World Cities Day October 31, 2023
BETTER CITY, BETTER LIFE
Financing sustainable urban future for all
— Municipality of Üsküdar in Istanbul, Türkiye —

UN-HABITAT

CONCEPT NOTE

Roundtable Dialogue:

Waste to Wealth

Tuesday, 31 October 2023

October 2023

Overview

Cities generate more than 80 per cent of the world's GDP[1] and annually more than 2.3 billion tons of solid waste. Waste generation has steadily increased with rising incomes[2] while the management of waste has not kept pace. According to UN-Habitat estimates, globally in 2020, 84 per cent of all municipal solid waste was collected and only around 61 per cent was managed in controlled facilities. Poor waste management leads to soil, air and water pollution and can block drainage channels leading to unsanitary conditions. In addition, inadequate waste management also contributes to climate change. While not generally considered as municipal waste, construction debris in fast urbanizing areas can also present major challenges linked to environmental degradation, contamination of soil and water, alteration of flow characteristics of water courses, and health and safety hazards, among others. Debris resulting from natural disasters, such as in the aftermath of the earthquakes that recently struck Turkey and Syria, can also present enormous challenges to cities.[3] Usually, construction and demolition waste is intermingled with municipal waste, and it is the city administration that has to manage the issue.

Despite being centres of economic activities, cities generally lack the financial resources – or use them inefficiently – to support sound waste management, which can account for the major share of municipal budgets, ranging between 20 to 50 per cent[4] even while services remain poor. Cities usually face challenges in financing capital investments and maintenance and operation costs for the necessary infrastructure for waste collection, transportation and disposal. Informal waste workers play a significant role in waste management in cities in developing countries, with conservative estimates suggesting that the informal waste and recovery sector consist of 15 million people, recovering up to 58 per cent of the recycled waste globally,[5] thereby contributing to major savings in municipal budgets and extending the life of landfills. Yet, most of them remain amongst the poorest segments in society and are unserved by basic social safety nets.

Waste generation is a barometer of unsustainable consumption and production: if the current pattern of exploiting resources continues, according to the European Union (EU), we would need the resources of three planets by 2050[6] to sustain our lifestyles. Therefore, a transition to a circular or "zero waste" economy where resources are reused, repaired, repurposed or recycled is crucial. Such a transition can reduce pollution and its associated hidden costs, create environment-friendly jobs, as well as mitigate public health issues and contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It can also ease the pressure on global material supply chains. In other words, **"waste can become wealth".** One estimate for example suggests that if recycling opportunities in Africa were more fully leveraged, an additional USD 8 billion could be injected into the African economy each year[7].

To achieve its goal of climate neutrality by 2050, the EU in March 2020 adopted a new Circular Economy Action Plan. At the United Nations General Assembly in December 2022, a resolution spearheaded by Türkiye was adopted to declare 31 March as the International Day of Zero Waste, to be observed annually. At the recent G20 meeting held in New Delhi, India, global leaders adopted a declaration which among other things stated: "In order to endeavour to decouple our economic growth from environmental degradation and enhance sustainable consumption and production, including primary resource consumption while supporting economic growth,

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we acknowledge the critical role played by circular economy, extended producer responsibility and resource efficiency in achieving sustainable development"[8].

While the waste management issue touches all segments of society and is interlinked with various business and industry sectors, it is usually city administrations that must eventually manage waste, their tasks ranging from identifying landfill sites to managing waste collection and transportation and recovery of materials. As was observed during the recent pandemic, outbreaks of infectious diseases, which tend to be concentrated in urban areas, exacerbate the challenges that cities must address in managing waste. The New Urban Agenda adopted in Quito in 2016 highlights the role of cities in promoting the circular economy approach and calls for cities to implement integrated waste management strategies and prioritise waste reduction, recycling, and responsible disposal of waste.

Roundtable Objectives

Building On World Cities Day 2023, building on the global attention on the transition to a circular economy, a roundtable on "Waste to Wealth" will discuss the strategies national and local governments can adopt to move towards a circular economy through sustainable operational finance to unlock investments and bring decent job in the Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) value chain and shift towards a circular economy. The roundtable will also explore how cities can collaborate with industries to promote circularity and zero waste in the built environment, while simultaneously ensuring that people who depend on the waste value chain for their livelihoods, particularly vulnerable groups such as waste workers, benefit from the transition. It will also discuss how cities can leverage the "value of urbanization" in bridging the financing gap and adopting innovative financing models in collaboration with the private sector and communities to finance capital and operational expenditures to improve solid waste management and to promote a circular economy. UN-Habitat, through its Waste Wise Cities and African Clean Cities Platform programmes, is increasingly working with national and local governments to develop business models and facilitate financial investments to shift towards circular and zero-waste economies.

Participants in the roundtable will include national governments, the private sector, civil society, city leaders, and international financial institutions. Based on the panel discussion, recommendations will be prepared in the form of a "Communique to industries, government and other waste sector players on a sustainable financial transition to a circular economy". The Communique will be widely circulated through the UN-Habitat Waste Wise Cities and African Clean Cities Platform programmes with a view to being adopted by Member States, local governments, and industries, among others. The Communique of the roundtable will be shared with the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Zero Waste.

Proposed Programme

1. Welcome and opening remarks and introduction of Communique
2. Keynote speech
3. Showcases of innovative financing for waste to wealth initiatives
3. Facilitated roundtable discussion with Q&A
4. Closing remarks and adoption of Communique

Endnotes

1 https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/overview#:~:text=With%20more%20than%2080%25%20of%20global%20GDP%20gen

2 https://datatopics.worldbank.org/what-a-waste/trends_in_solid_waste_management.html#:~:text=Overall%2C%20there%20is%20a%20positive%20correlation%20between%20waste,expected%20to%20increase%20by%20approximately%2040%25%20or%20more.

3 https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/earthquake-debris-could-create-an-environmental-catastrophe-in-tuerkiye-and-syria/

4 https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/brief/solid-waste-management#:~:text=Managing%20waste%20properly%20is%20essential%20for%20building%20sustainable,is%20expensive%2C%20often%20comprising%2020%25%E2%80%9350%25%20of%20municipal%20budgets.

5 United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) and Norwegian Institute for Water Research (NIVA) 2022, available at https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2023/04/en_2503_leaving_no_one_behind.pdf

6 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20210128STO96607/how-the-eu-wants-to-achieve-a-circular-economy-by-2050

7 Africa Waste Management Outlook – summary for decision makers https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/25515/Africa_WMO_Summary.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

8 https://www.g20.org/content/dam/gtwenty/gtwenty_new/document/G20-New-Delhi-Leaders-Declaration.pdf (page 13)