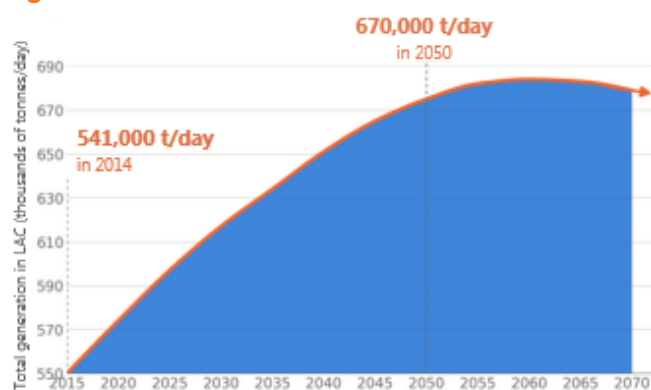


Open, eat, and throw away? A cycle that Latin America and the Caribbean need to break

Do you open a food item and throw away its packaging in a matter of seconds? Single-use plastics (SUP) are designed to be used just once, but the waste they generate can remain in the environment for hundreds of years. According to UNCTAD, by 2025, around 75% of all plastic ever produced will have become waste.

The problem goes beyond packaging. In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), less than 1% of the materials circulating in the regional economy are recycled as secondary raw materials, well below the global average of 7%.

Projections for waste generation in countries of the region



Source: UNEP report (wedocs.unep.org)

In 2018, the UNEP regional waste report estimated that 145,000 tonnes per day are disposed of inappropriately in the region, and the chart shows that municipal waste could reach around 670,000 tonnes per day by 2050, a burden that can only be managed by reducing and recovering these materials.

Solutions are being pursued along two lines. The first is global in scope: in 2022, the United Nations agreed to negotiate a legally binding treaty against plastic pollution, with the next stages of this process set out in February 2026.

The second, regional in scope, builds on measures already in place, such as the phasing out of SUP in Colombia and the reduction of disposable packaging in restaurants in Chile, experiences which should be adapted to the capabilities of each country and the needs of its businesses.

What makes packaging sustainable?

Sustainable packaging is designed to use as little material as possible and to be easily reused or recycled. We call this **circular packaging**, but beware of misleading labels:

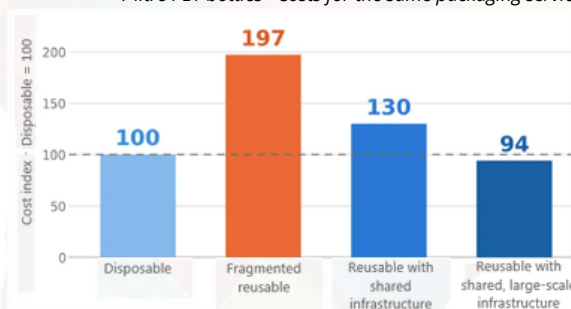
- **Bio-based** is made wholly or partly from renewable raw materials, such as plants.
- **Biodegradable** breaks down through the action of micro-organisms under specific conditions.
- **Compostable** can be turned into compost, but only if it is taken to industrial facilities.

None of these options is sufficient on its own, because without collection or treatment, a green label does not guarantee that the waste will not end up in the environment, and rather than being reused, packaging must protect the food and prevent losses along the supply chain.

Change is also driven by the market, as Regulation (EU) 2025/40, which applies from 12 August 2026 to packaging placed on the market in the EU, does not require all packaging to be compostable. Instead, it sets out phased requirements for recyclability, recycled content, reuse and material reduction, depending on the type of packaging.

Reusing can cost less: scale matters

1-litre PET bottles · Costs for the same packaging service



Source: Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2023)

Under a model for France (2023), reusable bottles would cost 6% less with a shared, large-scale infrastructure.

What can the region set in motion today?

- **Reducing waste:** phasing out certain single-use plastics and promoting reusable packaging, in line with the measures taken in Colombia.
- **Designing for recycling:** evaluating single-material packaging that protects food, in accordance with Chilean, Colombian and Mexican Agreements.
- **Packaging recovery:** financing its collection and recycling through contributions from companies, following the Chilean model.

The transition to circular packaging is already subject to rules and deadlines, and by taking these actions in advance, LAC will be able to turn the European requirement into a competitive advantage.

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