

Who is Responsible for Latin America's Waste?

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Packaging. Chemicals. Tires. These are just three kinds of waste that countries around the globe increasingly need to deal with. Many industrialized countries export their waste to far-away regions, often in other continents. Out of sight, out of mind.

REVOLVE Circular's latest investigation looks into waste management in Latin America, and the role of consumers, producers and governments.

From Guatemala to South America and Back

Sandra Moran in Guatemala City is concerned: "Solving the continuously growing problem of waste and reducing its impact is not easy here at all," says the former Guatemalan Congresswoman. Back in November 2016, she presented a law proposal alongside the late Guatemalan congressman Álvaro Velásquez and another colleague. Their intention: regulate recycling and sustainable management of solid and liquid waste.

"Our proposal was meant to result in the sustainable management of waste, generate jobs and contribute to the care of the environment," Sandra Moran explains. With its almost 17 million inhabitants the Central American Guatemala is one of many Latin American countries in which access to waste collection is limited and where waste is poorly managed. According to a 2018 report by the United Nations Environment Program UNEP using data from 2014,

90% of the 541,000 daily tons of Latin America's urban waste was not utilized for any further purpose.

While many countries of the region lack a comprehensive framework for waste management until date, some governments, such as Chile, have regulations since many years - and go beyond waste management by public authorities by also including a scheme referred to as 'Extended Producer Responsibility' (EPR).

When governments transfer responsibility for waste management

EPR schemes enable governments to address waste-management related issues by transferring parts of the responsibility to the producers; in the long

run, the aim is to encourage so-called eco-design, change the packaging and composition of products, enable repairing and more.

Within Latin America, Chile's current draft resolution for EPR and products that constitute packaging seems the most advanced: it defines as many as 138 products from 13 different industries, such as construction, agriculture, clothing and others, and also distinguishes between domestic and industrial waste. The resolution shall be applied to several existing laws concerning waste management and packaging.

Other legislative reforms are on their way: Mexico plans a reform of its waste management which would redefine single-use plastics and enable energy production from it. According to Greenpeace Mexico, this reform is a setback in single-use plastics regulation as it does not include sufficient

responsibilities for producers, that civil society has been demanding. In the south, Argentina intends to include EPR schemes, and proposes an environmental tax, for packaging and to integrate informal waste pickers into the management chain.

In the region, the reality of waste management and EPR is distinct - what's considered waste in one country is far from being waste in another. Costa Rica's law, for example, covers used tires, electronics, and special waste only. While Argentina also holds tire producers responsible and has a law for 'agrochemical's containers', it does not have a national framework law for waste management. Colombia's 2016 'National Policy for Integrated Solid Waste Management' on the other hand includes light bulbs, pharmaceuticals, pesticides, various electronics and diverse other products. Some of these national waste management laws have included EPR schemes since as far back as 2003, such as Mexico's national legislation, but are they achieving their objectives?

1. Guatemala City garbage dump, one of the largest in Central America. Photo: Paul Hart

The problem with EPR schemes: good intentions, low impact?

Costa Rica introduced an EPR scheme in 2010, "but the targets to measure its performance are only being set now," says Karla Chávez, Regional Director of ecoins, a digital waste currency originating from this Central American country. At a global level, researchers at Utrecht University in the Netherlands provide a strong critique: "The main problem with EPR schemes is that they are not democratic institutions; in most cases, they are entirely controlled by the companies that pollute in the first place," explains Martin Calisto-Friant, a French-Ecuadorian researcher. "The recovery options they choose are often the cheapest, and not always the best from a social or environmental standpoint. Moreover, these companies have very little or no incentive to reduce production and consumption of their goods, one of the main goals of a circular economy. In fact, there is no evidence so far showing that EPR schemes anywhere in the world have led producers to redesign their products by choosing sustainable materials, or making them easier to repair, recycle or refurbish."

What is Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)?

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), EPR is a policy approach under which producers are given a significant responsibility - financial and/or physical - for the treatment or disposal of post-consumer products. Assigning such responsibility could in principle provide incentives to prevent wastes at the source, promote product design for the environment and support the achievement of public recycling and materials management goals.

In Spanish-speaking Latin America, EPR schemes are either referred to as Responsabilidad 'Extendida' or Responsabilidad 'Ampliada' del Productor, meaning that the producing company is the only responsible for managing its respective waste. Some countries also use 'Responsabilidad Compartida' where the waste-accountability is shared among various actors including producers, consumers, distributors and the State.



México is currently discussing reform for single-use plastics. Its 'general law for the prevention and comprehensive management of wastes' passed in 2003 includes plastic packaging, used tires, cells and batteries, hazardous waste and special waste, and distributes responsibility between producers, distributors, consumers, users of by-products, and three levels of government.

Guatemala had a law proposal on 'recycling and sustainable management of polluting waste, solid and liquid waste to protect life, the economy and the environment' in 2016. It is yet to have been adopted.

Costa Rica passed a law on 'integrated management of waste' in 2010. It includes used tires, electronics, and special waste, and producers (should) cover waste management.

This is particularly problematic as all Latin American governments have signed the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) planned to be achieved by 2030 - including SDG 12 on 'Responsible Consumption and Production'. While EPR schemes are considered an important component for achieving this SDG, only few Latin American governments have moved towards updating their waste management regulations or, more importantly, at least enforce existing laws. "The success of implementing EPR depends to a large extent on the existence of control and monitoring of the established obligations and targets, as well as on the transparency with which management systems and product traceability are carried out" argues the Centro de Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible para Latinoamérica y el Caribe (CODS) based in Colombia in a recent analysis of EPR in Latin America.

Martin Calisto-Friant at Utrecht University adds: "There is a need for strong civil society and government participation in EPR schemes; they need to be governed in a more democratic manner and take decisions considering social and ecological implications rather than simply dealing with waste in the cheapest possible manner".

So where does Guatemala stand today?

Waste management and particularly EPR schemes can raise controversy since they are driving and aiming for change against well-established industry lobbies; political instability and high levels of corruption in many Latin American countries do not make their implementation easier. "Our waste management is still not properly regulated" says Sandra Moran in Guatemala City. "The laws discussed in congress are based on the personal interests of its members who look after their own agenda and business. Unfortunately, there is lack of a vision for the country and for solving problems for the common good of Guatemala's people. What other Latin American countries do is exactly what we need: laws for recycling and waste transformation which could also create jobs, plus raise awareness and increase responsibility for our waste."

Brazil approved in 2010 its national plan on solid waste management. It shares responsibility between manufacturers, importers, distributors, consumers and public service providers for street cleaning and solid waste management, and includes pesticides, cells and batteries, used tires, lubricating oils, fluorescent lamps, electronics, plastic, metal and glass packaging.

Chile is currently developing new legislation. Its 'national law regarding waste management, extended producer responsibility and recycling' was approved in 2016, which includes lubricating oils, electrical and electronic equipment, batteries, containers and packaging, used tires, batteries. Producers cover waste management and can delegate responsibility to other actor(s) but must bear all costs.

Colombia regulates waste since 2015 with a law on 'environment and sustainable development sector' and the 'national policy for integrated solid waste management' which includes light bulbs, pharmaceuticals, computers, cellphones, batteries, electronics, pesticides, used tires, containers and packaging. Producers cover waste management and information campaigns.

Circular fashion for Latin America

Lack of conscious consumption. Awareness raising strategies. Too few innovations and technological developments in the textile-clothing sector. These are the most important barriers to a more circular fashion industry in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Other take away messages from the investigative piece by Bogotá-based Andrea Mejía Fajardo, supported by Circulatam & 7191 Clothing Sustainable Ethical Lifestyle:

- Fashion has the capacity to change consumption habits. If the industry in LAC countries better understood the opportunities of a circular economy, it could generate new patterns of production and consumption, achieving business sustainability with a triple impact: environmental, social and economic.
- There is a need for regulations to discourage the use of toxic chemicals, non-recyclable fibres, waste and greenwashing, as well as regulations that stimulate the reuse of materials, EPR, research and technological innovation.

Discover more about circular fashion in Latin America at revolve.media/circular



Argentina has no framework law for waste management. One 2013 resolution holds tire producers responsible for waste management, and a 2016 law calls for extended and shared responsibility of agrochemical's containers between the producer and the whole supply chain.

2. Photo: RODNAE Productions

How a Digital Currency Drives Latin America’s Recycling

INTERVIEW WITH KARLA CHÁVEZ

Ecoins is a Costa Rica-based company dedicated to the recycling of household waste – with a digital currency. It is already present in Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Perú; REVOLVE Circular spoke with Karla Chávez, ecoins Regional Director to find out more.

Karla, how does ecoins work?

Our system rewards households who commit to recycling with a digital currency: ecoins. After the users deposit their household waste in specific collection

facilities, they receive ecoins which they can redeem for sustainable products and experiences. This is a clear incentive for people to start thinking about the value of the materials they discard and to start learning new habits.

At the moment, ecoins focuses on recycling household waste. Could the system also make people reflect about their consumption habits and contribute to more sustainable consumption? If yes, how?

Ecoins users learn to recognize the value of waste; they carry out the process of separation and thus identify which materials have no recoverable value and avoid them as far as possible. They consult, learn, educate themselves. They become more sensitive to the environmental impacts of their poorly treated waste and to positive social impacts of good waste management, also concerning local employment.



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How many companies does ecoins currently work with? What are your standards for accepting companies or organizations as ecoins members?

We currently have partnership agreements with more than 200 companies in five countries. Before joining the alliance, all brands are asked to submit information about their sustainability actions, such as the use of solar panels, social responsibility programs, environmental certifications, etc.

From your perspective, what are the biggest barriers to a more Circular Economy in Central America? And what are the biggest opportunities?

The main barriers are the lack of education and the lack of recognition of the value of post-consumer materials. As for the biggest opportunity, the current logistics crisis in international trade is a perfect time to take back what is already in use and put into action the benefits of a circular economy model maximizing the use of materials and resources, starting with more circular product design.



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4. Plaza Vea, Lima, Peru. November, 2019. Ecoins users handing over their recyclable waste at the Plaza Vea at a collection campaign.

5. October, 2018. Collection Centre La Carpio (a women-led collection center), San Jose, Costa Rica. Activity in collaboration with partners to promote recycling and proper nutrition in La Carpio area. People earned ecoins for their delivery of recyclable waste, which they could exchange for food products.

6. December, 2018. Pedregal, Heredia, Costa Rica. Second Guinness World Record attempt for the most plastic bottles to be recycled in 8 hours. This time the record was broken with 30 tons of plastic bottles collected.

Policies for More Circularity

INTERVIEW WITH **NICOLE STOPFER AND MARIA PINEDIA**
FROM THE LATIN AMERICA OFFICE OF THE GERMAN KONRAD ADENAUER FOUNDATION (KAS)

Due to the increasing prominence of a circular economy in Latin America’s public and private sector, civil society and digital space, EKLA commissioned a report on “Circular Economy and Public Policies” in 2019. One of its key findings: there were already over 80 public circular economy initiatives in the region. “This model is a significant contribution to the conservation of natural resources, which shows its present and future importance. The circular economy is perceived as an important opportunity for employment generation and poverty reduction in Latin America,” argue EKLA and the report’s authors from the Innovation Centre for the Circular Economy (CIEC) in Chile.

REVOLVE Circular sat down with Nicole and Maria to find out more:

Nicole and Maria, your report presents opportunities for a Circular Economy (CE) in Latin America. So, what are the main problems which the predominant linear "take-make-waste" economy poses to the region?

According to the nearly 700 people surveyed and 40 interviews with experts in the region, we identified one main risk: the disproportionate and unconscious levels of consumption based on a linear

economic model. In Latin America, this model opens space for the continuous generation of waste and the degradation of natural ecosystems due to the exploitation of raw materials needed for production.

7. Cobblers in Bolivia at work. Our research found that images showing people pro-actively engaging with sustainable practices (rather than being pictured near to low-carbon technologies) were well received. Photo: Rocco Lucia

8. Compost temperature: Andrea Rivera, co-founder and eco-social director of sinba, monitors the temperature of compost made from organic waste. Sinba, Peru

9. Organic waste – biofactory: The sinba team performs a manual quality control of the day’s organic waste. The waste that is suitable for the production of animal feed is selected. Sinba, Peru



Your report on CE policies also analyzes private sector entrepreneurship initiatives and circular business models. What are the main conclusions?

The first edition of the report identifies around 40 circular economy-related initiatives, many of which still focus on the end-of-life recycling phase of products. Thus, there is a need for more research and development between business-university-public sector to leverage technological development for circular innovations to focus on the regeneration of ecosystems and opportunities for scalability.

Could you highlight two or three Latin American initiatives which have circular thinking at their core and drive the agenda?

The *Centro Tecnológico de Economía Circular para la Macrozona Norte in Tarapacá-Chile*, for example, is a public-private initiative promoted by the *Corporación de Fomento de la Producción* (CORFO) and led by CIEC. It seeks to support companies in their transition towards a more circular model and to demonstrate that circular mining is possible.

Another example is Sinba, a Peruvian B-corporation with a circular business model; it focuses on the management of organic resources from restaurants. Sinba is also a partner of EKLA for circular economy trainings and support for Peruvian local governments that wish to develop circular roadmaps.

Why should Latin American governments care about a more Circular Economy? What is their role?

The good news is some governments are already supporting an accelerated transition towards a circular economy. In February 2021, the circular economy coalition in Latin America and the Caribbean was created with the participation of Colombia, Peru, Dominican Republic and Costa Rica. Its steering committee is developing a circular economy vision from and for the Latin American region; it will allow us to face the common challenges that unite us. By working in a coordinated and united way, the governments of Latin America can achieve favorable alliances for the development of sectors such as plastics, biofuels, electronics, food, agriculture and industrial symbiosis approaches.

Another positive trend is that local governments are taking the lead. Since they are the closest to the population, their role in raising awareness of and pushing for a circular economy is crucial. EKLA started the project “Ruta Circular” in Costa Rica, Chile, Argentina, Peru and Guatemala, which trained 20 teams from municipalities and local organizations to strengthen their local circular route. ●

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