



# Plastics Without Borders

Accelerator Session - World Circular Economy Forum 2021

## Session Report

World Circular Economy Forum 2021 – Acceleration Session  
Plastics Without Borders: A workshop exploring global  
supply chain issues and leading circular solutions

Virtual session, 15 September 2021

## Session Report

**DISCLAIMER**

This report has been prepared with the financial assistance of the European Commission for the Reducing Plastic Waste in Canada project implemented by EPRD Policy & Development. The views expressed herein are those of the consultants and therefore in no way reflect the official opinion of the European Commission.

## Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>What we did .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>What we talked about .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Session highlights .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Participants own words .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Ideas for future actions .....</b>	<b>6</b>

The event was co-hosted by:

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**EU-Canada Reducing Plastic Waste in Canada Project:** Launched in 2021, the two-year initiative broadens the interactions between Canadian and European policy-makers, businesses and influencers by facilitating peer-to-peer exchanges and supporting the development of knowledge and innovative practices across sectors of the economy.

**Canada Plastics Pact:** Established in 2020, the CPP represents signatory businesses and implementing organizations aligned on the common global vision to reduce plastic waste, leading actions and solutions tailored to Canada's needs and challenges. It is a member of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's global Plastic Pact network.

**Circular Economy Leadership Canada:** Launched in 2018 as a Coalition, CELC is focused on working to make Canada a world leader in building a sustainable, prosperous circular economy by providing thought leadership, technical expertise and a collaborative platform to accelerate the transition to a low-carbon, circular economy.

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## Introduction

Countries and businesses around the world recognize the need for action to prevent plastics from entering the environment, especially waterways and oceans, and to reduce the vast amounts that are going to waste each year. Many have committed to strong actions and are collaborating to improve the way we design, use, and recover plastic products.

Plastics supply chains cross borders: from virgin and recycled resin production to the manufacturing of products and packaging, and the management of waste destined to recycling facilities. While there are successful national policies to reduce some plastic waste, there remains many challenges to creating efficient circular economies that compel cross-sector and cross-border collaboration to develop solutions that will boost the global recovery of plastics and the reduction of plastic waste and pollution.

No one actor can fix it and many solutions are needed. Each solution requires coordinated work across industry sectors, up the value chain, across country boundaries and involving diverse disciplines. As a result, dialogue, engagement and collaborative efforts are necessary to make progress and advance the implementation of effective solutions worldwide.

## What we did

The World Circular Economy Forum 2021 (WCEF2021) brought together global leaders and experts to drive ambitious action over the next five years to accelerate the transition to a prosperous, inclusive, and equitable circular economy. The program focused on the actions that businesses, policy makers, civil society and other circular change-makers can pursue to unlock transformational change at the system level.

The third day of WCEF2021, was reserved for **Accelerator Sessions** organized independently by partner organizations. The session *Plastics Without Borders* was one such session organized by the European Union, the Canada Plastics Pact and Circular Economy Leadership Canada on September 15<sup>th</sup>.

The intent of the virtual event was to share information and explore topics around circular plastics that cross borders and examine how leading solutions can get a boost from international collaboration. Over 130 participants from around the world representing diverse sectors of the economy (governments, businesses, academia, civil society, and others) joined the session to hear and share experiences on the challenges and solutions to advancing a global circular plastics economy.

Together the plenaries and three break-out sessions sought to:

- 1) Identify transboundary issues that warrant further research or action.
- 2) Showcase issues and solutions across the plastics supply chain that may result in the transfer of knowledge, best practices, or technology.
- 3) Make connections between participants that will lead to future collaborations.

This report presents the promising paths forward that were highlighted by speakers and participants.



## What we talked about

The high-level line-up of expert speakers shared what is happening globally in terms of production and use of plastics, business leadership, and policies and legislation to curb plastic waste trends. Presentations on leading practices and challenges in three areas also shed light on necessary future global collaborations in:

- *Achieving recycled content goals*
- *Succeeding with innovative business models*
- *Influencing change within global supply chains*

## Session highlights

### Opening plenary

The opening plenary by Ambassador Gabrič, Shardul Agrawala and Hugo-Maria Schally acknowledged that positive innovation was taking place along the entire plastics value chain and that from a policy perspective there was a lot of action internationally to combat marine plastic litter. National and sub-national governments in more than 120 countries have also introduced measures and policies but these actions generally target only a small percentage of the plastic waste volume (e.g., 1% from single-use plastics or bags). As well, other policy instruments are emerging to create incentives to better design plastic products or refund schemes, but they too cover a relatively small number of products and can have a limited geographical scope. Existing national measures are not sufficient. There is the need for a dedicated international instrument to address gaps and foster harmonized measures to prevent plastic pollution.

While many jurisdictions are pursuing innovative policies, we face a two-prong challenge. On the one hand, the proliferation of policies and standards can be challenging and there is a need to consider if barriers have been created to operating effectively in a global marketplace. Meanwhile, there is an urgency to broaden the type and scope of actions in order to create circularity and ensure achievement of collective goals.



*The European Union is committed* a circular economy and has made the concept a focus of the European Green Deal, the ambitious plan to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. In the coming decade Europe aims to double the material circularity rate which will support economic growth, job creation and reduction in greenhouse gases.

*Ambassador Melita Gabric*

These are areas where governments and industry can work together:

- Restrain plastic consumption and optimize design;
- Improve data and traceability on transnational movement of plastics and especially secondary production;
- Fix global markets for secondary plastics, by creating a differentiated demand for secondary plastics and by removing incentives that subsidize virgin plastic production and use (e.g., fossil fuel subsidies).

Because, plastic products are part of global value chains, the scope and impact of domestic actions are limited. A global problem of this nature requires a global response. A global agreement could provide an overarching framework to close the gaps that existing agreements and initiatives do not address, especially related to upstream activities in the plastics' lifecycle and to coordinate action to prevent plastic waste and marine litter. Data, monitoring and reporting will be indispensable elements of a global agreement as they will provide a consolidated insight into the scale and evolution of the problem at national, regional, and global levels. The road to a global agreement is still long; national efforts are important, and a future agreement will need to represent a guiding framework for existing and future national plans to reduce plastic waste and pollution.

The EU and Canada are partners in this effort and working together to promote a shift towards a circular economy and combat plastic waste and marine litter.

*Innovation is happening.* There are technologies and innovations that have not been fully exploited which could overcome barriers and enable systemic solutions. Digitalisation, 3D printing, big data management, artificial intelligence, circular supply models, sharing and service models are a few examples. We also need to explore how to influence behaviours and communicate with consumers.

*Shardul Agrawala, OECD*

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### Break-out session 1: Achieving recycled content goals

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The distinctive feature of a circular economy is the recirculation of materials. Figuring out how to maximize this potential requires the coming together of well synchronized policies, market conditions, technologies, and infrastructure. For plastics, this is a complex equation that involves investments and public policies that will build on current systems, harness new technologies to recover more diverse materials and establish strong post-secondary material markets. Two leading and influential organizations in plastics recycling shared their initiatives and insights on how to advance the circularity of plastics and what is holding

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**Key points:**

*In Europe & North America, legislations are supporting the development of markets for secondary plastics. Requirements should be expanded to cover more regions and products but targets need to be realistic, standards harmonised and requirements developed with the recycling industry.*

*Voluntary commitments involving producers, converters and retailers are helping to reduce plastic waste and achieve more recycling contents (e.g. Ellen MacArthur Foundation Global Commitment & National Plastic Pacts, Circular Plastics Alliance).*

*A common challenge is the varying definitions and targets for PCR content in commitments by legislators and brands. Recycling and recycled content commitments are necessary drivers for the circular economy, but these need to reflect current reality (e.g., a PET bottle can't be 100% rPET if collection rates are less than 100%). Thus, a ladder approach is key to setting goals and targets.*

*To realise ambitions and circularity, investments are needed to optimize sorting, increase uptake capacity, and improve the quality and performance of recycle.*

*APR and PRE have joined efforts to prepare common protocols for PCR contents in order to support robust and transparent claims. Certification is the right tool to recognise the use of recycled plastics.*

*Given global plastic value chains, a fundamental part of the process is the connection with the business sector, as cooperation and knowledge sharing are at the basis of circularity, accountability and transparency.*

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## Break-out Session 2: Innovative business models for recirculating plastics

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All around the world we are witnessing innovations that are challenging established norms, creating new opportunities for us to live more sustainably and consume less resources in our daily lives. Success in establishing businesses based on reuse models is not without challenges but the drivers and rewards can lie beyond environmental gains and address equity and accessibility issues in society. Two leaders from different continents that have succeeded in establishing reuse models shared their business model, the secret of their success and the challenges as they continue to drive hard for the expansion and mainstreaming of reuse practices.

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**Key points:**

*Innovation in circular economy business models need long-term, green capital, as return on investments for some circular innovations can take longer than for linear businesses.*

*There remains too much emphasis on recycling and linear processes and a lack of substantial incentives for reuse.*

*Engagement of governments is needed at all levels in setting appropriate targets and policies that will support eco-behaviors and shift consumer demand towards more sustainable options. It is not enough to let startups tackle alone the behavioral changes necessary for new circular business models to succeed.*

*Clear guidelines and policies with achievable goals and stakeholders dialogue will accelerate change. An example is the engagement of local governments in the waste free or zero waste campaigns that promote the adoption of reuse and refill options.*

*We need to intensify the stakeholder dialogue, set a big & realistic vision that will take into account real environmental benefits.*

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## Break-out session 3: Influencing within Global Supply Chains

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The global drive to improve circularity and reduce GHGs and plastic waste is happening. Its success involves a long-term engagement and a commitment to working with others. Many companies bring to market products involving supply chains that are beyond their borders with production norms that vary across countries reflecting local capacity, priorities, and regulations. The current pandemic has taught us many lessons about the complexity and interdependence of supply chains and how disruptions can be quickly felt in our lives. Businesses are demonstrating innovation and resilience enabled by modern technologies and ingenuity. Two leading organizations shared their efforts to accelerate progress withing global value chains and insights on what it might take to realize global commitments.

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### Key points:

*Companies operating at global level are facing the challenge of varying environmental objectives and requirements across jurisdictions. Consistent actions by governments to reduce plastic production and consumption is needed globally for complex value chains to move in the same direction.*

*Experience of the Consumer Goods Forum reveals that investments are needed to expand global capacity to collect and recycle plastics and stopping its leakage into the environment.*

*Global standards on recycled content and related certification standards would facilitate work within the value chain, save business costs and time as the current approach of auditing flows and certification systems is not efficient.*

*Communications and training as a tool is underutilised and of ultimate importance for global progress. Support from national and global initiatives such as the Canada Plastics Pact and Consumer Goods Forum has been crucial in terms of knowledge sharing within the value-chain and providing credible information and tools to support training within a business.*

*Reporting requirements and efficient business decisions require significant data and efforts; mechanisms to facilitate the generation and availability of data along value chains globally are needed.*

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## In their own words

Participants were also polled on their thoughts from the sessions. Here is what they said:

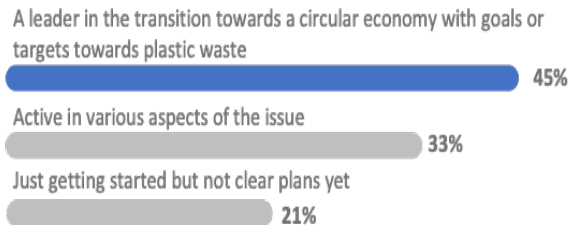
### In a few words, what is you take-away from your break-out session?

- Need to make reduced waste options price competitive compared to packaged options / Big challenges in shifting to circularity given more incentive for over consumption than efficiency.
- Brands and retailers need to use their power to change business as usual / Even large companies struggle with having enough scale to direct changes with suppliers.
- Improving cross-borders traceability is important / It is challenging to verify global supply chains for recycled content - need global standards, this will take time.
- Need common policy across countries regarding plastic generation and disposal/ Need investments in recycling and collection systems.

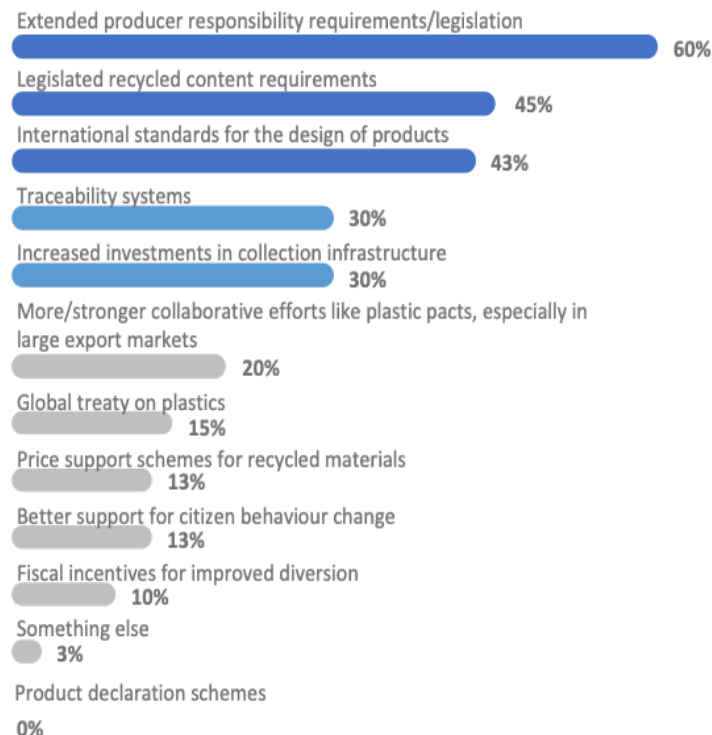


- Global collaboration on standards, recycling, etc. are critical to being able to solve this global challenge / Harmonization, targets and legislation are key elements.
- There is already some great collaboration between North America and Europe with respect to design for recycling criteria and guidance / Mandating PCR content is critical to achieving circularity and require policies to increase collection / Concerted efforts towards certification of PCR are needed, both in North America and Europe.
- Innovative ideas are out there / circular business models need to have underlying strong economic incentives for the consumer to be scalable.
- Tackling packaging issues can make a big impact on sustainability / Assigning value to packaging is important and an incentive for change / Reusables are becoming mainstream and are the way to go!
- We are on the right track / Mind shifting behaviours don't always need to be environmentally driven, they just have to happen / There is still a lot of ground to cover / We need to keep going and collaboration will be the key driver.

### How would you describe your organization?



### To accelerate progress globally, what do you think are the most necessary actions for your sector or business? Pick the two most important to you.



## Ideas for future actions

The closing plenary offered further thoughts on the path ahead. Despite global commitments, and leadership in so many sectors of the economy, the circularity quotient of plastics as a material remains low globally. Most plastics are sent to landfill, incinerators or worse, discharged in the environment, polluting lands and waters globally. Yet there is agreement on a range of actions that are moving us in the right direction.

Technology exists and can be impactful if we search outside the traditional plastics value chain. For example, the Internet of Things and other business models can drive collaboration through shared visibility of supply and demand. Data and new models can also help us measure progress against our GHG emission reduction and other environmental goals.

There are many important reasons why we need to do this when we consider *the impact of plastic waste on nature* and ecosystem services of nature, even in remote regions of the globe. A recent mission to Alaska collected significant volumes of plastics originating from all around the world and evidence of plastics being ingested by grizzly bears.

*Nina Bellucci Butler, Stina Inc.*

To raise our circular quotient for plastics we need to tackle the challenge of shrinking the delta between new production and the amount of materials capable of including recovered content. As we pursue circularity goals, there is a clear need to identify and establish mechanisms that can identify the trade-offs between the life cycle impact of plastic products, their recyclability, and the drive to incorporate recycled content and help navigate the policy and business choices among these objectives. Shifts in the market can be achieved by efficiency and more transparent value chains.

On the policy front the EU is leading the way with new proposals to increase the durability and longer life of products, with a focus on value retention operations such as remanufacturing, refurbishing, and new business models based on servicing or shared use. As such, the Green Claims and Right to Repair Initiatives will contribute to improved transparency and increased value retaining operations. As part of actions related to the implementation of the Plastic Strategy and the Circular Economy Action Plan, the EU also foresees launching mandatory recycling content in key sectors and measures to combat the release of microplastics from the use of products such as tyres, textiles, and others.

Insights from speakers and participants identified the following conclusions and ideas for future work:

- **Country-level commitments and legislation are key.** Legislation in Europe and elsewhere has created the necessary incentives for a circular economy—extended-producer responsibility, recycled content, recyclability, value retention and innovation. But the scope and scale of measures need to be expanded to many more products and sectors.
- **Economic barriers remain.** Low prices for virgin plastics undermine the ability to develop the recycling infrastructure and expand processes to recover a wider variety of plastics. Fossil fuel subsidies can keep virgin plastic prices low and make some recycled resins less market competitive. Governments need to examine policies that are misaligning economic signals to achieve circular economy ambitions.

- ***We must create the conditions for innovative processes and technologies to succeed.*** There are a range of enabling technologies, new business models and innovative processes that could provide solutions at various scale (global, national, local). Governments and industry need to collaborate to create the necessary financial and policy conditions for solutions to become mainstream. Circular business models need dedicated incentives and green capital, as return on investment can take longer than traditional linear businesses.
- ***Mechanisms are needed to increase transparency and support value chain collaboration.*** Whether it is to trace toxic chemicals, share data about recycled content or material performance specifications, businesses need a common basis for their exchanges and, governments and the public need to trust the information that is shared. Forums for collaboration are emerging but efforts remain scattered among leading initiatives. More concerted actions are needed to have common accountabilities and tools that reflect the global nature of the value-chain.
- ***Commitments must be achievable and reported on.*** Commitments and targets are important and need to be chosen carefully to reflect reality and capacity (e.g., a PET bottle cannot be a 100% recycled if collection rates are 30%). A ladder approach to commitments is more realistic and can reflect better efforts and incremental results.
- ***Knowledge sharing / training in a non-competitive area and space is needed.*** Connections and knowledge sharing among business sectors and throughout value chains are the basis of circularity. Associations and international organisation have undertaken work jointly to prepare common protocols and guidance in many areas. Efforts to increase accountability and transparency must be expanded as they form basis for effective actions at the national and regional levels.
- ***Strategies for consumer education and public awareness should be better exploited.*** Consumer education is less exploited as a tool. Governments, businesses, and voluntary organisations could benefit from better understanding how to successfully influence individuals' values and behaviour to support sustainable consumption goals and related innovations in the marketplace.
- ***International collaboration is needed.*** The global nature of the plastic value chain calls for collective vision and efforts. No one country or business will fix it all. The scope of some solutions is beyond national/country actions and will require international collaboration. A global agreement can provide the framework for such future collaborations, address gaps in international governance, strengthen existing actions and develop solutions that require global harmonization and standards.