Towards a Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency

Tuesday 3 November 2020
14:00-15:00 Brussels time (UTC+1)

Meeting Report

Context
As part of the Circular Economy Stakeholder Conference 2020, the session ‘Towards a Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency’ (see agenda in the annex) presented ongoing work towards the establishment of the ‘Global Alliance for Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency’ announced in the Circular Economy Action Plan1 adopted by the European Commission in March 2020.

The Alliance is inter alia meant to advocate for the transition to a global circular economy and a more efficient use of resources at the political level and in multilateral fora, in particular at the United Nations. It is expected that the Alliance will be launched at the fifth meeting of the United Nations Environment Assembly in February 2021.

The session offered an opportunity to hear the views of EU international partners on how to support a circular economy transition globally2 and the possible role of the Alliance to this end.

Key Messages

- There is an increasing understanding by countries on the importance of the transition towards a circular economy, not least as a way of addressing the economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The circular economy has become even more relevant, as it can create economic opportunities whilst reducing emissions and waste. However, a lot remains to be done at the multilateral level.

- The Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency (GACERE) would have the primary goal of advocacy at the multilateral level for the global transition towards a circular economy. The Alliance could also serve as a platform for sharing expertise and ideas, for identifying knowledge gaps, for solving implementation issues for both businesses and policy-makers, for facilitating benchmarking of experiences from regions, taking into account local differences, and for aligning terminology use across countries.

- It will be important to set short and medium term goals for GACERE in order to guarantee a future focus on the technical and financial resources needed to bring about change – including through co-operation with regional alliances, such as

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1 See in particular Section 3.2 in the accompanying SWD(2020) 100 ‘Leading the way to a global circular economy: state of play and outlook’.
those in Africa as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean. GACERE would also build on and enhance existing international initiatives, seek synergies and avoid duplications.

- While governments are responsible for creating the right conditions for the circular economy, businesses are the implementers. There is a need to involve businesses to show that the circular economy will provide new opportunities for them too.
- The circular economy concept ought to be brought to United Nations General Assembly to build global ownership of the concept. That could be done through a resolution dedicated to sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12), a topic that has never been discussed on its own right there. As trade plays a crucial role in promoting the circular economy, more should also be done at the World Trade Organisation. GACERE could play a role in both.

Session Summary

The online session organised by the European Commission gathered speakers and more than 60 participants from across the world to discuss the establishment of a Global Alliance for Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency (GACERE). The session was moderated by Ms Astrid Ladefoged from the European Commission.

Welcome and introduction

In the opening remarks, Ms Astrid Ladefoged stressed that the EU’s Circular Economy Action Plan approach makes sense for every country, taking into account local conditions. A resolution from the 4th Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-4) on ‘Innovative pathways to achieve sustainable consumption and production’ supported a similar approach. However, she opined that more would need to be done. Therefore, the Commission has proposed a Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency to drive change at the multilateral level and make most of regional circular economy alliances.

1st Question: What is your country or organisation doing to promote the circular economy?

Ms Astrid Schomaker, Director for Global Sustainable Development at the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Environment, highlighted that the circular economy is part of the EU’s new growth strategy with the European Green Deal as its cornerstone. It includes tackling unsustainable resource use along the entire product life cycle, promoting circular economy processes and fostering sustainable consumption and production. Given the COVID-induced economic crisis, there is greater need for circularity, more action on new jobs, and greater opportunities for use of stimulus funds to transition to more productive economies. There is also a need to raise the level of ambition. The EU will focus on value chains that deliver key benefits, including the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. But because the circular economy is a global issue, the EU seeks to promote circular economy policies at a global level as well as bilaterally.

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Mr Steven Kuhn, Director-General for Multilateral Affairs and Climate Change at Environment and Climate Change Canada, stressed that Canada is looking at ways to ‘Build Back Better’ as part of its COVID-19 economic recovery plans. The circular economy has become even more relevant in this context, as it can reduce emissions and reduce waste whilst creating economic opportunities. Canada seeks inspiration in other circular economy initiatives – including those undertaken by important economic partners like the EU. Canada wants to encourage innovation across economic sectors and step up work with businesses and provincial governments. Plastic waste is a particular focus (less than 10% of it is now recycled). If nothing is done, by 2030 some 11bn Canadian dollars would be lost because of resource wastage linked with plastic waste.

Mr Hazri Hassan, Director of International Policy at the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment of Singapore, highlighted that Singapore had adopted a circular economy approach to find synergies across different sectors such as food, water, energy and waste, to maximise resources. Last year, Singapore launched a zero waste masterplan to move towards a zero waste nation. This required a shift from a linear to a circular economy approach – reusing resources for as long as possible. Singapore had already closed the water loop and is working on closing other resource loops. Singapore had also enacted the Resource Sustainability Act which provides the legislative framework to impose upstream regulatory measures to address three key waste streams – e-waste, food waste and packaging waste including plastics. Singapore is also leveraging on innovation and technology to create value from some resources originally thought of as waste products – NEWSand by turning incineration ash into construction material, and NEWOil by using pyrolysis to recycle plastic waste into oil as feedstock to produce new resins. Singapore is working on promoting resource efficiency at industrial level through industrial symbiosis, where what is deemed waste by one company can become raw material for the operations of another. He posed a question whether the same symbiosis approach could be extended at a regional or global level.

Mr Alex José Saer Saker, Director of Sectorial and Urban Environmental Affairs at the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development of Colombia, highlighted that Colombia is also launching new regulations, e.g. on Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), and expects to divert 200,000 tonnes of material from disposal. In addition, Colombia has launched a new regulation on construction and demolition waste to enhance industrial symbiosis in this sector.

2nd Question: What role for a Global Alliance in supporting the circular economy transition?

Mr Hazri Hassan hoped that a Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency could facilitate mutually beneficial collaboration, or symbiosis, at a global or regional level. For example, a pyrolysis plant might require a certain amount of plastic waste as feedstock to be economically or operationally viable. For a small country, the feedstock might need to come from other countries to meet the critical mass. Mr Hazri Hassan also envisioned that the GACERE could serve as a platform for sharing expertise and ideas, and a marketplace of best practices.
Mr Alex José Saer Saker highlighted that Colombia is leading the establishment of a Latin-American and the Caribbean Coalition for the Circular Economy. The goal of the Global Alliance should be to share knowledge on how to implement circular economy policies, how to solve implementation issues for both businesses and policy-makers, and to align on using the same terminology.

Mr Kgauta Mokoena, Chief Director of Waste Management at the Department of Environment Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF) of South Africa, highlighted the need for GACERE to facilitate benchmarking of experiences from regions, taking into account local differences. South Africa’s National Waste Management Strategy contains a circular economy strategy which is to be further developed. The GACERE could have a role in informing the development of the strategy.

Ms Astrid Schomaker stressed that both national and global actions on circular economy issues are needed, as consumption and production patterns are global. Thus, if a country needs to improve its own environmental conditions, it needs markets for greener products. We do not plan to establish a new formal structure – the EU will seek to promote the GACERE as a global group of “friends of the circular economy”. The primary role of the Alliance should therefore be advocacy. It could also serve to identify barriers, knowledge gaps and bottlenecks in implementation – which the EU intends to work on together with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Industry Development Organization (UNIDO). The GACERE should work with regional alliances dealing with the circular economy, but it is also very important to avoid duplication with existing multilateral efforts. Instead, the Global Alliance should build on them. Finally, the GACERE should not be a permanent fixture on the multilateral scene. Rather, it should dissolve once it has been successful in its purpose – when the circular economy has been mainstreamed.

Mr Steven Kuhn acknowledged the remark made by the Chair who had noted that Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau, President of the European Council Michel and European Commission President von der Leyen met virtually a few days earlier and underlined their commitment to promoting the circular economy, including through multilateral advocacy. In this context, Mr Steven Kuhn stressed that it is important to recognise that circular economy approaches will differ by country. The GACERE could therefore also serve as a forum to discuss differences.

3rd Question: How do we co-operate in multilateral fora to move things in the right direction?

Mr Alex José Saer Saker would like to see a transfer of knowledge around concrete regional projects and joint action on Sustainable Consumption and Production. Mr Saer Saker believes it is important to set short and medium term goals for the GACERE in order to guarantee a future focus on the technical and financial resources needed to bring about change – including through co-operation.

Mr Hazri Hassan said that the circular economy concept was not new. The ongoing crisis and the realisation that the world was facing resource constrains had given fresh

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impetus. Some countries had already been adopting circular economy practices and implementing them to best suit their national circumstances. This was where the GACERE could provide a platform for mutual recognition or means for a global or region-wide adoption of circular economy approaches. In Southeast Asia, the idea of a region-wide circular economy could be promulgated at the 2nd ASEAN-EU High-Level Policy Dialogue scheduled at the end of the year, which would be co-chaired by Singapore and the EU. He underscored that governments were responsible for creating the right conditions for the circular economy – however, businesses were the implementers. Therefore, there was a need to involve the private sector by showing that the circular economy would be beneficial for their businesses.

Building on this statement, Mr Kgauta Mokoena stressed that winning political support through global cooperation in existing multilateral structures would enable greater participation of enterprises from different economies across globe. Cooperation and collaboration will be key for creating markets for products generated through the circular economy.

Ms Astrid Schomaker also emphasised that working with businesses is very important. In addition, she highlighted the need to bring the circular economy concept to the United Nations General Assembly in New York to build global ownership of the concept. This could possibly be as part of a resolution on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SDG 12), which has never brought about a General Assembly resolution. Members of the GACERE could come together to advocate for such a resolution, also addressing the circular economy. Ms Schomaker stressed that trade plays a crucial role in promoting the circular economy. Therefore, the GACERE should also focus on advocacy in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Geneva, in particular at the Committee on Trade and Environment.

Wrap-up

In her closing remarks, Ms Astrid Ladefoged thanked participants for the rich and fruitful exchange and stated that the journey towards the establishment of the GACERE will take months and years to implement – and that this session has been a first step.
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| 14:00-14:05 | Welcome and housekeeping  
Ms Astrid Ladefoged, Head of Unit for Sustainable Development Goals, Green Finances & Economic Analysis, Directorate-General for Environment, European Commission |
| 14:05-14:55 | Panel Discussion: How to support the circular economy transition globally and the role of the Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency  
Chair: Ms Astrid Ladefoged, Head of Unit for Sustainable Development Goals, Green Finances & Economic Analysis, Directorate-General for Environment, European Commission  
- Ms Astrid Schomaker, Director, Global Sustainable Development, Directorate-General for Environment, European Commission, Brussels  
- Mr Steven Kuhn, Director-General, Multilateral Affairs and Climate Change, Environment and Climate Change Canada, Ottawa  
- Mr Kgauta Mokoena, Chief Director, Waste Management, Department of Environment Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF), South Africa, Pretoria  
- Mr Hazri Hassan, Director, International Policy, Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment, Singapore  
- Mr Alex José Saer Saker, Director, Sectorial and Urban Environmental Affairs, Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, Colombia, Bogotá |
| 14:55-15:00 | Wrap-up  
Ms Astrid Ladefoged, Head of Unit for Sustainable Development Goals, Green Finances & Economic Analysis, Directorate-General for Environment, European Commission |