Unilever SA forms local partnerships to support inclusive circular economy

By teaming up with expert partners to reward South Africa's most underappreciated recycling community and developing sustainable plastic packaging on some of their most well-known products, Unilever has taken its first steps in South Africa to help address society's damaging throwaway culture.

Luyanda Hatashwayo, reclaimer with the African Reclaimers Organisation, and Luc-Olivier Marquet, EVP Unilever South Africa.

As part of this ambition, the consumer goods company has launched a series of initiatives to help collect and process plastic packaging across the world. But in South Africa the process has been about direct investment and partnerships in waste collection, building capacity by buying recycled plastics and supporting well-designed extended producer responsibility schemes.
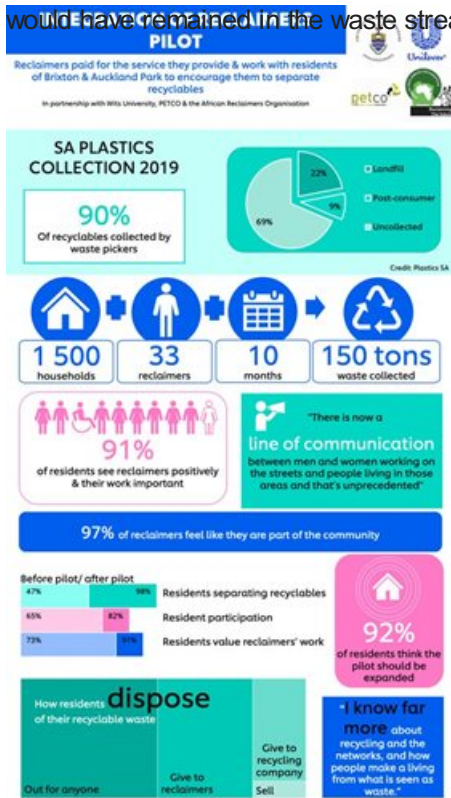
Recycling with Reclaimers pilot project

Recycling with Reclaimers is a pilot project that was jointly implemented by the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO), University of the Witwatersrand and Unilever, developed within the context of the Guideline on Waste Picker Integration for South Africa.

The aim of the pilot is to improve livelihoods of reclaimers and collection rates of recyclable material from households through recognition of reclaimers, compensation for their collection work and community behavioural change towards recycling. It demonstrates a model and approach that could be adopted by municipalities, residents and industry across the country, and could also be implemented as part of the Government's National Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) framework.

This is the first project in South Africa that has sought to find a way to integrate the majority of reclaimers who do not want to join cooperatives. It is also the first project that has paid reclaimers for the services that they provide.

University of Witwatersrand senior lecturer, Dr Melanie Samson said of the project: "The preliminary results of the evaluation have shown that 66% of the recyclables are being salvaged from rubbish bins. This is not surprising as many residents are still not separating and those who do still put some recyclables into bins.

"If a private company had been contracted to collect separated recyclables from households, two-thirds of the recyclables

would have remained in the waste stream and ended up at the dump! And it is important to note that private companies get paid a flat fee for each house in the area, so they would get paid the full amount even if they don't collect most of the recyclables.

"It is only reclaimers who will go through the bins to salvage recyclables as they have always done, and they will collect all of the recyclables (even those with little value) if they are paid a service fee as they were in the pilot project. Therefore it makes environmental and economic sense for reclaimers to provide separation at source collection services instead of private companies."

[click to enlarge]

Unilever works to eliminate fossil fuels from homecare products
23 Oct 2020

Supporting skills training, capacity building

Unilever has also partnered with Oxfam to support skills training and capacity building for recycling Community Based Organisations (CBOs) in the City of Ekurhuleni. The training involved basic business management, basic waste management, occupational health and safety, site operational procedures as well soft skills such as negotiation and collaboration.

"Municipal involvement and support, community engagement and awareness on recycling can increase collection rates of the waste CBOs - this would improve their business and increase their income," said Tinashe Machiridza, programme coordinator for Oxfam South Africa.

For Unilever Southern Africa CEO, Luc-Olivier Marquet, the collaboration is a win-win for all involved: "By working with partners such as ARO and Oxfam, we are working towards developing an inclusive circular economy that benefits communities and improves the livelihoods of our reclaimers."

Nestlé rolls out RE Sustainability initiative in South Africa
29 Oct 2020

Sustainable packaging goals: Rethinking plastics

Last year, Unilever became the first major consumer goods company to commit to an absolute plastic reduction across its portfolio. By 2025, the company confirmed it will halve its use of virgin plastic by reducing its use of plastic packaging by

more than 100,000 tonnes and accelerate its use of recycled plastic. Unilever's commitments remain unchanged and the company has significantly stepped up its use of such recycled materials.

"Throwaway culture and throwaway business models continue to dominate our lives and damage our planet. It is crucial that we – and the rest of the industry – rapidly transition to a circular economy," said Marquet.

Unilever has stepped up its use of post-consumer recycled plastic (PCR) to around 75,000 tonnes* globally. In SA, PCR provides 15% of Unilever SA's plastic footprint. The company's goal is to use at least 25% PCR by 2025.

Sunlight raises recycling awareness through packaging innovation
20 Mar 2019

Unilever has been exploring new ways of delivering products through its 'Less, Better, No' plastic framework.

'Better plastic' has led to products such as Sunlight Dishwashing Liquid, Sunlight Floor Cleaner and Comfort Fabric Conditioner all being packaged in bottles made from up to 100% recycled plastic.

Omo is relaunching its liquid detergent with changes to its packaging and formulation to significantly reduce the environmental impact of the product. The new bottle is 100% recyclable, made using 25% recycled plastic, with plans to increase this to 35% next year. This launch is part of Unilever's new 'Clean Future' commitment to lower the carbon footprint of their cleaning and laundry products.

"Developing solutions to meet our ambitious goals on plastic reduction will not only benefit the planet but also the South African consumer and their livelihoods through job creation and better value products. Including recycled plastic into our packaging is essential to drive the demand for more collection," said Marquet.