste Amendments for the first time. By the

end of 2018, six months before COP-14, Norway submitted a further proposal to amend the annexes of the Convention and listed which plastics should be included within the scope of the Convention (Interview with a delegate, 29 September 2020). We will come back to the results of Norway's proposals in the next section. Before doing so, we should note other turning points in 2018.

2018 marked the year that the EU adopted the European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy – aiming to transition the EU toward a new plastics economy “where the design and production of plastics and plastic products fully respect reuse, repair and recycling needs and more sustainable material are developed and promoted” (European Commission 2018). It was also the year that China implemented the National Sword Policy that would set major restrictions on plastic entering the country. The National Sword Policy “put the rest of the world in a difficult position because we relied on a single buyer” (Interview with the ACC, 20 August 2020). This would lead to a global recycling crisis (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020; Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). According to Jim Puckett, “the National Sword Policy sent everything into chaos mode”; “it created a chaos on the global market” as 75% of the plastic collected globally had nowhere to go and warehouse were being filled rapidly (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). Hundreds of brokers used to send plastic to China started pivoting their shipping to South-East Asia (ibid.). At that point, “we started getting press-report of what was happening in South-East Asia, thanks to a lot of NGOs activity there, on the ground”<sup>29</sup> (ibid.). For instance, in Malaysia much of the pressure came from civil society. Their NGOs informed the governments of the harm caused by importing plastic<sup>30</sup> (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). Local, national, and international NGOs worked together to bring pressure on national governments, similar to what the boomerang effect in IR

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<sup>29</sup> There are many watchdog organizations (such as BAN) in these countries. They documented that the stocks of plastics were mostly burned and only some of it recycled. Most of it is not recyclable as it is mixed with dirt or difficult to recycle depending on the polymer (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020).

<sup>30</sup> In many cases, local NGOs help the representative in charge to answer the problem at hand, as the representative must handle many issues and topics on her/his own.

literature predicts. Indeed, an interviewee indicated that local NGOs are often crucial in those processes as they “speak the same language as their state” (ibid.) and able to take advantage of specific political opportunities such as informing their governments when it is a good moment to show their commitment to an issue (ibid.).

The combination of the media’s attention and NGOs campaigns that followed helped build the momentum as “the world realized that much of the world’s plastic waste was sent to China” (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). For some, “the realization that plastics are flowing from developed countries to developing countries came as a surprise” (Interview with N. U., 4 September 2020). At that time, an interviewee indicated that “we were not aware of the magnitude of what was happening [and] similar realizations came from the EU and the US” (ibid.). Many interviewees indicated that the role of the documentary *Plastic China* should not be underestimated in the adoption of China’s National Sword Policy, which “summarized in a very poignant way the situation in China” (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020; Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). In the weeks that followed, China began enforcing its prohibition on plastic imports and the National Sword Policy was employed as the tool to enforce the ban at its borders<sup>31</sup> (ibid.). In the wake of the National Sword Policy, NGOs at every level started to pressure governments to look for solutions, precipitating a dramatic increase in public awareness and resulting in the launch of a solution seeking process (Interview with N. U., 4 September 2020). The search for adapted global governance of plastic pollution launched encouraged IOs to evaluate how they could contribute to solution-making and facilitating cooperation. Among them, the Basel Convention was looked at as a promising framework to regulate plastic waste trade and national management.

Lastly, an important point in the growing momentum toward the Plastic Waste Amendments was UNEA-4, which took place in March 2019, two months before the COP-14 of the Basel Convention. Like

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<sup>31</sup> At the beginning of the enforcement of the National Sword Policy, many people were incarcerated for smuggling plastic (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020).

UNEA-3, UNEA-4 is considered “a key turning point in recognizing plastic pollution as a global issue” (Interview with Japan, 11 September 2020). This included a representative of the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact who welcomed the processes of including Indigenous traditional knowledge and practices in the work programmes and supported the “work on a global governance framework for addressing plastic pollution” (UNEP 2019a, 16). Moreover, UNEA-4 emphasized that the “Basel Convention had demonstrated its ability to adjust to new global developments and needs with regard to waste management, as demonstrated by its consideration of amendments that would allow it to address plastic waste in an effective manner” (ibid., 17). It became increasingly clear to the international community that the Basel Convention could prove useful to address this issue (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). The discussions at UNEA-4 also stressed the urgency of the problem by suggesting “that the high and rapidly increasing levels of marine litter, including plastic litter and microplastics, represent a serious environmental problem at a global scale” (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2019a).

Examining the period between 2011-2019 allows us to see how concern for plastic pollution has steadily increased through these years, how turning points steered a growing momentum that, in turn, encouraged a search for solutions and adapted actions. Indeed, “the global movement in the past years led many countries to come forward with propositions” (Interview with N. U., 4 September 2020). For instance, “all around the world, as research consolidates and activism intensifies, towns, cities, and legislatures are banning some uses of plastic” (Dauvergne 2018b, 22). During this period, the Basel Convention was increasingly considered for its potential to regulate the global trade and national management of plastic waste and pollution. This further indicates that a momentum for regulating plastic trade was in place before the adoption of the Plastic Waste Amendments (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020).

### 4.2.3 Reaching Consensus: The Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention

As we have seen, the years that preceded COP-14 of the Basel Convention, which took place in May 2019, paved the way for reaching consensus. Months before the COP, the first drafts of the Plastic Wastes Amendments were proposed by the Norwegian delegation<sup>32</sup>. In fact, Norway submitted a proposal to amend Annex IX nine months before the COP and proposed another to amend Annex II by the six-month deadline for the OEWG (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). The documents were forwarded by the United Nations Depository to countries, ministries, and numerous stakeholders and experts for review. Most governments analyzed the documents in detail and engaged in interactions with others to discuss their content and suggest improvements (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020). At the same time, NGOs drafted their position papers in preparation for the COP and reached out to governments to highlight the amendments' relevance (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). The contributions of many actors resulted in the text evolving significantly, from its initial drafts to final adoption (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020; Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). As expressed by a representative from a Western country: "it is like if Norway has opened the door and then, many countries entered and contributed to the text" (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020). Norway's proposals are seen as "a turning point in the clarification of which plastic wastes fell under the scope of the Basel Convention" (Exchanges with the Secretariat of the Basel Convention, 2020).

During the 14<sup>th</sup> COP of the Convention, a working group comprised of technical experts such as foreign affairs representatives, scientists, and technical experts from environmental ministries was established to discuss the amendments. In parallel, there were discussions in the corridors, positions

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<sup>32</sup> Following the Basel Convention's Article 17 provisions – stating that any amendment must be proposed by a Party to the Convention (United Nations 2019)

papers being written and other side events taking place. These contributed to raising awareness and concerns for plastic pollution in the World Ocean (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020). In this line, Norway's proposal gained rapid momentum during the negotiations (Interview with a representative from Japan, 11 September 2020). As "Norway is a very well-respected country", they have a lot of credibility (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). Moreover, Norway was "smart enough to know that this would be viable and if we would get this passed, they would need to get some big players on board" (ibid.). In Jim Puckett's words, "one of the turning points would probably be when they went to the EU and the EU did not substantially weaken their proposal, they improved it" (ibid.). Norway is, of course, very close to the EU and "this came at a time where the EU wants to move towards a circular economy" (ibid.). During the discussions at COP-14, the EU presented further recommendations to enhance the draft proposals of Norway (UNEP 2019b, 18). These were considered by the contact group on plastic waste established during the meeting and eventually influenced the final proposal to amend Annexes II, VIII, and IX (ibid.).

Following this, "Norway went to Japan; another big player" (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). Indeed, according to Jim Puckett, an important turning point was securing Japan's support. "Japan has been in close communication with other countries, such as Switzerland, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada" (Interview with a representative from Japan, 11 September 2020). A Japanese representative suggested that there was a "common understanding of plastic issues" among these countries (ibid.). Moreover, Japan pledged to support the ongoing effort to update the Convention's technical guidelines on plastic waste to facilitate the implementation of the Amendments (UNEP 2019b, 18).

In parallel to the discussions in international forums, interviewees suggested that "the momentum was also growing in our respective society" and important collaboration was developing to address the issue (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020; Interview with a representative from Japan, 11 September 2020). As a result, Norway's proposal mobilized critical support during COP-14. Among others, the governments of "Congo, Japan, Samoa, Switzerland, Togo and

Zambia indicated their desire to co-sponsor the proposals” which were then followed by Uruguay, Ghana, and Vanuatu (UNEP 2019b, 17). Put simply “broad support was expressed for Norway’s proposals to amend the annexes” (ibid.). China had also indicated its support for the Norwegian proposal from the offset, which proved to be helpful since “China is very influential, in its own way” (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020).

Norway also made sure to have the NGO community on board. As an interviewee noted, in order to reach a consensual decision, one must work upstream of the COP and “the first that you need to have consensus among NGOs” (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). NGOs are in a position to work on issues prior to decision-making and “reach out to government delegates” and help build consensus (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). As Jim Puckett pointed out, “the NGO community did not know much about the Basel Convention, we (the Basel Action Network) have been alone there for years and years” (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). At one point, “I had a phone call from the Break Free From Plastic Movement and said you should really consider the Basel Convention and what could be done within it; I have tried to convince them that Basel is a venue that was worthy” (ibid.). As he further noted, “at the meeting there were about a hundred different NGOs, which was unheard of” (ibid.). The Break Free From Plastic Movement (#BreakFreeFromPlastic) managed to mobilize more than a million of signatories behind a petition to support the Plastic Waste Amendments (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). Moreover, “if you don’t have consensus among the major NGOs, that could be problematic and, fortunately, this was not the case at Basel” (ibid.). According to a representative of an environmental NGO, the level of cooperation, mutual aid, and knowledge-sharing on this issue has never been seen before: “we are in coalition mode” (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). There is no important competition among the NGOs notably because no one has the illusion of being able to do all the work alone, “as the common enemy is so big and powerful” (ibid.). Among others, the International Pollutants Elimination Network played a significant role in structuring the NGO movement. They were trained to do lobbying linking the



global and international regulations and national implementation; “it was they who had the knowledge of the institution” (ibid.). Accordingly, support from the NGOs built up behind the Norwegian’s Proposal. Once Norway proposed, “all these NGOs joined the us at the meetings; we were surrounded by NGOs, which in the past was never the case” (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020).

“At the meeting itself there was little opposition to what was proposed” (ibid.). However, the petrochemical industry was among “the ones to make some recourse, and of course the US as the US is in the pocket of the industry” (ibid.). The US and the industry pushed back, potentially because the amendments could reach the OECD level and have important implications for both (Interview with K. R., 13 August 2020). Moreover, they chose countries to do their bidding, namely Argentina and Brazil (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). According to Jim Puckett, those two countries were the most vocal at the onset, particularly Argentina (ibid.). They tried to push back and tried to weaken the initiative by arguing that was going too fast (ibid.; Interview with K. R., 13 August 2020). An interview with the American Chemistry Council highlighted that one of their “main concerns with the Basel Amendments was that not all implications have been fully considered and that the process was moving too quickly without fully knowing what the impacts would be” (Interview with ACC, 20 August 2020). In the same vein, the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industry claimed that any trade constraint would harm the industry while NGOs argued, instead, that quality recycling should be put in place so that the cost of preparing for recycling is not prohibitive (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). The industry attempted to make some peripheral changes and “they were able to succeed in doing so, but in minor ways; the major trusts went through untouched” (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). Moreover, as the week went on, Argentina constantly felt more pressure; “to not be the one that would hold out the amendments” (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). In the end, they sided with the consensus (ibid.). As Jim Puckett noted, “usually there would have been an argument, because this thing moved so quickly, but people realized that we had to do something quickly because of the crisis situation” (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). The

industry was “surprised how it went so quickly” (ibid.). One interviewee confided never having “seen amendments fly so quickly into the process” (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020).

In accordance with articles 17 and 18 of the Convention, covering procedures for the adoption of amendments, the fourteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP-14) adopted decision BC-14/12, leading to amendments to Annexes II, VIII, and IX of the Convention otherwise known as the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention (United Nations 2019). Indeed, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2019, a decision by consensus was reached on the new entries to Annexes II, VIII, and IX to the Convention. New items were added, such as Y48 in Annex II to include mixtures of plastic waste; A3210 in Annex VIII to clarify “the scope of plastic wastes presumed to be hazardous”; and B3011 in Annex IX to replace B3010 coverage of “the types of plastic wastes that are presumed to not be hazardous” (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2019b). This considerably broadened the scope of the Convention and its application to the end-of-life of plastics (ibid.). In other words, by agreeing to decision BC-14/12, “governments amended the Basel Convention to include plastic waste in a legally binding framework which will make global trade in plastic waste more transparent and better regulated, whilst also ensuring that its management is safer for human health and the environment” (ibid.). Moreover, decision BC-14/12 comes in hand with decision BC-14/13, which encourages further actions to address plastic waste, and BC-14/21, which recognizes “the importance of enhanced cooperation in tackling plastic waste” (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2019a). Encouraging the international community to look for pathways for addressing the transboundary challenges posed by plastic waste, the COP requested the Secretariat to work “closely with other international organizations on activities related marine plastic litter and microplastics” (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2019a).

Upon their entry into force on the first day of 2021, the amendments “will have a significant impact on the rules governing the movement of plastic waste across international boundaries” and the new categories of plastic wastes covered by the Convention, including resins, non-halogenated and

fluorinated polymers and mixtures of polyethylene (PE), polypropylene (PP) or polyethylene terephthalate (PET), will be subject to the Prior Informed Consent procedure of the Convention, waste minimization objectives and environmentally sound management principles (ibid.; Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2019c.). In other words, the Plastic Waste Amendments “clarify when and how the Convention apply to such wastes”, widening the scope of the Convention and providing it with a broader reach to tackle plastic litter as a global environmental problem (ibid.).

COP-14 also led to the establishment of a Plastic Waste Partnership (PWP) which provides further weight to the view that a global norm on plastic pollution has emerged. Along with other countries Norway contributed to the creation of the PWP by allocating significant financial resources. The PWP would provide stakeholders with tools, resources, and expertise, and foster cooperation in the implementation of the Plastic Waste Amendment and in the development of innovative solutions. The Plastic Waste Partnership would also aim “to mobilize business, government, academic and civil society resources, interests and expertise to assist in implementing the new measures, to provide a set of practical supports – including tools, best practices, technical and financial assistance” (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2019b). In the words of Katharina Kummer, the creation of partnerships “is one way to bring an issue forward under the Basel Convention” (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020). Accordingly, in the process of addressing plastic pollution “one of the first step was the plastic waste partnership” (ibid.). As further suggested by Kummer, partnerships, although non-binding, can be effective by enabling public-private partnerships under the framework of the Convention (ibid.). Indeed, the PWP mobilizes “governments, industry, civil society and UN joint forces to beat plastic waste pollution” (Secretariat of the BRS Conventions 2020).

Plastic Waste Partnership activities include identification of the gaps and barriers in addressing the transboundary issue of plastic pollution; forums and channels for information and knowledge sharing; the advancement of environmentally sound management (ESM) of plastic waste and adapted policies;

educational and awareness raising projects; and the promotion of research and innovation (Secretariat of the Basel Convention 2019c). Moreover, in the words of the Secretariat of the Basel Convention, “the goal of the PWP is to improve and promote the ESM of plastic waste at the global, regional and national levels and to prevent and minimize its generation so as to, among other things, reduce significantly and in the long-term eliminate the discharge of plastic waste and microplastics into the environment, in particular the marine environment” (ibid.). This indicates a clear commitment to the Basel Convention Secretariat and its partners to address the studied issue.

In March 2020, The PWP met for the first time in the Seychelles, gathering more than 100 members of the Partnership. Delegates worked on plastic waste prevention and minimization; plastic waste collection, recycling and other recovery; transboundary movements of plastic waste; outreach, education, and awareness-raising; and “preparations for entry into force of the Plastic Waste Amendments” (ibid.). Building on its multistakeholder structure, the PWP also benefits from collaboration with other global organizations and actors toward achieving the first target of the 14<sup>th</sup> Sustainable Development Goal focusing on marine litter (United Nations 2015, 26). An interviewee noted that “with the Amendments, the Partnership, and the Capacity Building initiatives, we have a great menu on which we can build under the Basel Convention” (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020).

## Chapter 5 – Analysis

The previous chapters have set the grounds to test the life cycle model's mechanisms. The first chapter presents our definition of norms and the literature account of their emergence. The second details our ontology, epistemology, conceptual framework, and methodology. The third chapter presents the issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean and its governance. The fourth chapter provides an account of the temporal sequence of events that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments, offering relevant insights for the study of the three main mechanisms of Finnemore and Sikkink's model and, by the same token, answering our research question. This fifth chapter investigates the presence of ideational, agential, and structural mechanisms' logics in the processes that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention.

### 5.1 Ideational Mechanisms

Our case study shows that ideational mechanisms were prominent in the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution within the scope of the Basel Convention. From the *increasing awareness* period of 1950-2010 onward, strategic social construction processes informed and influenced the framing of the issue. The resulting ideational and normative concerns were significantly linked with the work of researchers who documented pollution in marine environments; proposed categorizations of plastics; attempted to define the issue; investigated its sources; and demonstrated its harmfulness in the World Ocean. Knowledge on plastic pollution negative impacts developed and in turn influenced which ideas and norms were promoted by activists, researchers, and individuals. Epistemic communities, NGOs and the media informed the public about the scale of this issue and “flagged what is going on” (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). Our case study indicates that researchers' work contributed to bring attention to the negative impacts of plastic in the marine environment while the media and NGOs have frequently

highlighted its impacts around the world. In similar fashion to Richard Price's analysis of the case of antipersonnel land mines, the "transnational dissemination of information" about plastic pollution and its effects on the World Ocean shifted the attention to the global problem (1998, 622). These processes remind Finnemore and Sikkink's emphasis on the interplay between ideas and the role of norm entrepreneurs in how an issue is framed and addressed (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Through these efforts, those actors have influenced the terms of the debate, the collective definitions of appropriateness, and the normative concerns of a plurality of actors. This similarly follows Keck and Sikkink's suggestion that "the construction of cognitive frames is an essential component of transnational networks' political strategies" (1999, 95). The study of such processes "demonstrates the power of ideas to reshape understandings of national interest" and beyond (Sikkink 1998, 519). Moreover, Sikkink argued that "networks and moral entrepreneurs work to redefine an activity as wrong, often through the power of their language, information, and symbolic activity" (ibid.). Our investigation of official documents and interviews demonstrates that the emergence of normative concerns on issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean has been, from early on, associated with these ideational processes. Indeed, the information collected revealed that the language of many actors focused on stressing the detrimental impact of plastic in the marine environment, particularly from the 1970s onward, and demonstrates that concerns for plastic pollution in the World Ocean has been consistently growing since. As a result of this increasing awareness, the *growing momentum* period of 2011-2019 was characterized by high level agenda-setting processes and a further search for solutions. Indeed, we have seen that as both attention and momentum have been rising, problems regarding plastic pollution have been identified and solutions to the issues of plastic in the World Ocean repeatedly called for. This has been translated into an increasing number of conventions, organizations and actors working on the issue such as the Honolulu Strategy; Rio+20; the numerous COP of international conventions and the adoption of decisions and provisions to address the issue and its related impacts; UNEA-1, UNEA-2, and the decisive UNEA-3 and UNEA-4. Large organizations

and conventions have flagged the seriousness of the issue globally, investigating and documenting the problem and recognizing that “plastic was everywhere” (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). It has become clear for the international community, as one interviewee underlined, that plastic pollution in the World Ocean was and still is “a growing environmental challenge that we have to deal with” (Interview with a delegate, 29 September 2020). Indeed, it has become common to hear that “everyone now knows that marine plastic pollution is very serious” and that “we are now in an age of plastic” (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020; Interview with Japan, 11 September 2020).

This trajectory has encouraged the establishment of many expert group meetings that have pointed to the Basel Convention as one of the available options under which part of the global governance of plastic could take place (Interview with K. R., 13 August 2020; Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). According to a representative of a Western country, “no one could stick their head in the sand and say that there was no problem with plastic and that the Basel Convention had no role to play in addressing it” (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020). As previously noted, “Norway saw that and took the lead and proposed these amendments and things moved very quickly, I mean, really quickly because everyone knew that we had a real problem” (Interview with a delegate, 29 September 2020). Our case study also shows that actors such as representatives of Norway have been emphasizing the importance of the issue from the very beginning and have seized the opportunity to bring forth solutions to address it (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020). Indeed, our case study demonstrates that Norway’s leadership has been prominent in setting plastic pollution on the global governance agenda. For instance, submitting propositions to amend the Basel Convention has helped frame the issue and pushed for solutions under the Basel Convention. Accordingly, Norway’s initiatives have contributed to the strategic social construction of the issue at hand and the processes that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments are tainted by these efforts. As reminded by Peter Haas, “the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power” (Schattschneider 1975, 66 in Haas 1992,

16). Norway's leadership and proposals, supported by a vast number of organizations and individuals, have greatly influenced the definitions of the issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean and ultimately which norm emerged under the Basel Convention.

The combination of many actors' voices has influenced the search for solutions to plastic pollution in the World Ocean, supported the growing momentum that encouraged Norway to submit propositions, and, ultimately, the consensual adoption of the Plastic Waste Amendments. To do so, they worked to frame and strategically construct the issue along with promoting why and how it should be addressed (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). These actors, such as NGOs, have sought to build transnational consensus to address the issue and engaged "in the business of framing and strategic constructions" (Risse 2013, 438). In order to raise awareness, draw attention, and "make the issue negotiable, NGOs had to first raise the profile and salience of the issue, using information and symbolic politics" (Keck and Sikkink 1999, 97). Through their use of language, strategic social construction and specific framing, networks are able to "use symbolic events to reshape understandings" (ibid.). Our case study demonstrates how actors have used language for instrumental purposes. For instance, "the saying that there will soon be more plastic than fish really resonated with people" (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). Promoted by a coalition of actors around the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, these formulations have had great impact (ibid.). Indeed, as Campbell and her colleagues highlighted, these types of figures and wording "have put plastics at the forefront of ocean pollution concern" (2016, 534). As a result, "there has been a significant change in the level of what is acceptable in society" (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020). Katharina Kummer, Executive Secretary of the Basel Convention from 2007 to 2012, highlighted that "during the 30 years that I have been involved closely with international environmental law, there has been important progress" (ibid.). She suggested that "in the 1970s and 1980s, business community was totally opposed to environmental law, whilst nowadays, basically every business worth its salt has a sustainability strategy and a strategy foundation and invest in sustainability projects; now it



is a given” (ibid.). According to Niko Urho “the private sector recognizes the problem of plastic pollution because there is a huge call from the public” (Interview with N. U., 4 September 2020). Similarly, while the initial focus of the Convention aimed at restricting and refraining transboundary movement of hazardous waste, it has recently considerably broadened its scope to include related concerns voiced by the governments and nonstate actors. In Kummer’s words, “at the beginning of my tenure in 2007, my impression at that time was that waste management was at the very bottom of the agenda” and rare were those interested in it (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020). As a result, little funding for environmental issues was directed toward waste management; to win an election, “no politician would promise to build waste management infrastructure; because it was not something people were interested in” (ibid.). However, things have changed in recent years, with increasing awareness at all levels. According to Kummer, due to this “prise de conscience” at the global level and the emergence of the concept of the circular economy which has been embraced, waste management has become important (ibid.). The way waste was viewed has gone “from a focus on prohibiting and controlling transboundary movement of waste toward an emphasis on an environmentally sound management of waste and materials” (ibid.). Similarly, the interest and attention to the Basel Convention as a pathway towards solutions to address plastic pollution in the World Ocean has also expanded. The interviews conducted show that concerns for the negative impacts of plastic pollution in the World Ocean served as the normative background to support the amendments.

The visibility of the problem may also contribute to explaining the rising ideational and normative concerns that support the emergence of the norm. Niko Urho highlighted that the visual consequences of the problem of plastic pollution in the World Ocean has generated a growing momentum and the “attention has been rising” (Interview with N. U., 4 September 2020). According to one interviewee, for some actors – including representatives from landlocked countries – “it is not easy to understand how serious the problem is” (Interview with a representative from Japan, 11 September 2020). Nonetheless,

landlocked countries such as Switzerland can still be actively involved in generating solutions as demonstrated in our case study. Moreover, it is considered that in regions where the problem is most visible, such as “South East Asia, considered the center of marine plastic pollution, most people understand the problem” (ibid.). In this line, another interviewee has suggested that because the issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean is tangible, it can rapidly draw attention and concern (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). This further explains why documentaries such *Plastic China* (2016) or those produced by National Geographic and Discovery, along with NGO campaigns and researchers’ findings have played a key role in bringing attention to the issue – as they have underlined the visible and tangible impacts of plastic pollution on marine ecosystems. By the same token, they may have contributed to the translation of ideas into frames that, in turn, influenced norm emergence. For instance, as epistemic communities have produced conclusive studies, they supported claims that the negative impacts of plastic pollution in the World Ocean require solutions. As we have seen, these ideas were firstly translated into legislation regulating the dumping of plastics at sea. However, as ideational and normative concerns about plastic pollution in the World Ocean gained ground and research was consolidated, a search for solutions to the land-based sources of pollution was launched. The increasing awareness of the issue has led to a growing momentum to address the issue and from 2010 onward “the issue has become a very high priority” (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020).

In these processes, the role of research is considered central as new scientific knowledge can “create a consensual basis for the recognition of new cause-effect links which had not been recognized before” (E. Haas 1975 in P. Haas 1992, 29). Finnemore and Sikkink have greatly emphasized the importance of studying emerging ideas and discourses to understand how international structures are changing. This suggests that epistemic communities and researchers have brought – and are bringing – new knowledge to the discussion in global environmental governance; they are contributing to the creation of common understandings and, ultimately, to norm emergence. In this line, Peter Haas

suggested that “epistemic communities can shed light on the nature of the complex interlinkages between issues and on the chain of events that might proceed either from failure to take action or from instituting a particular policy” (1992, 15). Hence, epistemic communities can be decisive in the uncovering of pathways for cooperation and the definition of appropriate solutions.

Nonetheless, Haas reminds us that the information generated is always “the product of human interpretations of social and physical phenomena” (ibid., 4). To this, Finnemore and Sikkink added that “groups with specialized knowledge often have a common set of norms and world views; many scholars would argue that technical knowledge is never value neutral and always comes with an array of shared normative understandings that make it meaningful, therefore powerful, in social life” (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001, 402). In the case of plastic pollution in the World Ocean, epistemic communities have contributed to the development of new normative understandings, which developed from the *Increasing Awareness* period onward. As Adler suggested, “when epistemic communities diffuse *new* normative views of science and of the global environment through the institutions of state and society, both the norms and their carriers may help bring about a transformation of political actors’ identities, interests and practices” (1997, 344, emphasis in original). As noted previously, Finnemore and Sikkink’s consider that ideas and norm shifts are among the most important sources of change in international structures. As epistemic communities promote and develop new ideas and norm, they influence processes of norms emergence. Moreover, “environmental governance – the ever-expanding network of legal obligations and formal institutions influencing states environmental policies – has evolved principally through the development of better scientific understanding about the behavior of the physical environment combined with a growing appreciation of the role that international institutions can play” (Haas 2001, 310). Haas claims that “in general, governments and organizations may be said to learn through the evolution of consensual knowledge” (1992, 30). Hence, efforts to build common understanding of the issue at hand

show that ideational and normative concerns have been instrumental in reaching a consensus on the Plastic Waste Amendments.

Moreover, the importance of China's National Sword Policy should not be underestimated in the processes that led to the strategical social construction and framing of the issue. For many, the National Sword Policy "created a crisis globally" (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020; Interview with the ACC, 20 August 2020). Many have also draw attention to the role of NGOs and the media in exposing the situation on the ground, particularly in South East Asia, including the influential documentary *Plastic China*, which was viewed as a turning point (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020; Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). As Khagram, Riker and Sikkink noted, in some cases "strong international norms did not exist and the first task of the activists was to build new international norms by mobilizing international consensus around their collective action frames" (2002, 15). Moreover, as Sikkink underlined, it is often "not enough for individuals to develop norms, they must promote them globally through intense campaigns" (1998, 519). Additionally, as Keck and Sikkink suggested, it is often "not one event, but the juxtaposition of disparate events that makes people change their minds and take action" (1999, 97). In the case of plastic pollution in the World Ocean, the circulation of ideas on local, regional, national and global scenes, along with the increasing work and collaboration between various actors during international forums, has led to "a change of attitude and approach" (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020). By relaying articles and stories around the world, the media, NGOs and activists have pointed to the mismanagement of plastic waste and led to the decisive "cognitive punch" (Adler 2019, 162). Indeed, examining the narratives in activists' networks, international conventions' reports, and world-wide media reveals that plastic pollution has become part of the social imagery (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). One interviewee stated that she/he "[has] never seen an issue that has captured the imagination of policy-makers and the public quite like this since the ozone layer" (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). According to her/him, this urged organizations to act (ibid.). Ideas emanating from academia, awareness raising campaigns,

documentaries and the media contributed to the growing momentum, prompting actors such as IOs to address the issue. For instance, UNEP has promoted the Clean Seas Campaign in order to support the involvement of multiple stakeholders to address marine plastic pollution (UNEP 2017a). It has become clear that UNEP's main idea was to address the marine plastic issue and that the justification behind the Plastic Waste Amendments was based on this objective (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). Indeed, Norway's proposals echoed the growing awareness of the problems caused by the mismanagement of plastic waste and was a result of how the issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean has been framed globally (Interview with a delegate, 29 September 2020).

Pursuing a common goal has also proven to be crucial. Based on the data gathered, a shared understanding among supporters of the Amendments was built before COP-14 and was central to reaching consensus during the Basel negotiations (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020; Interview with a representative from Japan, 11 September 2020). This follows Constanza's saying that "what we are learning about change process in various kinds of organizations and communities is that the most effective ingredient to move change in a particular direction is having a clear vision of the desired goal which is also truly shared by the members of the organization or community" (1999, 205). Moreover, according to Raubenheimer, consensus is "always a compromise between the technical details and putting forward something everyone can follow the train of thought and agree to" (Interview with K. R., 13 August 2020). As underlined by a Japanese representative, "the most important and difficult thing during the negotiations at the Basel Convention was to make amendments which every country can accept; to do so we needed to build a common understanding" (Interview with a representative from Japan, 11 September 2020). Accordingly, the increasing awareness and growing momentum around a shared common understanding of the issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean has influenced the emergence of a norm and contributed to the resulting Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention. As emphasized by Katharina Kummer, "the question which wastes should be included in the scope of the Basel

Convention was subject to considerable debate” (1992, 543). This suggests that the consensus itself has also evolved through the years. This can be partly explained, as suggested the former Executive Secretary of the Convention, by the fact that “the priority of the countries for the first 10 to 15 years of the existence of the Convention was essentially on this issue of illegal traffic; now it has expanded to encompass all aspects of waste management not only transboundary movement and to encompass new types of wastes” (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020). With plastic as a high-level issue that has grown in significance in the recent years, the Amendments have broadened the scope of the Convention (ibid.).

## 5.2 Agential Mechanisms

Finnemore and Sikkink have greatly stressed the role of both norm entrepreneurs and persuasion in norm emergence. They argue that norm entrepreneurs’ endeavours are central to the norm emergence stage of their model (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 896). This also echoes Raymond’s view that “norms exist only relative to human beings” (1997, 219). Moreover, as underlined, Finnemore and Sikkink suggest that persuasion is a central mechanism describing how norm entrepreneurs influence norm emergence. As such, our analysis in this section is two-fold: determine whether norm entrepreneurs have been present in the processes that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments; and whether they used persuasion in supporting the emerging norm.

The role of norm entrepreneurs was heavily emphasized by interviewees. Among others, Norway’s leadership was repeatedly underscored (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020; Interview with K. R., 13 August 2020). Moreover, it was also emphasized that actors other than states have significantly contributed to the emergence of the norm (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020). This also goes in line with Price’s saying, according to which transnational civil society actors can play a catalytic role in “teaching states a new norm” (1998, 638). Although decisions are taken by states, and only states can

vote and make proposals, nonstate actors – such as representative of governmental organizations or non-governmental organizations, industries, activists and research institutes – can be observers, lobby delegates and actively participate in the debates. Indeed, persuasion and advocacy are central to the work of many NGOs (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). Asked whether these non-state actors actually have the option to pressure and make persuasive arguments to influence others, Katharina Kummer remarked:

“Absolutely, they can, and they do. It is a bit like a national parliament where you have lobbyist that go on and talk to the parliamentarians and lobby them. They have different ways of doing this. They can participate as observers, which means not only sitting in the room and making statements but also being in the corridors, meeting with the delegates and persuading them, making their points. It is very much part of the decision-making process” (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020).

Non-state actors also have to account for the uneven weight between states in their attempt to have an impact. Indeed, as voting is rarely resorted to, powerful countries and blocks carry much more weight than others (ibid). Accordingly, Kummer added, “the ways in which anybody can get their position through is to basically talk to the key representative of these groups to get their support” (ibid). This follows the argument of a lawyer working for an environmental NGO who suggested that “those who want to persuade others have to target who are the key persons to talk to on the other side; who will be on the delegation and who will be the person taking decisions... depending on the composition of the delegation, including who is in charge, you will change your arguments” (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). This reminds us of the intimate link between ideational and agential mechanisms, with ideational mechanisms often serving as a basis for persuasion and agential mechanisms as central to the strategic social construction process. Indeed, to be persuasive, “you need arguments, and this is why NGOs do research, publications, campaigns, and side events” (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). The rare usage of voting also implies that actors often engage in detailed discussions until compromise is found (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020). Hence, despite the fact that observers, such as

environmental organizations and industry representatives do not have a formal role, they are permitted to participate in the discussions, make interventions and try to persuade delegates, implying that “they have a much higher level of influence than they would otherwise have” (ibid.). Indeed, observers can have an active role in the “corridor discussions”, “where much of the decision making gets done” (ibid.). This is where people meet others and talk, explain their positions and distribute position papers. According to Kummer, “this is one of the main ways for NGOs to influencing things” (ibid.). Moreover, partnerships such as the PWP, can be particularly effective for non-state actors as they have an equal voice (ibid.).

Interviews have shown that the Secretariat of the Convention itself engaged in persuasive processes. Indeed, one interviewee suggested that “in the Basel Secretariat... there [are] some elements that felt that they could do a lot more than the Plastic Waste Amendments” (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). This suggests that the Secretariat of the Convention was open to further expanding the scope of the Convention and served as a platform for norm entrepreneurs; emphasizing the co-constitution of agents and structures together with agential and structural logics in explaining norm emergence.

Finnemore and Sikkink’s focus on persuasion finds roots in the larger discussions on norms and political change. Our literature review has highlighted that “norms influence political change through a socialization process that combines instrumental interests, material pressures, argumentation, persuasion, institutionalization and habitualization” (Risse and Sikkink 1999, 37). As persuasion mechanisms operate, they may change what is intersubjectively believed and, by the same token, influence actors’ intentions and objectives (Adler 1997, 329). In some cases, as Finnemore and Sikkink have highlighted, people need to be persuaded that it is indeed in their interest to support a norm and what this entails (1998, 899). To influence and persuade others, norm entrepreneurs rely “upon the strength of their normative argument and the power of facts to support and dramatize their argument” (Sikkink 1998, 519). Again, this reminds us of the intimate link between ideational and normative



mechanisms and agential mechanisms such as persuasion. Drawing upon her experience as Executive Secretary of the Convention, Kummer highlighted that “in the case of the Basel Convention, there is one NGO in particular called the Basel Action Network (BAN) that had enormous weight during the negotiations; they have extremely skilled lobbyists; they know how to use the role and the rights that they have to the best of their advantage” (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020). Moreover, she added, “they manage to claim the moral high ground – that they represent the environment and the people, so their influence is a lot higher than what it would ever be formally” (ibid.). The important coalition of NGOs in which the BAN played an important role all worked together during COP-14 to foster consensus and agreement (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020).

As suggested by Finnemore and Sikkink, states can also play a key role in forming coalitions of like-minded actors that support norm emergence processes by acting as norm entrepreneurs and encouraging others to be norm followers. This process exemplifies how “states are socialized” (Finnemore 1996a, 2) not only by their citizens and institutions but by all the members of the international community. For instance, the influence of individual states – such as the role played by Norway in the processes that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments – to bring change to world politics is attested by looking at states following other states’ leadership and norm entrepreneurship. In other words, “states are not always leaders of social change; they can also be followers” (Boli and Thomas 1997, 187). Similarly, the IR scholarship reminds us that “states do care about their international reputation and image as “normal” members of the international community” (Risse and Ropp 1999, 245). Indeed, “states may make changes in their behavior not only because of the economic costs of sanctions, but because leaders of countries care about what leaders of other countries think of them” (Sikkink 1998, 520), illustrated by Argentina joining the consensus.

The bargaining processes that took place during COP-14 also bring light to contestation efforts from the petrochemical industry, the United States, Brazil and Argentina. Some interviewees underlined

the relations between them; with the US being influenced by “the powerful plastic industry very much tied to the fossil fuel industry” and with Brazil and Argentina supporting some of the United States’ claims (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). It is important to reiterate that the US is limited to a status of observer at the Basel Convention, having only recently started considering joining the Convention (ibid.). As an observer, the US tried to influence and persuade other countries in the corridors. They talked with other delegates and “tried to convince them that it is a bad deal” (Interview with N. U., 4 September 2020). Countering the United States’ and industry’s claims, some have argued that the industry aims to make up for the deficit related to decreasing sales in the oil sector caused by the increase in electric cars and the transition toward renewable power sources – “by creating three times more plastic in the future” (ibid.; Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). This important argument is also brought forward in the widely referred to documentary film *Plastic War* (ibid.). The American Chemistry Council (ACC) confirmed that they “did oppose the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention” (Interview with the ACC, 20 August 2020). During the meetings, they collaborated with other industry partners and talked with different countries to share their vision, arguing that the Amendments would not work or be useful (ibid.). While developing countries remained mostly quiet during the negotiations, they took part in the “fairly intense corridor negotiations” (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020). Moreover, “Argentina in particular, pushed back very aggressively on the Norway proposal that the EU championed” (Interview with the ACC, 20 August 2020). During the meeting, an environmental delegate shared a post on social media regarding the Argentinian delegate trying to push back during the negotiations, which “heightened the tension in the room”. The session was stopped and “the debate got incredibly charged and highly emotional” (Interview with the ACC, 20 August 2020). Ultimately, Argentina’s concerns were mostly answered, encouraging them to join their voice to the consensus.

In global governance, state and nonstate actors find themselves in multidimensional structures and processes. In this context and “in an increasingly complex and interdependent world, negotiation,

adoption and implementation of international agreements is a major component of the foreign policy activity of every state” (Chayes and Chayes 1993, 175). In the framework of the Basel Convention, states found in the adoption of the Plastic Waste Amendments a way to address their concerns and those voiced by nonstate actors. As Chayes and Chayes suggest, “when nations enter into an international agreement [...], they alter their behavior, their relationships, and their expectations of one another over time in accordance with its terms” (ibid., 176). In this line, norm entrepreneurs such as Norway, have encouraged others to enter into an international agreement and engage in cooperative governance frameworks. One interviewee said that “Norway is driving this ship” and that they have been focusing consistently on the marine plastic pollution issue since the beginning (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020).

As momentum started to build inside nations, leaders searched for solutions, with Norway seizing the opportunity in Basel to address the end-of-life of plastic (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020). According to a representative of the ACC, “it was very aggressively pushed” by the coalition around Norway (Interview with the ACC, 20 August 2020). The ability of certain countries such as Nordic countries, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Belgium to garner such support may be explained by them being “countries that have a strong environment ministry in Europe and that have the independence to take strong positions enable them to bring forward issues”(ibid.). Coastal countries with strong domestic support for environmental concerns (such as Norway) also demonstrate strong leadership on this issue (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). Indeed, Norway “being a coastal country probably has more support than other countries to put this issue on its agenda” (ibid.). As Norway was already backing important financial commitment to address the issue globally, “it made sense for them to push the Plastic Waste Amendments through” (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020; Interview with N. U., 4 September 2020).

The support Norway obtained from the EU was consequential. “In order to bring about policy change, networks need[ed] to both persuade and pressurize more powerful actors” (Keck and Sikkink

1999, 97). As Keck and Sikkink pointed out, “identifying points of leverage is a crucial strategic step” (ibid.). At the same time, in the months before COP-14, NGOs worked to support Norway’s proposal (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). Ultimately, the cooperation between them contributed to exert “leverage over more powerful institutions, [and] influence far beyond their ability to influence state practices directly” (Keck and Sikkink 1999, 97). As Niko Urho stated, the ability to secure support from the EU was a turning point because “when the EU turns it can move strongly forward” (Interview with N. U., 4 September 2020). The backing of Japan was also critical (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020), as during the negotiations, their “position facilitated the negotiation of the Amendments” (Interview with Japan, 11 September 2020). China also signaled that they agreed with everything being proposed, even suggesting stricter restrictions (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). This illustrates that norm entrepreneurs can in fact strengthen their persuasive efforts by building alliances to “reinforce narratives and enhance lobbying capacity” (Alger and Dauvergne, 2019, 4). In short, the analysis of the processes that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention shows that agential mechanisms were present and that persuasion by norm entrepreneurs played a significant role, as theorized by Finnemore and Sikkink’s life cycle of norms model.

### **5.3 Structural Mechanisms**

Finnemore and Sikkink’s suggest that “two elements seem common in the successful creation of most new norms: norm entrepreneurs and organizational platforms from which entrepreneurs act” (1998, 896). While the role of first was outlined in the analysis of agential mechanisms, the second has an important place in structural mechanisms. The structural characteristics the Basel Convention are the object of this section. It investigates their presence in the processes that led to the adoption of the Plastic Waste Amendments.

Finnemore and Sikkink stress that “the expansion of international organizations (especially with the UN) is [...] providing more opportunities to address and negotiate on a broad range of normative issues” (ibid., 909). International organizational platforms contribute to shaping which incentives and opportunities are offered for actors to support and promote norms. Kate O’Neill states that IGOs such as the United Nations are the result of nation-states delegating the role of “managing and implementing global political processes” (2013, 97–98). In consequence of these delegation processes, “international law and international organizations [serve as] primary vehicles for stating community norms and for conferring collective legitimation” (Sikkink 1998, 520). This view “underscores the now widely recognized need for more theoretical work to address the increasingly well-documented feedback effects of social structures such as norms, shared expectations, and even international organizations on actors such as state” (Finnemore 1993, 594).

Finnemore and Sikkink suggest that “networks of norm entrepreneurs and international organizations also act as agents of socialization” for actors that interact with them (1998, 902). This is clearly illustrated by examining the influence of networks and organizations that supported the Plastic Waste Amendments on the behavior of states such as Argentina. Moreover, IGOs not only offer significant platforms for discussion and opportunities for the global management of problems, they also “provide different kinds of tools” for actors to promote their ideational and normative concerns (ibid., 900). This evokes Finnemore’s emphasis on the “largely unexplored role for international organizations, namely, their role as an arena in which norms and convergent expectations about international behavior are developed” (1993, 594). Additionally, it reinstates the close link between structural and agential mechanisms – between organizational platforms and norms entrepreneurs. Indeed, international organizations “provide arenas enabling regular interactions between advocacy networks and state actors” (Risse 2013, 435) and their proliferation “has provided foci for the contacts” between actors of the world (Keck and Sikkink 1999, 93).

With regard to Finnemore and Sikkink's emphasis on opportunity structure, interviews revealed that the structure is significantly opening since Rio+20 and that incentives are multiplying for conventions, organizations, and actors to develop solutions to the issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean. As underlined, Finnemore and Sikkink consider that the international structure is closely linked with the distribution of ideas and change according to idea and norm shifts (1998, 894). As research has increased the availability of data on the issue and campaigns have raised awareness amongst a growing number of people, international organizations and conventions have supported action by offering new platforms for cooperation, contributing to the dissemination of new ideas. Our case study also shows that these have encouraged the development of a legally binding framework under the Basel Convention. Indeed, "there is a growing momentum in the Basel Convention" opening the door for innovation and development (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020). This demonstrates that the fit of normative claims with existing normative frameworks do facilitate norm emergence and supports Finnemore and Sikkink's argument which states that "social structure and normative context shape the action of agents" (1998, 910). We recall that Norway saw the favorable normative context and the existing structure of the Basel Convention as an opportunity to support the emerging norm. Moreover, by serving as forums of discussion, organizations and conventions affect ideational mechanisms. Indeed, intergovernmental organizations can play a significant role in bridging national divides, reaching common understandings on global norms, and guiding global governance as organizational platforms.

Research and interviews also highlighted the structural role of the technicality of the Basel Convention. Many have stressed the importance of the multiplicity of actors are involved in decision-making; the numerous opportunities for stakeholders to provide feedback; and the various processes under the Convention must follow specific procedural rules. The technical aspect of the Basel Convention is found in many other international environmental conventions. Indeed, "in every convention, institutional and procedural components are part of the formal process" (Interview with K. K., 9

September 2020). For instance, the Plastic Waste Amendments had to respect the provisions stating proposals must be submitted by Parties, with other articles specifying the level of agreement required for a proposal to pass. Moreover, the Norwegian delegation had to respect strict deadlines to submit its proposals and documents in the six official languages of the UN. Yet, amending an annex is easier than amending the text of the Convention itself: “annexes are technical and meant to change faster” (ibid.). Change can also be made through guidelines (adopted by the parties but not binding) or partnerships, which were used very early on in the Basel Convention. All processes must respect the technicalities and rules of the Convention. It should be noted that since as the COP meets only every two years, “if there is a momentum and it is not seized, it may take another two years before we have another opportunity to do so” (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020). In the build-up to COP-14, there was some energy and desire to do something about plastic pollution in the World Ocean which suggest that “the conditions were favorable for making progress under the Convention” (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020).

The presence of structural mechanisms in the studied outcome was reemphasized by Karen Raubenheimer who suggested that “we did something under the Basel Convention because it is already a framework convention” (Interview with K. R., 13 August 2020). The decision to amend the Basel Convention was natural “essentially because Basel is the only treaty in existence that deals with wastes” (ibid.). In Raubenheimer’s words, “we talked about the Basel Convention at UNEP and a new international framework fitted under the Convention” (ibid.). Simply stated, “the Plastic Waste Amendments were straight forward with the structure of the Basel Convention” (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). Indeed, the Basel Convention presented the advantage of being an existent framework, covering the and had provisions that welcomed proposals for further development of its scope (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020). Moreover, as amendments to existing conventions typically do not require the creation of new ministries or divisions, modifying an amendment is often

preferable to the complexities involved in the creation of a new treaty (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). This is one important reason why the Convention has been able to bring together several actors around a consensual decision (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020). As underlined by Kummer, “the way a waste is defined by the Convention is through the annexes, so if you want to add a new waste, like plastic waste, you have to put it in the annexes” (ibid.). Accordingly, because of the structure and instruments of the Basel Convention, “amending the annexes was the obvious choice” (ibid.).

Interviews have also suggested that the Convention and its members may themselves seek to remain relevant and secure funding. According to one interviewee, to do so, institutions must be focusing on issues that capture both attention and resources (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). In Jim Puckett’s words, “all human agencies are very territorial; they want to build their empires” (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). We have seen that UNEP and the Basel Convention itself explored what role they could play in the governance of plastic pollution, leading them to attempt “to grab some of that attention and get some of the resources” (ibid.). Moreover, according to one interviewee, “there would be an appetite, by at least some members and actors of the Basel universe, who would like to do much more under the Basel Convention; measures that would move beyond trade and deal more with waste management including prevention” (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020).

Many interviewees also underlined that the Basel Convention provides a favourable venue since the United States is not a Party and only has observer status (at the time of writing) along with the fact that there is a growing appetite in the international community to address the studied issue (Interview with a delegate, 29 September 2020; Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020; Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020; Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). The opening of the opportunity structure for the development of global governance frameworks to address plastic pollution in the World Ocean, coupled with the growing momentum around this issue, was sufficient to overcome the combined



American industry and Argentinian opposition. This also shows why the case of the Plastic Waste Amendments may be of particular interest in understanding how global environmental norms can be promoted. Indeed, it is often argued that “there are relatively few global environmental norms in part because the political economy of environmental problems is rarely conducive to strong support from the most powerful segments of industry” (Alger and Dauvergne 2019, 8). This is often the case since “many environmental ideas and norms by their very nature call for an end to (or restrictions on) certain economic activities [and as such] inevitably face an uphill battle to attain global norm status given the current paradigm of liberal environmentalism” (ibid.). However, the Plastic Waste Amendments were an exception; not because the industry was in favor, but because the global support was so strong.

Last but not least, it was argued by many interviewees that because the Basel Convention is legally binding, it further explains why it was chosen as an avenue to make some progress on the governance of plastic pollution in the World Ocean (Interview with a delegate, 29 September 2020; Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). For instance, Japan considered that any action taken needed to be legally binding because “the legally binding character is the most important thing to solve the problem” (Interview with Japan, 11 September 2020). These points strongly suggest that structural mechanisms, such as the form of the organizational structure of the Basel Convention, influenced the processes that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments. Again, this confirms the relevance of Finnemore and Sikkink’s life cycle model of norms to explain their emergence.

## Conclusion

This study shows that understanding the emergence of norms in world politics calls for an account of manifold processes with co-constituting influences. Indeed, ideational, agential, and structural mechanisms were not only present in the processes that led to the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention, but all were intrinsically dependent upon the others. This finding is in line Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) life cycle of norms model. It also echoes Rosenau's analysis according to which there is "multidirectional interactions" between "the diverse ideational sources, behavioral patterns, and political institutions of any global order" (1992, 16). This study also sheds light on how grappling with processes of norm emergence can be facilitated by combining complementary perspectives. We have done so by joining the strengths of a becoming ontology that views change and metastability as part of a unitary vision of the world; an evolutionary epistemology attentive to complex processes such as emergence and their invaluable source of information on how ideas, norms, actors, and structures evolve in world politics; and a process-tracing research method offering a detailed account of multidimensional sequences of events. In parallel, IR literature and connected fields of study have offered insightful lenses to seize the importance of ideas, agents and structures in understanding norm emergence.

Our process tracing research method has allowed us to investigate Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink's life cycle of norms model and its emphasis on ideational, agential, and structural mechanisms to explain norm emergence in world politics. This research suggests that their model may prove useful in the development of the research agenda on the role of norms in societal contexts. For the present study, it has shed light on explanatory mechanisms behind the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution in the World Ocean and its translation in the recent plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention. Accordingly, it has proven fruitful to answer our guiding research question: *How can we explain the emergence of a norm on plastic pollution within the scope of the Basel Convention?*

Both social and natural sciences are instrumental in analyzing the issue of plastic pollution in the World Ocean. “To think of ocean pollution requires us to think about how marine and social systems are integrated” (Jacques 2013, 453). Social sciences have been central to our analysis of norm emergence and natural sciences fundamental to understanding the issue at hand. Our case study has illustrated that over the past decades, research, campaigns and cooperation have engendered increasing awareness. As a result, growing momentum in international organizations and conventions have spurred action to address the issue of plastic pollution in marine ecosystems and has led to a consensual decision in 2019 to amend the Basel Convention and include plastic trade and management in a legally binding framework.

State and non-state actors have both played a determinant role in the strategic social construction and persuasion dynamics that have helped seize windows of opportunity to address plastic pollution in the World Ocean. These efforts were central in supporting the emerging norm and their interactions were at the basis of the change we are witnessing in the global governance of plastic. By using the combination of literature insights provided by official documentations published by international organizations and interviews with key actors of the global governance of plastics, this research offers a comprehensive analysis and answer of its guiding question. The emergence of a norm on plastic pollution within the scope of the Basel Convention finds its source in the interplay between ideational, agential, and structural mechanisms. Accordingly, it contributes to the development of the research agenda on norms in world politics and opens the way to further investigations on how plastic pollution in the World Ocean contributes to the development of partnerships and opportunities for cooperation beyond borders that may inspire developments in global environmental governance.

The research has also revealed that global norms appear most likely to emerge around issues where<sup>33</sup> there are beyond-border interactions between transnational actors, a need for coordination,

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<sup>33</sup> This formulation is borrowed from Keck and Sikkink’s description of conditions where “transnational advocacy networks appear most likely to emerge” (1999, 92).

global awareness, and grounds for cooperation. In these situations, “common global norms may create similar structures and push both people and states toward similar behavior at given times” (Finnemore 1996b, 342). Time will tell if the Plastic Waste Amendments creates such convergence.

For now, we can at a minimum determine that a global norm on plastic pollution is emerging. In this regard, the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention attest “an increasing awareness for the harmful consequences of plastic pollution, which may signify the beginning of a global norm dynamic in environmental politics, comparable to climate change or biodiversity” (Loges and Jakobi 2020, 1005). Some scholars have suggested that “soft law and other policy guidelines and statements may serve as indicators” to observe the emergence of global norms (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002, 15). Moreover, not only are global norms often codified by international agreements, standards, or (un)written codes of conduct (Alger and Dauvergne 2019, 2-3), they also inform the change in the global normative structure.

Studying global environmental norms emergence provide grounds for theoretical and practical discussions on norms’ roles in world politics. As Opp suggested, “if norms did not emerge in social life, people would be charged with high insecurity concerning the behavior of others. This insecurity is eliminated or at least reduced by the formation of norms” (1979, 781). Indeed, as norms are essential for cohabitation, reaching common understanding, and coordinating actions, understanding the emergence of norms in world politic may offer important insights on how we can support global norms. “A major goal of investigating how cooperative norms in societal setting have been established gives us a better understanding of how to promote cooperative norms in international settings” (Axelrod 1986, 1095 and 1110).

By providing a portfolio of solutions to address the transnational issues of plastic pollution, the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention offers a repertoire of actions for both state and non-state actors (Secretariat of the BRS Conventions 2020). As other have suggested “it is not either-or Basel”; the global governance of plastic pollution is still in construction and the Plastic Waste Amendments may

only be one of the pieces of the edifice (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020; Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). Indeed, the framework under the Basel Convention “could be run in parallel with the UNEA process; it was in no intent a replacement” (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020). Actually, the NGO community and other key actors are currently working on legally binding treaty directed at phasing out plastics globally (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020). These efforts are in line with growing global governance initiatives aiming to answer transnational environmental issues (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020). This further suggests that the norm is emerging in a larger and ever-changing normative context (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020). The question remains whether the global community will reach an agreement on the creation of a treaty addressing the whole life cycle of plastic. According to Raubenheimer, “the conversation will rise up again at UNEA-5 in 2021” (Interview with K. R., 13 August 2020). What is clear is that the Plastic Waste Amendments of the Basel Convention established a legally binding benchmark for the governance of plastic and “have strengthened the Basel Convention as the only global legally binding instrument to specifically address plastic waste” (Secretariat of the BRS Conventions 2020).

As the World Ocean is “ultimately the heritage of all humanity” (Costanza 1999, 211), the ongoing efforts to address plastic pollution will be of much interest in the years to come. Costanza reminds us that “the intergenerational and interspatial effects of the use of ocean resources result in a tendency to ignore effects that might be distant in time and space” (1999, 205). New understandings of the relation between people and the ocean brought by emerging norms on plastic pollution in the World Ocean may “effectively challenge the traditional boundaries established between the human and nonhuman” (Campbell et al. 2016, 534). As we are increasingly aware of our impacts and the momentum is growing to address them, we may find in global norms an avenue to coordinate global efforts and take future generations into account in our present decisions. Acknowledging the interconnectedness and interdependency of all life on earth may provide untapped opportunities for cooperation beyond borders.

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## **Annex A – List of Interviews**

1. Interview with Jim Puckett on 24 July 2020 (Interview with J. P., 24 July 2020).
2. Interview with Karen Raubenheimer on 13 August 2020 (Interview with K. R., 13 August 2020).
3. Interview with a representative of the American Chemistry Council on 20 August 2020 (Interview with the ACC, 20 August 2020).
4. Interview with a representative of a Western country on 28 August 2020 (Interview with a representative of a Western country, 28 August 2020).
5. Interview with Niko Urho on 4 September 2020 (Interview with N. U., 4 September 2020).
6. Interview with an environmental lawyer on 8 September 2020 (Interview with E.L. 1, 8 September 2020).
7. Interview with Katharina Kummer on 9 September 2020 (Interview with K. K., 9 September 2020).
8. Interview with a representative of Japan on 11 September 2020 (Interview with Japan, 11 September 2020).
9. Interview with a representative of an environmental NGO on 17 September 2020 (Interview with an NGO, 17 September 2020).
10. Interview with an environmental lawyer on 21 September 2020 (Interview with E.L. 2, 21 September 2020).
11. Exchange of emails and interview questions answered in written form by representatives of the Basel Convention's Secretariat (Exchanges with the Secretariat of the Basel Convention, 2020).
12. Interview with a delegate from a Party to the Convention on 29 September 2020 (Interview with a delegate, 29 September 2020).