United Nations Division for Sustainable Development Goals
Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP)

An expert group meeting in preparation for the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2018: Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies

Thursday 3 – Friday 4 May 2018
United Nations Headquarters, New York
Conference Room 9

Background Note

Session 5: SCP and Plastic Pollution in the Ocean

Background

Only a small percentage of all plastic waste is recycled, while the rest of it is either accumulating in landfills or is discarded in the natural environment, eventually ending up and breaking down in the ocean. As a result, UNEP estimated last year that at least 51 trillion microplastic particles were already in the ocean. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 14.1 aims at preventing and significantly reducing marine pollution of all kinds, providing opportunities for addressing the plastic pollution threat.

Over the past few years, UNEP has highlighted the social, economic and environmental impacts of plastic pollution in the ocean in several reports and resolutions. In the report "Marine Plastic Debris and Microplastics", for instance, UNEP identifies the main land-based and sea-based sources of marine macro- and microplastics, as well as their types. In that report, UNEP also details how marine litter affects socio-economic development and hinders environmental protection, which could help us discern the linkages between plastic pollution and several SDGs. For instance, as macroplastics can damage marine habitat and can lead to species entanglement, we can assume that marine plastics could make SDG 14 (Life Below Water) more difficult to reach; as marine plastics break down in the ocean into microplastics, they are easily ingested by marine species and can then be taken up by human beings consuming sea food, which could slow down the achievement of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being); altered marine ecosystems might also generate a loss of revenue for fisheries and the tourism industry, impacting on SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). As the potential risk of plastic leakage into the ocean is a high possibility in all phases of a product's life cycle, the report further recommends changing the plastic economy from a linear one to a circular one.

In its Resolution on Marine Litter and Microplastics[1], adopted in December 2017, UNEA noted with concern the social, economic and environmental impacts of high and rapidly increasing levels of marine plastic litter as well, reiterating the need for extensive research on marine plastics. It further underlined that "preventive action through waste minimization and environmentally sound waste management should be given the highest priority".

Actions aimed at meeting SDG 12 through environmentally sound management of plastic products and waste through their life cycle are an effective way to reduce the amount of plastic litter ending up in the ocean, hence to reach target 14.1 and the rest of the 2030 Agenda. It is equally important to identify the role of governments, companies and citizens in the fight against plastic pollution.

Questions

Guiding questions to frame the discussion:

- What would be important in developing and implementing an effective strategy to address plastic pollution in the ocean through improved production and consumption patterns, including waste management?

- What are the respective roles, and collective responsibilities, of different stakeholders in ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns, including environmentally sound waste management, with regard to plastics and microplastics? And how could potential partnerships be secured?

[1] Resolution UNEP/EA.3/L.20