News

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# La Union in Costa Rica: some valuable inspiration for reducing plastic waste

## On the occasion of the 10th anniversary, part III of the activities and impact of Connective Cities

La Union is well-known for its advocacy for a greener future. The city's commitment to combating single-use plastic is an inspiring example to other communities.

Katherine Quirós from the Environmental Unit in the city of La Union, Costa Rica, presents her project idea at the event in Hamburg. | Photo: Connective Cities

Plastic waste is polluting the environment across almost the whole planet – in Augsburg in southern Germany and Irbid in Jordan, just as much as in Hawassa in Ethiopia or Kandy in Sri Lanka. And strategies for reducing this flood of plastic are similar the world over. In Costa Rica, the city administration of La Union decided it was worthwhile engaging in an exchange of expertise with other international municipalities on this topic. After launching a project to reduce plastic waste in 2018, the invitation from Connective Cities to participate in a dialogue event entitled Plastic waste – how municipal waste management can contribute to solving the problem in Hamburg in 2019 came at exactly the right time. Representatives from the city shared with other municipalities their successful approach to raising awareness among the population and within the retail trade. In return, they benefited from other delegates' knowledge and insights – including in unexpected areas such as organic waste management.

## La Union's approach: awareness raising

When attempting to reduce plastic waste, there are many approaches, as became clear at the event: improving waste collection and separation at household level; building recycling centres; optimising sorting facilities; and raising awareness among the population and businesses on how to reduce plastic waste. The municipality of La Union has been focusing on the last of these since 2018, with its 'Plan for reducing single-use plastic'. The plan has sought to replace plastic with reusable packaging or compostable solutions. The municipality's focus is on the retail trade, restaurants, and individual consumers.

Business and restaurant owners proudly display their stickers certifying their environmentally-friendly practices. Photo: Municipality of La Union

The 13 municipalities from nine countries who took part in the dialogue event confirmed La Union's approach to be the most preferable: although low-value types of plastic can be recycled, thereby reducing the load on landfill, avoiding plastic waste altogether remains the best option. The delegates in Hamburg stated: "Plastic waste is first and foremost a social challenge. Changing the attitudes of consumers and producers is crucial."

## The project idea: a sticker points the way

The stickers used by the city of La Union to recognise the environmental awareness of retailers and restaurants. | Photo: Municipality of La Union

At every Connective Cities event, the delegates develop ideas for projects they wish to implement after the event, and Hamburg was no exception. In a discussion with delegates from Rostock and Augsburg, representatives from La Union decided to pursue an idea from their plan: implementing non-fiscal incentives by setting up a certification programme for shops and restaurants that offers awards for sustainable practices, particularly the reduction of plastic waste. The aim of the certification is to motivate businesses to stop using single-use plastics.

Today, almost four years after that event, Katherine Quirós, representative of the Environmental Unit in the city administration, looks back with pride at what they have achieved. Thirty shops and restaurants and nine greengrocers in the city have now been awarded certification for their environmentally-friendly practices. These include: offering fabric bags instead of plastic bags; serving drinks without plastic straws; separating recyclable waste and organic waste for composting. They can display their certification status with a sticker on the shop window or at the entrance.

## Linking with further environmental themes

La Union is also focusing on environmental education to reduce plastic waste. It has integrated the topic into its environmental education programme, entitled 'Municipal School for Water and the Environment'. Katherine Quirós stated that it was vital that children and young people are given a comprehensive view of the challenges facing the environment, whilst also learning about the options for action. Numerous students have now participated in workshops and excursions as part of this integrated approach.

An art campaign drawing attention to the fact that everything that gets into the city's rivers eventually ends up in the sea. | Photo: Municipality of La Union

'Garbage Island' is part of La Union's campaign to reduce plastic waste. | Photo: Municipality of La Union

Another part of La Union's strategy was a striking PR campaign: 'Garbage Island' – a small beach island created in the centre of the city. It would have conjured up a perfect holiday atmosphere – if there hadn't been so much plastic waste in the sand. Behind it was a large poster, with the caption: 'We were born to protect nature'. A clear commission, which the population of La Union has taken up.

## Importing innovative ideas

Katherine Quirós had not anticipated that the most surprising insight she took home from the event would touch on a completely different topic: waste collectors in Costa Rica are held in very low esteem. Katherine Quirós discovered a completely different attitude in Hamburg: "I was very impressed at the high regard in which the staff at Hamburg's municipal cleaning services were held. Waste collection is valued as a profession, and the corporation takes care of the health of this occupational group. Hamburg's example has motivated me to campaign for better working conditions and greater appreciation of waste operatives in La Union."

During the event, the city received additional ideas for improving organic waste composting, which often ended up in landfills and resulted in a significant loss of resources. The La Union city administration is now allocating resources to launch a pilot program aimed at households. This initiative will involve distributing plastic containers for free and implementing a 'door-to-door' collection system for organic waste. The program will include training to enhance commitment and awareness regarding waste management – for example, by separating waste. Similarly to the collection of organic waste in shops and restaurants, the goal is to convert this waste into compost for use in public green spaces. Currently, La Union collects 2.5 tons of organic waste per week, averaging 10.03 tons each month. The city administration expects that the upcoming pilot program and the inclusion of additional commercial establishments will significantly enhance its organic waste collection efforts.

Another idea which stayed with Katherine Quirós was one from some East African delegates: She was fascinated by the approach of using plastic waste to make handcrafted jewellery, and its possibilities as part of a circular economy and as a way to generate income. The latter has become firmly established at La Union city administration, and will soon bear fruit, just like many of the project ideas developed jointly between municipalities – inspired by a municipality that may lie thousands of kilometres away, and implemented locally. A perfect example of the international Connective Cities learning processes.

How is La Union benefiting from the exchange of expertise?

- Discussion with other municipalities on plastic waste and waste management
- Expansion of their own approach to raising awareness among the population and retail trade
- Ideas for an environmental certification programme
- Optimisation of composting of organic waste

> *"Our participation in the event had a big influence on our work. We gained numerous new insights and learned a great deal about waste management."*
> Katherine Quirós

Author: Connective Cities

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