Thank you, Honorable Chair and Esteemed Delegates,

I am Jo Banner, of The Descendants Project. I live in an area many call ‘Cancer Alley’ because we have the highest rate of cancer in the U.S. Our area is known as the most climate vulnerable area of the country. Plastic production is a big part of the reason for us having both of these labels.

My community is also within a so-called ‘Sacrifice Zone’. This is a label our government has coldly applied to us, leaving us to the vagaries of toxic pollution, so the world can continue satisfying its enslaved addiction to plastic. This is deeply connected to the world’s addiction to fossil fuels. We are also the most climate vulnerable county in the US, disproportionately impacted by the hurricanes, extreme heat, and other disasters sweeping the globe. You want to see how plastics impact the climate, come here.

I prefer to remember and refer to our town as a self-reliant Freetown founded by our once enslaved ancestors who pursued their liberation, after emancipation, and where local economies bloomed. Over time though the land was sold by the plantation owners, leaving the residents in the shadow of petrochemical facilities. So much for liberation. This is plastic’s dark history and dismal present. We must start to speak hard truths and dispel myths if we are, at this critical phase in our negotiations, really going to ensure this treaty helps us all break free from plastic.

Parts of the zero draft do not support a future for frontline communities like mine. One example is ‘exemptions’ under Part II.4. Some others are options 2 and 3 of part II.1 on ‘primary plastic polymers’, options 2 and 3 of part II.2 on ‘chemicals and polymers of concern’, and option 2 of ‘problematic and avoidable plastic products’ under Part II.3. I urge the Chair to adopt option 1 for these in the next iteration of the treaty to invest the governing body with the broadest authority to protect my community from the toxic impact of plastic production. The history of environmental racism that I have outlined above gives me little confidence that national action plans will reflect any consideration for our suffering.

Allowing governments to exempt plastic products from the treaty, or merely “reduce” plastic production is not the future we need. Similarly, efforts by some of the governments and 146 industry representatives present here to promote recycling, both via the traditional mechanical method and so-called ‘chemical’ or ‘advanced’ recycling, or less-toxic plastics won’t save us either. Neither will selectively banning types of plastics but not all. The production of all forms of plastic are what harm and kill my family and my neighbors. If governments here really do want to support a just transition for frontline communities, a total end to the production of all forms of plastics is the right place to start.
Furthermore, a treaty that really intended to protect the human rights of communities like mine would follow the lead of other UN, EU and national level policy initiatives to incorporate a robust human rights and environmental due diligence framework into the text, to bolster the provisions of Parts II.5, II.6, II.7, II.8, II.9.a, II.12, and II.13. Per the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights by the Office of the UN High Commissioner, petrochemical and plastic producers are failing to show due diligence to human rights unless they identify and assess actual or potential adverse human rights impacts, and track the effectiveness of measures to and processes to address them.

Lastly, I urge the Chair to ensure science based decision making in the next draft of this instrument. The notion of sustainable “plastic circularity” is not based in science, but industry excuses to continue the toxic desolation of my community. Toxic emissions and releases from production, along with inevitable releases of microplastics along every portion of the plastic lifecycle means any ‘circularity’ of plastic will present adverse risks to human health and the environment. It is really a death cycle when you think about it. I again thank the Chair delegates for your work to enact a legally binding instrument to end the plastic crisis, and for this opportunity to share my reflections.