

BIMSTEC Stands Ready to Deepen Regional Cooperation to Achieve a Plastic-Smart Bay of Bengal Region

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One of the fundamental strengths of BIMSTEC is the recognition that regional challenges often require multi-sectoral solutions. Plastic waste is one of them that intersects with the environment, economy, public health, urban management, fisheries, and development. A plastic- smart Bay of Bengal might serve a prime illustration of what can be accomplished through effective regional cooperation.

For centuries, the Bay of Bengal has been regarded as a center of connectivity. It connects vital river systems to the Indian Ocean, spans South and Southeast Asia, and supports a multitude of lifestyles through shipping, tourism, agriculture and become a source of employment, food, culture and economic opportunities for coastal commerce. However, plastic waste has now emerged as a growing and alarming threat to this shared resource.

Plastic bags, packaging materials, abandoned fishing gear, bottles, and other refuse make their way into the waterways and ultimately reach the ocean. Once in the sea, these materials can be carried great distances by currents and tides, gathering along the shoreline and breaking down into microplastics. Consequently, this issue extends beyond national borders. It is a regional challenge that demands collaborative action from multiple countries.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) currently stands at a critical juncture. Comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, BIMSTEC serves as a unique geographical and institutional bridge between South and Southeast Asia. The member countries share the Bay of Bengal, linked rivers, ecosystems, economic stakes, and environmental risks. This positions BIMSTEC uniquely to enhance regional collaboration and strive for a plastic-wise Bay of Bengal.

A truly plastic-smart Bay of Bengal would aim to stop plastic pollution before it starts, reduce needless plastic use, enhance waste collection and segregation, encourage recycling and reuse, fortify circular economy systems, and make sure plastic doesn't get into rivers and marine environments. The plastic smart reality demonstrates that while national-level solutions are essential, a joint regional action plan is required for the countries bordering the Bay of Bengal.

One of the fundamental strengths of BIMSTEC is the recognition that regional challenges often require multi-sectoral solutions. Plastic waste is one of them that intersects with the environment, economy, public health, urban management, fisheries, and development. The issue lies not with plastic itself, but with the increasing reliance on single-use and mismanaged plastics, along with insufficient systems for collection, recycling, and disposal.

BIMSTEC can foster a regional perspective that links land-based plastic waste management with river protection and the conservation of the marine environment.

The declaration “BIMSTEC Prepared to Enhance Regional Collaboration for a Plastic-Smart Bay of Bengal Region” was emphasized by Mr. Pandey, Secretary General of BIMSTEC, during a senior-level roundtable in Dhaka on July 10, 2025, jointly organized by BIMSTEC, Bangladesh's Department of Environment, and the United Nations Office for Project Services for a seminar titled “Accelerating Solutions for Plastic Pollution in Bangladesh”. A primary objective is to create a ‘plastic-smart’ Bay of Bengal by promoting circular economy practices and responsible plastic management; simultaneously, it aims to emphasize the urgent need to address plastic pollution—viewed as a shared global and regional threat—and to call for collective solutions.

Immediate strategies such as Bangladesh's National Action Plan for Sustainable Plastic Management (2020–2030) was taken into consideration.

Cross-border pilot projects like sustainable financing, partnerships between public and private sectors, and technological advancements to address marine waste were also implemented to have a greater impact connected through a regional framework.

The advantages of this collaboration would extend past formal goals. BIMSTEC can act as a venue for sharing knowledge about what works well and what does not. One nation may have developed an efficient municipal waste-separation program, another might utilize inventive techniques for retrieving fishing equipment, while a third could have introduced successful community-focused recycling efforts. Collaboration across borders can enable the exchange of these insights.

Country Manager of United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) for Bangladesh and Bhutan Mr. Muralidharan said that “Plastic pollution is not just an environmental issue, it is an infrastructure and behavioural challenge that demands bold, collective action.

Thus, BIMSTEC can take the following steps-

1. Preventing garbage from being produced or leaking into the environment in the first place is the most effective plastic strategy.
2. This necessitates a change from the conventional linear model of "create, use, and discard" to a circular model where materials are used productively for as long as feasible.
3. Durability, reusability, and recyclability should be considered when designing products.
4. Extended producer responsibility can become an important component of this transition.
5. A plastic-smart Bay of Bengal must also be a river-smart region.
6. Community-based waste collection, fishing-gear recovery schemes, coastal monitoring and local recycling initiatives can create both environmental and economic benefits. Governments and regional institutions should therefore support local organisations rather than treating communities merely as recipients of environmental programmes.
7. The informal waste sector also deserves special attention.
8. BIMSTEC could strengthen cooperation among academic institutions like universities, marine research institutions and environmental agencies.

International development partners, multilateral institutions and climate and environmental funds can also support regional initiatives. A coordinated BIMSTEC approach could make it easier to develop projects at a scale attractive to external financing institutions.

9. The most important opportunity for BIMSTEC is to transform environmental cooperation from a collection of individual initiatives into a sustained regional programme.

Regular ministerial communication, technical working groups, collaborative research, data exchange, and progress tracking might all be established by BIMSTEC. It might promote collaboration between businesses, rivers, ports, cities, and fishing communities.

A plastic-smart Bay of Bengal might serve a prime illustration of what can be accomplished through effective regional cooperation.

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