



DITC/MISC/2024/10  
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## NOTIFICATION

### **Special session on illicit trade and waste: Environmental challenges and trade solutions**

Side event during the fourteenth session of the Trade and Development Commission

Thursday, 25 April 2024, 10 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.

Room XVII

During the fourteenth session of the Trade and Development Commission, a [special session](#) will be held on the issue of illicit trade and waste. This form of illicit trade has widespread repercussions for the sustainable development agenda, not least with regard to environmental well-being, human health and sustainable production and consumption practices.

This event is aimed at discussing the challenges posed by illegal trade in waste and, within an overall development framework, exploring how trade, coupled with better border-related and domestic governance, can provide positive circular economy solutions that contribute to the lasting mitigation of this global problem. The event will be supported by details from empirical cases on used lead-acid batteries and second-hand clothing, from technical assistance projects under the Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution programme of UNCTAD and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

### **Background**

Waste is a near ubiquitous by-product of contemporary economic activity, present in ever increasing quantities, commensurate with growing rates of consumption and production. Globally, around 2 billion tons of solid waste are produced annually, of which only about 13.5 per cent is recycled. Due to the costs of treating it in a safe, environmentally considerate manner, waste is often assigned a negative value. Therefore, there is an incentive for actors within a supply chain to avoid such costs by illegally dumping or disposing of waste or exporting it to countries with less strict environmental standards. Trade in waste can happen legally in secondary materials markets, but becomes illegal when it violates international regulations, such as the Basel Convention, or the rules and regulations of exporting or importing countries.

Trade in illicit waste is considered the most profitable environmental crime and encompasses activities that do not abide by regulations across the sorting, transportation and disposal of waste. The profit generated from illicit waste amounts to \$10–12 billion annually, which is on a par with those in other major criminal areas such as human trafficking. Due in part to the significant profits, organized crime groups in some countries have entered and sought to take advantage of this market. The illicit trade of waste flows from the global North to the global South, particularly towards Southeast Asia and Eastern and Western Africa. The complexity of waste-related regulations and varying legal definitions, often in combination with few resources for monitoring, inspection and enforcement, result in low levels of risk for criminals, while the possible illicit profits in this sector are high. Stringent regulation in a country of export does not solve the problem of waste-related criminality if there is less-strict regulation in the destination country. The effective implementation of provisions in international and regional treaties regulating trade can also be a struggle.

In this context, there is much scope to address the illicit trade of waste, with trade policies that address the root of the problem, from a development perspective. Novel material alternatives and substitutes that can replace common sources of waste, particularly single-use plastic packaging, may be explored. Doing so could help to upscale industries based on less-polluting natural fibres, creating jobs and reducing illicit trade flows in plastic waste.

The linear model of production based on extract and take-make-waste leads to a throw-away culture that does not provide incentives to producers and consumers to reduce or prevent waste generation. In contrast, a circular economy approach provides opportunities to rethink waste and see it as an opportunity to recover valuable resources and perform economically valuable activities. This may be key in addressing widespread problems related to illicit trade in electronic waste, as well as textiles and second-hand clothing, in Western Africa and Eastern Africa, respectively. By aiming to minimize the amount of waste generated, related activities also contribute to environmental sustainability objectives, not only by reducing pollution and degradation but also by addressing increased demand for primary supplies of raw materials. For example, with the accelerating implementation of net-zero policies in line with the 2050 deadline, circularity principles applied to clean energy transition technologies could potentially play a significant role in helping meet long-term demand for critical energy transition minerals. Finally, the efficient recovery of minerals and materials from hazardous waste can provide not only economic value, but revenue through services connected to circular economy activities that provide job opportunities in developing countries.

## **Participation**

The event is open to all participants of the Trade and Development Commission. Online registration, at [Trade and Development Commission, fourteenth session](#), is mandatory for all those wishing to attend the event.

Further enquiries regarding registration should be sent to the UNCTAD secretariat, Intergovernmental Outreach and Support Service, Palais des Nations, CH-1211 Geneva 10; email: [meetings@unctad.org](mailto:meetings@unctad.org).

## **Logistics**

The event will be held in room XVII of the Palais des Nations, with interpretation in the six official languages of the United Nations.

Before entering the Palais des Nations, participants are requested to scan their badges at the United Nations Security Service, Pregny Gate entrance, 14 Avenue de la Paix, 1202 Geneva. As part of the new system at the United Nations Office at Geneva, participants will receive a digital badge consisting of their photo, a quick response (QR) code and the name and date of the meeting. The digital badge will be sent to each participant by email once they have been accredited by the meeting organizer and should be downloaded to a mobile telephone or other mobile device. Participants may also print the digital badge in order to use the QR code. The Security Service is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Because of the security measures in force, participants are strongly advised to arrive before 9 a.m. in order to complete entry procedures in good time and proceed to the meeting in Building E of the Palais. Participants are requested to carry a passport or similar national identity card with them. Taxis are not allowed to enter the grounds of the Palais des Nations. Visitors should therefore be dropped off at the indicated entrance gates. Furthermore, luggage may not be brought into the buildings unless the Security Service gives special clearance.

## **Further information and contact details**

For all other enquiries, please contact Mr. Graham Mott, Economic Affairs Officer, Division on International Trade and Commodities; email: [graham.mott@un.org](mailto:graham.mott@un.org).

(signed)

**Miho Shirotori**  
Acting Director

Division on International Trade and Commodities  
15 April 2024