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**Ministerial Panel:
Circularity, Sustainable Economy and
Pollution Prevention**

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I. Context of the session

“With only 10 years left before the 2030 deadline, there is an urgent need to step up action. And every nation, every community and every person can and must make a contribution.”

UN Secretary General, António Guterres

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us in the most powerful way that we are closely interconnected and only as strong as our weakest link. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is our road map and its implementation a necessity for our survival. Urgent efforts are required, as it was stated at the UN General Assembly in Sept 2020 (UNGA A/Res/75/L.1)¹. Whereby Member States declare that amongst other things, “we need to adapt to the circumstances and take transformative measures. We have a historic opportunity to build back better” as well as that “we need to immediately curb greenhouse gas emissions and achieve sustainable consumption and production patterns in line with applicable State commitments in the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Paris Agreement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

Unsustainable Consumption and Production is overburdening the Earth’s resources, threatening not only the achievement of most Sustainable Development Goals – SDGs, but human well-being. Over the last 50 years, human population has doubled, the extraction of materials has tripled, primary energy production has more than tripled, the economy has grown nearly fivefold, and global trade has grown tenfold². This unsustainable patterns of consumption and production resulted in the three environmental crises: climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

The shift from an unsustainable consumption and production pattern, based on the linear model of extraction, consumption, and disposal, towards a circular model is pressing. Inspired by nature-based solutions, circular models keep materials at the highest possible value along the value chain. The benefits of circular economy are numerous, the International Resource Panel estimates that adopting circularity could reduce GHG emission by as much as 99% and requirement of new materials by 98% in some sectors, this could amount to 3.6 billion tonnes CO₂ per year by 2050³. The ILO estimates the circular economy could generate 4.8 million green jobs in the LAC region by 2030. At the Global level, the World Economic Forum estimated that material savings potential is in the order of magnitude of over 1 trillion UDS a year⁴.

Linked to the unsustainable patterns of consumption and production is the increasing level of pollution. The World Health Organization estimates that 23 per cent of all deaths worldwide – amounting to 12.6 million people in 2012 – are due to environmental risk factors, such as poor air quality⁵. Low-income and middle-income countries bear the brunt of pollution-related illnesses, with a disproportionate impact on children, women and the most

¹ Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA A/Res/75/L.1) of September 2020, entitled *Declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations*,

² United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Global Environment Outlook – GEO-6: Healthy Planet, Healthy People*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108627146>.

³ <https://www.resourcepanel.org/reports/re-defining-value-manufacturing-revolution>

⁴ <http://reports.weforum.org/toward-the-circular-economy-accelerating-the-scale-up-across-global-supply-chains/>

⁵ Prüss-Ustün, A., and others (2016), *Preventing Disease through Healthy Environments: A Global Assessment of the Burden of Disease from Environmental Risks*, World Health Organization, Geneva. Available at https://www.who.int/quantifying_ehimpacts/publications/preventing-disease/en/.

vulnerable. Additionally, the costs of pollution amount to 2 per cent of gross domestic product and up to 7 per cent of annual spending in terms of health care costs⁶. Very significant costs also derive from lost productivity and clean-up activities.

Existing knowledge of pollution impacts on the environment and people points to the need to urgently prioritize action to tackle pollution, a planetary crisis which adversely impacts the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. COVID-19 has further illustrated this need, as studies suggest that the impacts of air pollution, combined with the impacts of COVID-19, can lead to worse health outcomes. Further, countries are faced with increased waste challenges due to the massive use of Personnel Protective Equipment and the increased use in single use plastics. Conversely, the pandemic has demonstrated how some changes in behaviour, e.g. in the area of mobility, can lead to decreases in pollution.

Addressing pollution not only avoids environmental degradation and enhances ecosystems resilience, it also improves the quality of life and the health of people worldwide. By acting to prevent, better manage and reduce pollution at the regional, national and local levels, governments and stakeholders contribute to improving the lives of millions and put themselves on a path to meeting the SDGs.

The international community recognizes the centrality of addressing pollution: at the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA)'s third session, world ministers adopted a declaration expressing commitment towards a Pollution-Free Planet. As a follow up, UNEP was requested to develop an Implementation Plan "Towards a Pollution-Free Planet" and was tasked to work with partners to accelerate efforts to tackle pollution globally. Notwithstanding the ample knowledge and global recognition of the urgency to act, investment in pollution-prevention and reduction worldwide is insufficient and needs to be dramatically accelerated.

II. General guiding questions for the session

With the above framework in mind, some suggested elements to think about for this panel includes the following:

- a. How can sustainable consumption and production and circular economy support countries and private sector in their post-COVID-19 recovery?
- b. What are the key challenges and opportunities for circular economy in the LAC region?
- c. What is the potential of sustainable public procurement to build back better, in particular in key sectors such as energy, construction, infrastructure and agriculture?
- d. What strategies can be implemented to speed up behaviour change and citizens' participation in the adoption sustainable consumption patterns and circular economy?
- e. What prevents governments and the private sector to shift the needle towards circular approaches? Is the financial system adapted to the needs of this emerging sector?
- f. What strategies can be more effective to tackle key pollution related challenges like plastic pollution, air pollution, or the eradication of dumpsites in the region?

⁶ Landrigan, Philip J., and others (2017), *The Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health*. Available at [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)32345-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)32345-0).

- g. What kind of partnerships for action and resource mobilization, new modalities for capacity building, and new forms of cooperation in LAC could be pursued?
- h. How to promote a preventive, whole life cycle approach to address pollution?
- i. What synergies should be considered with other areas like biodiversity and climate change?

III. Reference documents

- Resilient and Inclusive Circular Economy to Build Back Better and Greener⁷
- UNEP's Circularity Approach <https://buildingcircularity.org/>
- Towards the circular economy: Accelerating the scale-up across global supply chains⁸
- Financing Circularity: Demystifying Finance for the Circular Economy⁹
- Implementation Plan Towards a Pollution-Free Planet¹⁰

⁷https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/32922/Circular%20Economy_LAC.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

⁸ <http://reports.weforum.org/toward-the-circular-economy-accelerating-the-scale-up-across-global-supply-chains/>

⁹ <https://www.unepfi.org/publications/general-publications/financing-circularity/>

¹⁰ <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/28484>