

New report looks at barriers to recycling in SA

A new report from WWF SA points to problematic food packaging, poorly informed consumers, poor design of plastic packaging, an unstable supply chain, and a lack of cooperation between brand owners, producers and retailers as among the many reasons why South Africa is lagging behind when it comes to recycling.



Image source: Gallo/Getty

The report, titled [*Plastics: From recycling to \(post-consumer\) recycle*](#), notes that consumers are hard-pressed to do the right thing due to confusing labelling and a lack of information around products containing post-consumer recycle (the raw material made from products and packaging that is discarded and then made into new raw material at recycling plants).

Food packaging is a particular challenge for several reasons including food-contact and safety standards, along with the fact that post-consumer recycle is often more expensive than virgin (new) plastic resins.

While there is potential for meaningful, systemic changes, the report notes there is a “general inertia” in the value chain. Very few, if any, brand owners and retailers have a packaging policy which includes recycling design criteria (such as the inclusion of post-consumer recycle and procurement from suppliers who also support circular packaging).



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Informal reclaimers face brunt of price fluctuations

Another key issue in the value chain is that informal reclaimers face the brunt of any price fluctuations due to the failures of the current free-market system. Together with buy-back centres, formal waste operators and recyclers, they absorb most of the economic losses, which ultimately affects the supply of plastic recyclables.

While the scenario spelled out in the report highlights the many challenges facing the industry, a recent positive step on the part of government has been the gazetting of the extended producer responsibility regulations for paper and packaging in May this year.

Co-author of the report Lorren de Kock says: “Ideally, we advocate for a ‘circular economy’ where no plastic in any form is being sent to landfill. To do this, we must find ways to keep plastics in the system, which is why the extended producer responsibility legislation is such an important step. It requires converters, brand owners, importers, licenced agents and retailers to take responsibility for the end of life of the products they place on the market and to reconsider packaging design without laying the problem entirely at the door of the consumer.”

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