

Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development

Side-event

“Building back better from the COVID-19 pandemic while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through circular economy”

Monday, 28 February 2022, at 9 a.m. (CAT) / 8 a.m. (CET)

Virtual

Main findings

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and turned back decades of progress, while affecting the world’s poorest and most vulnerable populations the most. Just at the time when efforts needed to be amplified, Africa suffered its worst recession in more than 50 years due to the COVID–19 pandemic¹, limiting its ability to deliver timely and ambitiously on the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement.

As recognized by the international community, the crisis has affected both the social and physical environment. While atmospheric pollution decreased temporarily, the over-exploitation of local biodiversity resources and the lack of funds for its conservation increased dramatically. Not to mention the decision of many countries to prioritize “brown” stimulus packages over “green” ones by, for example, relaxing pollution control regulations, just when climate action is not optional.

Global biodiversity loss can only be tackled through transformative economic, social, political, and technological changes. Though essential, this means going beyond conservation and restoration efforts and radically transforming the way we make, use, and reuse products and food². Circular economy holds a promising approach not only to slowing and eventually halting biodiversity loss but also to reversing its decline, restoring ecosystems, and rebuilding natural capital (SDGs 14 & 15)³. All while providing new opportunities for the most vulnerable communities, including women and children, to new learning and skills development pathways (SDGs 4 & 5).

Building on the efforts of UNIDO to support its Member States in adopting circular economy principles and practices, the side event offered a space for representatives from governments, civil society, international organizations, and academia to exchange experiences and lessons learned on circular economy. Consensus was pursued on policy options and actions (SDG 17)

¹ African Development Bank, Africa’s growth performance and outlook amid the COVID–19 pandemic (2021) https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/2021/03/09/aeo_2021_-_chap1_-_en.pdf

² Ellen MacArthur Foundation, The Nature Imperative: How the circular economy tackles biodiversity loss (2021)

³ <https://circulareconomy.earth/publications/the-role-of-the-circular-economy-in-addressing-the-global-biodiversity-crisis#:~:text=Circular%20solutions%20for%20biodiversity&text=In%20principle%2C%20the%20circular%20economy,ecosystems%20and%20rebuilding%20natural%20capital.>

to build forward better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis while accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 of the AU: “*The Africa we want*”.

Panel

Moderator:

- Ms. Aurelia P. Calabrò, Representative and Director of the Regional Office Hub in Ethiopia, United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

Keynote speaker:

- Mr. Hiroshi Kuniyoshi, Deputy to the Director General, United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

Panelists:

- Ms. Suzan Oelofse, Principal Researcher, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research.
- Ms. Adenike A. Akinsemolu, Founder and Director, The Green Institute.
- Mr. Tawanda Collins Muzamwese, Chief Sustainability Consultants - Toxiconsol African Sustainability Consultants.

Main findings

- ***The world is facing a series of unprecedented crises due to our unsustainable use of biodiversity.*** COVID-19 pandemic, climate change as well as rates of biodiversity loss and pollution reveal the need to shift our relationship with the planet and mainly our unsustainable patterns. Despite being one of the richest regions in natural resources, Africa is also one of the most affected areas, notably in terms of income loss per household, extreme poverty and exploitation and loss of ecosystems.
- ***Circular economy is a straightforward approach to achieving 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.*** Circular economy principles and practices have contributed, inter alia, to the recovery and conservation of ecosystems. Some examples include the promotion of sustainable packaging away from single-use plastics to reduce ocean pollution, recycling to minimise volume of dumped waste, and renewable energies to alleviate pressure on forests due to illegal wood extraction.
- ***Women can accelerate the transition to a circular economy.*** Social responsibilities place women in an ideal position to actively manage natural resources and contribute to local and global value chains. Women have a unique repertoire of knowledge and skills, including sensitivity to ecological, environmental and health concerns and thus more sustainable decision-making. They are more likely to recycle, minimize waste, buy organic food and eco-labelled products and participate in water and energy saving initiatives. Engaging them in the global dialogue will be critical to achieving transformational and social change.

- ***Quality education to unlock capacity building, innovation and gender equality.*** With the lack of funding, access to quality education remains a major concern. The production of local goods in Africa is hampered and thus opportunities for women and vulnerable communities, due to limited skills to innovate and make use of cutting-edge technologies. Ensuring access to quality education, including for small and medium-sized enterprises, can secure funding and position Africa as a sustainable region capable of competing globally. In addition, it can raise awareness and change consumption and production patterns, as society understands the benefits of a circular economy, thereby reducing pressure on ecosystems and unlocking green jobs.
- ***Policies, regulatory and legal frameworks to enable the transition to a circular economy are needed.*** Access to education, technology and incentives to support entrepreneurship, among others, depend on timely and holistic policies and frameworks. Circular economy progress at the technical level is exponential, while that related to regulatory and policy frameworks at the global level is advancing slowly. Governments around the world can learn from national and regional efforts to design a global agenda.
- ***A continuous and inclusive global dialogue is crucial to mainstream circular economy principles and practices into the Sustainable Development Agenda.*** Scenarios such as the global consultations on circular economy, convened by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization in May 2021, facilitate the exchange of best practices and lessons learned for designing effective circular economy policies and regulations. The alignment of the Sustainable Development Goals and the global circular economy agenda will rest on such dialogues.
