



Case study: Building ownership to turn evidence into action

How government engagement accelerated plastic policy implementation in Guinea-Bissau

Summary

Plastic pollution poses an existential threat to Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and coastal nations, threatening marine ecosystems, public health, and key economic sectors like fisheries and tourism. Addressing this challenge requires moving beyond strategy design to secure the high-level political ownership needed for real-world execution.

Through the Sustainable Blue Economies Programme, funded by

UK International Development, Common Seas partnered with the Government of Guinea Bissau and the Competent Environmental Assessment Authority (AAAC) to tackle the country's severe plastic leakage challenge.

By pairing data-driven policy design and financial roadmaps with a deliberate, senior-level engagement strategy, the partnership achieved formal approval of the National Action

Plan (NAP) by the Council of Ministers, chaired by the Prime Minister, resulting in immediate cross-government directives to implement key plastic reduction measures.

This case study demonstrates how technical expertise combined with targeted political buy-in turns ambitious policy into immediate, enforceable executive action, offering a scalable blueprint for coastal nations worldwide.

Systemic challenges threatening coastal resilience

Like many coastal nations and SIDS, Guinea-Bissau faces compounding environmental, health, and economic pressures driven by plastic waste. Single-use plastic bags and sachet-packaged water represented the primary drivers of leakage into vulnerable coastal and marine habitats. The widespread reliance on water sachets is itself a symptom of a deeper infrastructure gap: a lack of access to sanitary, reliable municipal drinking water.

Compounding this problem are major deficits in broader waste management. Inadequate municipal collection and routine open burning damages public health and local air quality, while a lack of financial clarity stalls long-term infrastructural improvements.

Environmental policy initiatives often suffer from an implementation gap, frequently stalling due to fragmented inter-ministerial ownership, limited institutional readiness, and a lack of senior political buy-in. Without a unified, evidence-based strategy paired with high-level political sponsorship, Guinea-Bissau could lack what is required to convert environmental policy intent into enforceable, funded execution.



"..sincere gratitude to the entire COMMON SEAS technical team for their partnership, technical support, and fundamental contribution to the preparation and approval of this important strategic instrument for Guinea-Bissau."

Cristina Lopes Falcão - Competent Environmental Assessment Authority (AAAC)

Co-designing solutions and cultivating political ownership

To overcome these structural barriers, Common Seas served as a core strategic and technical partner to the AAAC, delivering an intervention built on two interdependent pillars: rigorous evidence-based policy architecture and a targeted political engagement strategy.

Technical and financial plans

Common Seas applied its UN-endorsed Plastic Drawdown model to translate complex national waste data into actionable policy scenarios. The resulting National Action Plan (NAP) outlined a targeted strategy designed to reduce plastic pollution by 79% over 10 years. Beyond plastic reduction through bans and reuse, the NAP structured the expansion of municipal waste collection to eliminate open burning and laid the groundwork for sustainable economic instruments, such as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and Deposit Return Schemes (DRS).

To move the NAP from strategy to action, Common Seas developed a comprehensive financial assessment, which evaluated implementation costs against pollution-reduction potential, mapping viable funding pathways across ODA, climate funds, and philanthropic partners. Simultaneously, an embedded national consultant within the AAAC formalised the National Committee to Combat Plastic Pollution, broadening inter-ministerial representation and creating a procedural roadmap to navigate government approval channels.

Senior engagement and stakeholder alignment

Recognising that technical rigour alone cannot deliver political prioritisation, Common Seas and the AAAC executed a targeted engagement strategy to cultivate senior government buy-in and multiple sector stakeholders' participation.

Through early engagement with senior leadership, sponsorship from the Minister of Environment and Climate Action was secured, positioning the NAP as a top-tier national priority. Common Seas also conducted extensive consultations across government, civil society, and local communities, intentionally identifying solutions that could address the challenges faced by vulnerable populations directly impacted by waste and pollution.

By framing the NAP around cross-sectoral co-benefits, such as improved public health, safer drinking water, and reduced municipal waste costs, the NAP achieved strong support and cross-ministerial alignment across Finance, Health, Trade, Interior, and Natural Resources, setting the stage for Council of Ministers approval.

Quick positive results: NAP approval and immediate executive actions

By combining rigorous technical modelling with strategic political engagement, the partnership catalysed immediate, top-level government action.

On 28 July 2026, during an Ordinary Session chaired by His Excellency the Prime Minister, Mr. Ilídio Vieira Té, the Council of Ministers formally approved the Draft Decree on the National Plan to Combat Plastic Pollution (Projeto de Decreto sobre o Plano Nacional de Combate à Poluição Plástica), giving the NAP full legal authority. This senior buy-in translated directly into immediate, multi-agency enforcement mandates:

- **60-day mandate on plastic bags:**
The Council mandated **six key ministries** (Natural Resources, Finance, Commerce & Industry, Public Health, Environment & Climate Action, and Interior & Public Order) to initiate strict enforcement measures against single-use plastic bags within 60 days.
- **Shutdown of sachet facilities:**
Ordered the Inter-Ministerial Commission to **swiftly shut down manufacturing facilities** producing single-use plastic water sachets, prioritising public health and marine protection.
- **Long-term reduction pathway:**
Established the pathway to prevent thousands of tonnes of plastic leakage, setting Guinea-Bissau on course for a **79% reduction in plastic pollution over the next decade.**

Key takeaway

Many environmental strategies fail to deliver, even with a strong technical basis, due to lack of political ownership. The Guinea-Bissau experience demonstrates that by embedding technical modelling, financial feasibility, and institutional capacity-building directly within a high-level political engagement strategy, we can unlock the executive authority required to accelerate adoption and turn policy into immediate, national-scale action.

