



Local Governments
for Sustainability

AFRICA

Circular City Labs South Africa

Practitioner-Developed Pathways for
Accelerating Reuse Uptake in South Africa

September 2025



Acknowledgements

This pathways document for accelerating reuse uptake in South Africa is a result of the findings, outcomes, and key recommendations that result from the Circular City Labs (CCL) workshop series, other CCL engagements, and written reflections from the course of the project. This document is tailored towards action-oriented pathways forward for reuse systems in South Africa, targeted at local government authorities and support for the private sector.

The project *Circular City Labs (CCL) – Testing reusable packaging systems in cities* aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through waste prevention by promoting reusable packaging systems and strengthening women's participation in local circular economies. The selected partner locations for this challenge are Tirana (Albania), Tbilisi (Georgia), Medellín (Colombia), and South Africa.

The project is carried out by *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)* in collaboration with ICLEI on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). It is funded through the BMZ Initiative for Climate and Environmental Protection (IKU).

We would like to acknowledge Silke Megelski, Jana Schwalm, Lea Derr, and Nikolaos Archontis from GIZ and Olga Horn, Paola Castañeda Rodríguez, and Magash Naidoo from ICLEI World Secretariat for their invaluable input to the project. We would also like to thank and acknowledge all the participants in the CCL workshop series, of which there are too many to name, without whom the insights in this document would not have been possible.

Pathways Document on Reuse in South Africa

This document was led by an ICLEI Africa team, comprising Kiera Crowe Pettersson, Zakiyya Atkins, Paul Currie, and Jokudu Guya. Information held in this document was primarily derived from a series of multi-stakeholder workshops, with insights from public, private and on how to advance reuse in South Africa.

Please cite this document as:

ICLEI Africa. 2025. Circular City Labs: Practitioner-Developed Pathways for Accelerating Reuse Uptake in South Africa. Cape Town. 30 September 2025.

Disclaimer

The findings in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the individuals and organisations interviewed in this research.

This material has been funded by the BMZ. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Ministry.

Circular City Labs

Testing Reusable Packaging Systems in Cities



Implemented by



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List of Definitions

Term	Definition
Circular Economy	“An economic model based inter alia on sharing, leasing, reuse, repair, refurbishment and recycling, in an (almost) closed loop, which aims to retain the highest utility and value of products, components and materials at all times.” (European Parliament, 2016)
Reuse	“The repeated use of a product or component for its intended purpose without significant modification.” (EMF, 2021)
Reusable Packaging	“Reusable packaging is packaging designed to be used multiple times for the same purpose for which it was conceived. While single-use packages are designed to be thrown away after one use, reuse systems employ a circular system where packaging can be used, cleaned, refilled, and reused, over and over again. Reusable packaging is not transformed for a different purpose, and it is supported by a functional system that enables the package to repeatedly serve the same purpose.” (WWF, 2022)
Recycling	“A resource recovery method involving the collection and treatment of a waste product for use as raw material in the manufacture of the same or a similar product” (European Environment Agency, 2000)



List of Abbreviations

CCL	Circular City Labs
CE	Circular Economy
DFFE	Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
DRS	Deposit Return System
DSI	Department of Science and Innovation
EMF	Ellen MacArthur Foundation
EPR	Extended Producer Responsibility
ESG	Environmental, Social, and Governance
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
IKU	BMZ Initiative for Climate and Environmental Protection
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
LGA	Local Government Authority
LGSETA	Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority
NWMS	National Waste Management Strategy
SA	South Africa
SAB	South African Breweries
SALGA	South African Local Government Association
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SUP	Single Use Plastic
UN	United Nations
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Programme
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature



Introduction

Globally, particularly in the Global North, the definition of reuse is generally recognised as WWF (2022) describes: *“Reusable packaging is designed to be used multiple times for the same purpose for which it was conceived[...] and it is supported by a functional system that enables the package to repeatedly serve the same purpose.”* UNEP echoes this view, distinguishing reuse from recycling and refill, and stressing that it takes place before an item is discarded, within systems of collection, cleaning, and redistribution. UNEP also aligns with the Basel Convention: *“Re-use refers to the using again of a product, object or substance that is not waste, for the same purpose for which it was conceived, without the necessity of repair or refurbishment.”* (UNEP n.d.).

By contrast, reuse in South Africa is understood and applied differently, with multiple framings. The National Environmental Management: Waste Act 59 of 2008 defines waste as “any substance, whether or not that substance can be reduced, re-used, recycled or recovered,” and adds that “any portion of waste, once re-used, recycled and recovered, ceases to be waste.” (Republic of South Africa, 2009). The National Waste Management Strategy 2020 (NWMS) states, “Recycling of waste for reuse and recovery of materials is prioritised over recovery of energy from waste,” (Department Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, 2021) which implies that reuse takes place after waste recovery, not as an upstream intervention in the circular economy. Similarly, the Circular Economy Guideline for the waste sector defines reuse as the use of whole products once their current users no longer need them, with testing or minor repairs to ensure performance in the next cycle (Department Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, 2020). Again, reuse is positioned as something that occurs after disposal rather than as a preventative system.

Despite South Africa’s circular economy ambitions, as outlined in the NWMS, reuse as a system-based activity receives little recognition in local government waste strategies. While the NWMS suggests municipalities should divert waste from landfill through interventions such as reuse, recovery, and recycling, in practice reuse is not promoted in line with WWF’s definition (Department Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, 2021). Local governments tend to encourage individual behaviour rather than systemic change. For example, the City of Cape Town promotes household-level actions such as reusing plastics and refillable containers. Its Smart Events Handbook, first edition developed in 2010, advises event organisers to purchase in bulk, use reusable glasses with refill dispensers, and reuse transport packaging (City of Cape Town, 2010). While practical, these remain isolated actions rather than part of an integrated system with collection, cleaning, and redistribution infrastructure. Few municipalities have developed operational reuse systems for packaging that can circulate repeatedly, largely due to structural barriers.

One obstacle is the framing of reuse in South African policy, which conflates it with recycling or refill. Reuse is frequently understood as “waste reuse” associated with the informal sector’s recovery of discarded goods, rather than as an intentional system to prevent waste (Godfrey et al. 2021b). This lack of clarity prevents targeted action and makes it difficult for municipalities to justify budgets for the WWF



definition of reuse infrastructure. Financial and capacity constraints further compound the issue. The NWMS highlights challenges in securing sustainable financing for waste services, and municipalities already struggle to meet minimum requirements for collection and disposal. Limited resources leave little room to develop integrated systems. Local governments are also overstretched with basic service delivery mandates, lacking the technical capacity to support more advanced circular initiatives (Department Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, 2021).

The absence of infrastructure is another barrier. Effective reuse requires systems for collection, cleaning, sanitising, redistribution, deposit-return schemes, consumer incentives, and labelling of reusable packaging. None of this is currently embedded within municipal service delivery, leaving reuse activities to be driven by the private sector rather than integrated into local government policy. Research and development into reuse in the South African context is also scarce, with little data, case studies, or literature available (ICLEI Africa, 2024; Mutereko, n.d.), limiting the evidence base for municipal planning.

Policy attention has also shifted towards substituting single-use plastics with biodegradable alternatives. While aligned with waste reduction goals, this emphasis diverts focus from developing reuse systems (Department Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, 2021). Recycling is similarly prioritised. Although the NWMS identifies “increase re-use, recycling and recovery rates” as a key intervention, proposed actions and targets concentrate on recycling, such as public procurement frameworks and material recovery facilities, with no operational reference to reuse. These further sidelines more upstream interventions.

For local governments to contribute meaningfully to the circular economy, the definition of reuse must be clarified, distinguished from recycling, and aligned with international standards. National frameworks should obligate municipalities to develop by-laws that incorporate reuse and provide guidance on the infrastructure required. Strengthening municipal capacity to deliver basic waste services, alongside targeted investment and grants for reuse systems, would free up resources for circular practices. Integrated waste management plans should be updated to include reuse explicitly, outlining infrastructure needs and practical pathways for implementation. Service delivery must also shift away from a predominant focus on disposal towards upstream interventions.

Whether implementing reuse systems falls squarely within municipal mandates remains uncertain. The critical question is how South African local governments can move beyond seeing reuse as a downstream activity, instead enabling it as an upstream principle within the circular economy, before products are discarded.



Background

What Is the Circular Economy?

The circular economy (CE) is a sustainable economic model that prioritises minimising waste and consumption by utilising resources more efficiently. Unlike the traditional linear economic model, it retains the value of resources in closed loops for as long as possible. This circular model promotes practices such as sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing, recovering and as a last resort recycling or composting products (European Parliament, 2016).

By maximising product lifespan and reducing resource consumption, the circular economy decreases greenhouse gas emissions and mitigates environmental pollution by preventing the generation of waste (EMF, 2019).

The circular economy is based on three principles driven by design:

- Eliminate waste and pollution,
- Circulate products and materials (at their highest value),
- Regenerate nature (EMF, 2019).

The Circular City Actions Framework (2021), developed by ICLEI, EMF, Circle Economy, and Metabolic, serves as a valuable tool for local governments and circular economy practitioners to drive systematic change at any phase of their city's transition towards circularity. The framework is structured around five key R strategies:

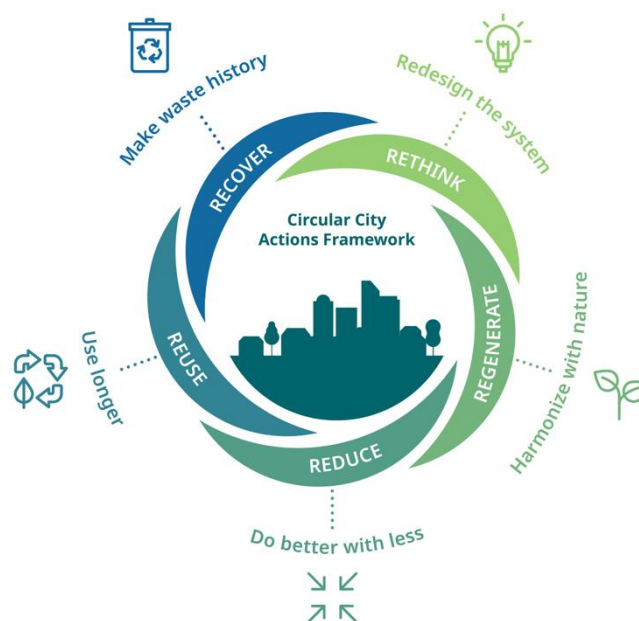


Figure 1: 5R Strategies from the Circular City Actions Framework (2021)



These strategies are defined as:

- **Rethink:** Redesign systems to lay the foundation for circular activities and enable the transition to a circular economy.
- **Regenerate:** Harmonise with nature by promoting infrastructure, production systems and sourcing that allows natural ecosystems to thrive.
- **Reduce:** Do better with less by using and supporting infrastructure, processes and products that are designed to minimise material, water and energy use and waste generation from production to end of use.
- **Reuse:** Use longer and more often by extending and intensifying use of existing resources, products, spaces and infrastructure.
- **Recover:** Eliminate waste by maximising the recovery of resources at the end of the use phase so that they can be reintroduced into production processes.

Why and How Should Local Government Support Circular Economy Development?

Local governments worldwide are facing increasing waste management and resource management challenges, driven by linear, extractive economic models. Although cities occupy only 3% of the planet's surface, urban areas produce around half of the waste generated globally, consume over two-thirds of resources, and emit more than 60% of global greenhouse gases (UNCCD and UN-Habitat, 2024; UN, 2020). Without systemic action, population growth will further exacerbate these problems.

The circular economy, therefore, provides a comprehensive systems change approach to resource and waste management in cities, with reuse initiatives significantly reducing the volumes of waste generated. Local governments are in a strong position to provide an enabling environment and promote the uptake of reuse by conducting public awareness campaigns on reuse, convening relevant stakeholders for the development of reuse systems, and supporting the development of collection and cleaning infrastructure for reusable solutions, among others.

Local Government have the potential to support circular economy and the prevention of waste (Circle Economy, 2019) by:

- **Using regulatory, economic, and soft tools in order to shape markets through rules, incentives, and education that enable circular activity.**
 - By regulating resource use, incentivising reuse and recycling, and educating citizens, municipalities can reduce the generation of waste at the source and promote more efficient material cycles.
- **Creating jobs with targeted policies in order to drive employment through regulatory and financial measures while sustaining activity with soft instruments.**
 - Jobs in repair, reuse, recycling, and remanufacturing industries help extend product lifespans and divert materials from disposal, lowering overall waste volumes.



- **Setting strategies and targets in order to guide businesses towards long-term circular planning and collaboration.**
 - Clear goals (e.g. for recycling rates or landfill reduction) push businesses and communities to design products and systems that minimise waste creation.
- **Providing finance and fostering networks in order to offer loans or subsidies and build knowledge-sharing platforms that strengthen circular initiatives.**
 - Financial support helps new circular businesses overcome entry barriers, while networks spread knowledge and collaboration, both of which enable more reuse, sharing, and material recovery instead of waste.

Cities are key sites of intervention for realisation of global sustainability because:

- Cities account for approximately 75% of global natural resources consumption (UNEP, n.d.)
- Cities generate 50% of the world's total waste (OECD, n.d.)
- Cities generate more than 60% of GHG emissions (UNCCD and UN-Habitat, 2024; UN, 2020)
- Cities concentrate residents, industry, consumption and knowledge

What is Reuse?

Ellen MacArthur Foundation's Circular Economy Glossary (2021) defines reuse as "the repeated use of a product or component for its intended purpose without significant modification." In the context of this document, reusable packaging becomes the focus. A more detailed definition is then found:

"Reusable packaging is designed to be used multiple times for the same purpose for which it was conceived. Reuse systems employ a circular system where packaging can be used, cleaned, refilled, and reused, over and over again. Reusable packaging is not transformed for a different purpose, and it is supported by a functional system that enables the package to repeatedly serve the same purpose." (WWF, 2022).

Reusable packaging systems can contribute substantially to mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and environmental pollution as they address the root causes of the packaging waste problem (EMF, 2019).



Framing the Context

Circular economy initiatives across South Africa are currently spread across various sectors and localities and are largely visible within the private sector as well as the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME) sector. The circular economy has been identified as an opportunity to support urban development and manage the country's resource constraints. The transition to the circular economy thus requires action from all stakeholders in governance, production, as well as consumption.

Although some local governments have started adopting circular economy principles and ideas, this is largely taking place from an administrative perspective, without being able to see the impact on the ground (yet). Despite political commitment to circular economy as an important paradigm¹, and emerging research on how to use CE as a transition tool, the country is yet to see a strong push for a circular economy implementation from national government, as well as political leadership in driving circular economy uptake.

Circular economy in South Africa:

- Currently reuse contributes only a small fraction of SA's circular economy compared to recycling (DFFE & DSI, 2020)
- Data on reuse economy remains scarce in SA (Lange et al., 2022)
- In SA only 2% of materials are being cycled back through circular economy activities (Blottnitz et al., 2021 cited in Godfrey, 2021a)
- SA stands to gain 3% GDP boost from the waste sector (Wijnberg, 2022).

¹ South Africa is a signatory to the African Circular Economy Alliance





Figure 2: CCL SA Mural Board

Growing The Reuse Economy In South Africa

Workshop Approach and Summary

Given the context outlined above, as well as previous research by ICLEI Africa on the state of the reuse sector in South Africa through a baseline titled *Circular Economy in South Africa: Opportunities for reusable packaging systems and women's participation*, published in early 2024, it became clear that further unpacking, interrogation, and engagement on the topic of reuse as well as the roles of public and private sector in advancing reuse was needed.

To tackle that, a series of invite-only workshops was developed.

These design-thinking workshops, running from February to August of 2025, were delivered primarily through the use of a living resource, held on the ICLEI Circulars² platform with an embedded Mural board,³ seen in figure 2. The Mural board was built by ICLEI Africa but co-developed during the workshoping process with invaluable inputs from each of the 118 local government representatives, reuse practitioners, and circular economy advocates who attended over the 6-month process. The final workshop, which was in person, used persona-mapping and role play to unpack different approaches to reuse. These were then lifted into the Mural for others to access.

The series of workshops were part of a broader initiative aimed at testing reusable packaging systems in South Africa that prevent waste pollution and empower women in the sector.

This series of workshops aimed to:

- Identify how to channel public sector focus to reuse and reusable packaging
- Identify pathways forward for LGA involvement in reuse economies
- Strengthen the role of public-private partnerships in the implementation of CE in South Africa.

The workshops highlighted the consensus that driving the transition from single-use to reuse requires a coordinated approach across government, business, and society. Awareness and education are foundational, with behavioural campaigns needed to shift entrenched cultural reliance on disposables and build consumer trust in reuse systems. Municipalities, while not solely responsible for delivery, can act as powerful enablers through procurement, by-laws, incentives, and partnerships that mainstream reuse in public life. At the same time, manufacturers and brands must play a pivotal role by designing reusable products and investing in shared infrastructure, while community engagement and the inclusion of waste pickers ensure initiatives that are both socially just and locally grounded.

² <https://circulars.iclei.org/circular-city-labs/circular-city-labs-south-africa/>

³

<https://app.mural.co/t/riseafrica0272/m/riseafrica0272/1737548978767/6f8838c8573b7a982fa65715bc8ef68ccf52827a?sender=u0021b8683054ada854337832>



However, systemic barriers persist. Fragmented policy, limited alignment between regulation and infrastructure, and underdeveloped Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks leave reuse overlooked in favour of recycling. International models offer practical guidance, but local adaptation requires stronger leadership, accountability, and reform of existing rules. To unlock scale, clear role definition across sectors, national standards for safety and quality, and financial incentives for businesses and households are critical. Ultimately, long-term success depends not only on regulatory frameworks but also on cultural and behavioural shifts, embedding reuse into everyday practice and ensuring that cross-sector collaboration transforms aspiration into lasting impact.

These findings and takeaways are unpacked in the sections below, and feed into the critical material that the consolidated pathways are comprised of.

Workshop One: Intercity Introductions to Reuse

The first workshop, held on 20 February 2025 with 32 participants from a diverse cohort of reuse practitioners, municipal representatives, and NGOs, set out to build a shared foundation of understanding among South African local government officials on the topic of reuse and reusable packaging systems. The session introduced the CCL project's aims, particularly its focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions through the promotion of reusable packaging and on strengthening women's participation in local circular economies. It provided participants with an overview of the project's objectives, a review of the baseline report, and critical statistics on the current state of reuse, while also establishing a common understanding of definitions and the specific role local governments play in enabling change. Framing South Africa's ongoing waste challenge, the workshop contextualised how municipalities can support systemic shifts towards reuse despite competing demands and resource constraints.

A key goal of the workshop was to strengthen understanding of the role of local governments in supporting reuse systems. However, participants identified several barriers: limited consumer awareness and cultural habits favouring single-use items, lack of government-level knowledge on refill and reuse models, institutional fragmentation, insufficient policy direction, and significant capacity and budget constraints which relegate reuse to being perceived as a "nice to have." Additional barriers included red tape hindering SME innovation, concerns around consumer misuse of refill containers, and industry-level inertia where many brands and manufacturers have yet to prioritise packaging redesign or embed environmental, social, and governance strategies.

Discussions also explored possible pathways forward. Participants highlighted the importance of championing reuse through municipal-led initiatives such as public awareness campaigns, integrating reuse requirements into event permits, and adopting circular procurement practices. They also pointed to the role of businesses and industry associations in driving systemic change, with brands and manufacturers recognised as crucial in offering consumers reuse options. Policy and regulation were identified as critical levers, from providing incentives to businesses, to strengthening the inclusion of informal waste pickers, and developing tamper-proof systems to ensure consumer safety. International examples, such as Paris' ban on single-use plastics at events and Munich's ordinances, were presented as



models that could be adapted to the South African context. In this way, the workshop began to chart a pathway for local governments, industry, and communities to collaborate in advancing a culture of reuse.

Key Takeaways from Workshop One

1. Awareness & Education are Foundational: Both consumers and government officials need stronger awareness of reuse benefits; behavioural change campaigns should target cultural habits of single-use reliance.
2. Local Government as an Enabler: Municipalities can mainstream reuse by embedding it into procurement practices, event permits, and awareness campaigns, despite limited resources.
3. Policy Alignment is Urgent: Fragmentation within local governments and lack of cohesive national policy hinder progress; coordinated leadership is essential.
4. Business Role is Pivotal: Manufacturers and brands must design and offer reusable options, creating the conditions for consumer uptake.
5. Global Models Provide Guidance: International examples, such as Paris and Munich, can be adapted to South African realities, offering practical regulatory pathways.

Workshop Two: Unlocking The Potential of Reuse Systems in South African Local Government

The second workshop, held on 21 May 2025 with a similarly diverse group of 21 participants, centred on identifying and unpacking city action levers for implementing reuse and reusable packaging systems. Building on the shared definitions and materials from the first workshop, as well as insights from the city peer-to-peer exchange and the WCEF2025 accelerator session, the discussion explored what reuse means at a city level and how it can be embedded into local service delivery. It further considered the role of reusable packaging systems in supporting municipal functions and examined how cities can create enabling conditions for reuse uptake by the private sector and other stakeholders. The session introduced participants to a policy tool shared during WCEF, designed to help cities navigate the complexity of implementing reuse systems within their mandates.

Case studies were used to ground the discussion in practical examples. Paris' zero single-use plastic events illustrated how a city can mobilise local authority levers, such as action plans, public-private partnerships, public space management, and financial incentives, to scale reuse across sectors. Locally, the Gcwalisa pilot in Alexandra demonstrated the potential for reuse initiatives in South African contexts. Together, these examples underscored the importance of both international learning and context-specific experimentation in advancing city-level reuse systems.

The workshop also surfaced a number of persistent challenges. Local governments continue to face capacity and governance constraints, with overstretched resources and a lack of coordinated approaches limiting readiness for refill systems. Consumer habits and trust remain barriers, with widespread scepticism about the safe handling of reusable packaging. Regulatory frameworks were described as ill-



fitted to refill models, inadvertently stifling innovation, while market gaps were evident in the limited ESG commitments by brands and the inability of reuse service providers to compete on cost with single-use plastics. Additional sector-specific barriers, such as health concerns, contamination risks, and inadequate infrastructure, further complicate uptake.

In considering possible pathways forward, participants emphasised the importance of consumer engagement through targeted campaigns, behavioural nudges, and community-led awareness initiatives. Policy tools were seen as critical, with proposals including by-laws mandating reuse at public events, deposit-return systems, and the allocation of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) funds towards reuse infrastructure like washing hubs and return bins. Financial levers, such as tax incentives for retailers offering refill options, were also discussed. Finally, cross-sector collaboration emerged as a central theme, with calls to integrate reuse into built environment planning, promote shared infrastructure among businesses, and strengthen public-private partnerships. Scaling successful pilots, such as Gcwalisa, Oranjezicht market, and Reusefy, with municipal backing was identified as a key opportunity to advance systemic change.

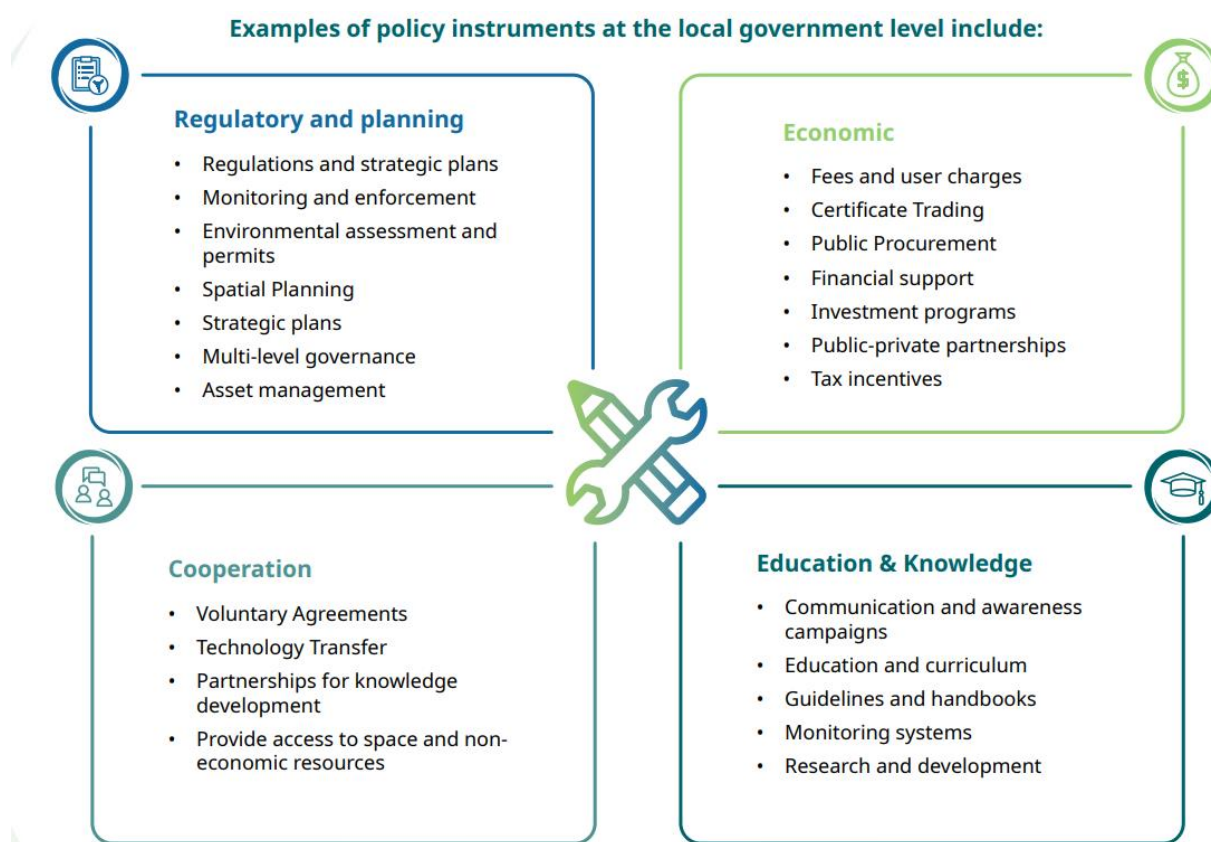


Figure 3: Examples of City Action Levers that are applicable to Reuse (ICLEI, 2021)



Key Takeaways from Workshop Two

1. **Cities Hold Key Levers:** Municipalities can act through by-laws, public procurement, incentives, and deposit-return schemes to accelerate reuse uptake.
2. **Case Studies Provide Proof Points:** Paris' zero-SUP events and the Gcwalisa pilot show that local authority interventions and partnerships can shift practice.
3. **Infrastructure & Regulation Need Alignment:** Current packaging rules constrain innovation; targeted regulatory reform and investment in reuse infrastructure (e.g., washing hubs) are required.
4. **Collaboration is Crucial:** Cross-sector partnerships, particularly between municipalities, businesses, and communities, are essential to share infrastructure and scale pilots.
5. **Consumer Trust Must Be Built:** Behavioural campaigns and community-led awareness are vital to overcoming distrust and habits around single-use.

Workshop Three: Roles And Responsibilities of The Public and Private Sector in Advancing Reuse

The third workshop, held on 10 July 2025 with 23 participants, focused on clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the public, private, and third sectors (NGOs, civil society, academia, etc.) in accelerating the uptake of reuse and reusable packaging systems. Building on the foundations laid in the first two workshops and the city action levers identified earlier, this session aimed to chart a clear path forward by unpacking sector-specific barriers and supports. Through breakout discussions, participants explored how each sector could contribute to advancing reuse, what support they required from one another, and how responsibilities might be shared to strengthen system-wide collaboration. The discussion was also framed in the context of global developments, such as the UN Plastic Treaty's work to define reusable packaging versus single-use plastics, underscoring the importance of early engagement even if systems may not initially operate efficiently.

The workshop highlighted the challenges facing the public sector, which included capacity constraints, lack of infrastructure, funding limitations, and difficulties integrating waste pickers into formal systems. Additional barriers involved low levels of household participation in source separation, behavioural change challenges, and the need to meet health and safety requirements affordably. Participants noted that municipalities are under increasing pressure due to rising landfill costs, positioning reuse as a valuable upstream solution. In order to succeed, the public sector requires private sector support in areas such as incentives to encourage household participation, alignment with waste regulations, and the development of economies of scale through clearer labelling, safety standards, and accountability mechanisms for retailers.

For the private sector, barriers included compliance difficulties with labelling and chemical safety, brand concerns around packaging visibility, and high logistical hurdles such as prohibitive minimum order



quantities. To overcome these issues, businesses were encouraged to invest collectively in shared pools of reusable packaging and to foster partnerships between established corporations and start-ups for testing and scaling innovation. Establishing an industry body dedicated to reuse was seen as essential for coordinating with regulators, lobbying for supportive policies, and addressing standardisation challenges. The sector also requires public sector engagement in shaping practical standards, regulatory flexibility to allow innovation, and incentives for smaller companies to meet requirements.

Across all discussions, persistent challenges identified in earlier workshops remained present: consumer habits, regulatory misalignment, lack of readiness within government, and economic constraints. Safety and compliance concerns also featured strongly, with incidents involving the misuse of refill containers fuelling public scepticism. Market fragmentation and resistance to shared systems were further barriers to scale.

Possible pathways forward emphasised clearer definition of roles: the public sector leading on regulation, infrastructure, and facilitation; the private sector driving supply chain innovation, shared system models, and R&D; and the third sector supporting advocacy and community engagement. Participants highlighted the need for stronger funding and incentives, including leveraging Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) fees, offering tax levers, and reducing red tape for SMEs. Standards and safety frameworks, such as national or ISO-aligned guidelines, were considered critical to building trust. Behavioural change strategies, including linking reuse to tangible rewards such as discounts or data vouchers, were proposed to improve uptake at household and community levels. Finally, scaling pilots through cross-venue standardisation and prioritising quick wins was recommended as a way to build early momentum and lay the groundwork for systemic adoption of reuse practices.

Key Takeaways from Workshop Three

1. **Clear Role Definition Across Sectors:** Public sector (regulation and infrastructure), private sector (innovation and systems), and third sector (advocacy and community engagement) must have aligned, complementary roles.
2. **Standards & Safety are Non-Negotiable:** National reuse/refill standards, aligned with ISO frameworks, are needed to build consumer confidence and ensure safe systems.
3. **Funding & Incentives Drive Adoption:** Leveraging EPR funds, offering tax incentives, and reducing red tape for SMEs can unlock participation and scale.
4. **Economies of Scale Require Shared Systems:** Collective industry investments and pooled infrastructure can address cost and logistical barriers.
5. **Behavioural Change Must Be Rewarded:** Incentives such as discounts or data vouchers linked to reuse can help shift household and community practices.



Workshop Four: The Future of South African Reuse Systems - A Design Thinking Workshop

The fourth and final instalment of the Circular City Labs (CCL) workshops, funded by GIZ, took place on 20 August 2025 at Victoria Yards in Johannesburg. Bringing together 42 participants from municipalities, the private sector, and civil society, the workshop explored practical approaches to advancing circular economy implementation in South African cities, with a particular emphasis on reuse systems and women's representation. The primary objective of the fourth workshop is to summarise and disseminate the findings from the previous three workshops as well as engage in brainstorming and ideation around reuse solutions in the South African context through a persona-based approach.

Following a fresh take on the collaborative nature of the previous workshops, the day's activities were structured around the fictional city of Motsedithabatau, or Thabatau for short, which faces mounting waste challenges but aspires to become a zero single-use city by 2030. Workshopping was centred on persona mapping and solution design for four fictional contexts for advancing reuse in Thabatau: The Church St inner-city food market, the Umngane90 ultra marathon event, the Grab-a-Bunch e-commerce platform, and the Tiago's Chicken fast-food chain. Participants used role-play to explore the challenges posed by single-use plastics in these settings and developed "How might we..." questions as a basis for reuse-focused solutions (game play can be found in Appendix A). From here, participants shared their pitches with the other workshop participants from the other contexts. The summary of these pitches can be found below:





Church Street Market – Skaftin Zone

What?

- Locally produced containers; bags; clothing.
- Market rules of no single use
- Reuse ambassadors and dedicated washing station with a team that goes between stalls
- Separation bins, education, awareness

Benefits?

- Culture of reuse, spread to homes
- Savings on single use packaging
- New jobs
- No environmental pollution
- Community ownership

How?

- Business model built around vendors, waste pickers
- Participatory engagement
- Market rules and bylaws
- Continuous education through practice
- Incentives through loyalty point from participation

Bonus:

- Industry development

Dedicated range of skaftins/clothing for the city to expand on





Grab-a-Bunch – “Don’t Trash it, Rehash it”

- Thabatau to set up an app for waste management for basic separation of wet from dry. Households are allocated bins with QR codes for each. Wet and dry collection happens on different days. Collection trucks scan whether households are separating appropriately. Households get GrabMiles to use on grab-a-bunch for participating continuously.
- In parallel, grab-a-bunch phases out cardboard boxes and starts rolling out multiple sizes of reusable crates for delivery. The crates also have a QR code that integrates with the Thabatau waste app. Crates can either be collected at the same moment as delivery within a time constraint or can be scanned for collection at a later stage. Timely return of the crates by customers gets GrabMiles for use on the grab-a-bunch platform.
- Grab-a-bunch in tandem commits to transitioning their fleet to electric motorbikes and vans.





Umngane90 – CupDrop

- Reusable cups and a variety of reusable items and refill stations placed along the course
- Collection bins for the cups that are placed along the course
- Reclaimer to be paid for delivering reusable cups back to the city
- The sponsor who covers the initial costs of the reusable cups
- Cups owned by the city for free use in future events
- Municipality to legislate single use plastics are more expensive
- Make people pay more for water that is in single use packaging
- Stakeholder meetings leading up to the event and lots of communication with the runners to ensure everyone understands the system
- Municipality to eventually ban production and import of single use plastics





Tiago's Chicken – Reuse Transformation

The Tiago's Chicken team considered solutions to successful reuse systems in the restaurant sector, considering the role of business founders, employees, service providers, regulatory bodies and customers.

The team pitched a Beyond Packaging proposal driven by a practical pathway towards a transition to reuse packaging solutions. The aim of this pitch was to get early momentum towards establishing reuse systems by:

- Reducing waste
- Prioritising food safety and environmental security
- Facilitating local economic development
- Strategically leveraging other R strategies (i.e. considering the broader circularity value chain concurrently)
- Optimising operational costs

With the above foundation and focal areas, the team designed a change intervention driven by data analysis and systems thinking.



Each of these solutions aimed to reduce waste, improve human and environmental health, and support the city's goal of eliminating single-use plastics by 2030.

Following the pitches, the room was opened for feedback and discussion on how the workshop's overview and activities could be reflected in the work of those in attendance.

Discussions highlighted several critical themes. On policy and governance, participants pointed to the limitations of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), which is currently focused on recycling rather than reuse, and called for reforms to integrate a more holistic circular economy approach. While reuse is not formally part of city mandates, municipalities were recognised as important enablers through their budgets, planning frameworks, and advocacy roles. Participants also raised concerns about transparency and accountability, noting that workshop learnings are often not carried through into municipal practice. Beyond policy, there was broad agreement on the importance of cultural and behavioural change. Several reflections emphasised returning to traditional practices of reuse, such as bringing personal containers for food purchases, alongside embedding reuse values in schools to influence younger generations. Visible leadership from mayors, CEOs, and national government was also seen as crucial to shifting attitudes and behaviours.

Service delivery emerged as another central issue, with participants highlighting the difficulty of translating reuse into the municipal service delivery lens. While financial and infrastructural challenges were acknowledged, the private sector was identified as a key partner in creating enabling environments for reuse. There was consensus that recycling, reuse, and recovery should not be treated in isolation but connected through integrated systems of waste minimisation. Social inclusion was also a recurring theme, with participants stressing the need to integrate waste pickers and reclaimers into circular economy initiatives to ensure livelihoods are not undermined. Some also called for national-level measures, such as banning problematic materials, to address waste more systematically.

Participant reflections illustrated these challenges and opportunities in practice. Rosina from the City of Cape Town acknowledged that reuse is more complex than initially assumed, requiring supportive policies beyond current recycling-focused efforts. Rendani and Loganathan from eThekweni stressed how personal experience shapes solution design, while also noting the difficulties of translating ideas into practice and the importance of visible advocacy. Julian from Rustenburg underscored the value of returning to traditional reuse practices, while Tshepo from Fezile Dabi highlighted the need for EPR reform to encompass reuse. Gather from Ga-Segonyana warned of weak accountability in following through on commitments, and Bala from SALGA emphasised both the principle of “leaving no one behind” and the need for national interventions to address waste production directly.

In closing, participants reflected on the broader implications of the workshop. They identified a leadership gap in circular economy implementation and a risk of policy remaining aspirational without concrete follow-through. The importance of measuring small wins was stressed as a way of building momentum, while recognition was given to the fact that reuse is not a standalone solution but part of a wider system involving recycling, recovery, and reduction. Overall, the workshop reinforced that while barriers remain,



circular economy interventions - if supported by governance reform, cultural shifts, and inclusive planning - can play a transformative role in building sustainable South African cities.

Key Takeaways from Workshop Four

1. **Policy Gaps and EPR Reform:** Current Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks are too narrowly focused on recycling, leaving reuse overlooked. Stronger, more integrated policies are needed to link reuse, recycling, and recovery, while ensuring that municipalities have the tools and mandates to act.
2. **Leadership and Accountability are Lacking:** There is a significant gap between policy discussions and implementation. Without visible leadership, ongoing advocacy, and mechanisms for accountability, valuable workshop learnings risk remaining aspirational instead of driving real change.
3. **Cultural and Behavioural Shifts are Crucial:** Reuse cannot succeed through policy alone; it requires a societal shift. Returning to traditional practices of reuse, embedding reuse values in schools, and shifting consumer behaviour are essential for long-term impact.
4. **Inclusion of Waste Pickers and Communities:** Transforming the waste sector must be inclusive. Excluding waste pickers and reclaimers from new reuse systems risks undermining their livelihoods, while community engagement is critical to ensure initiatives are accepted and adopted.
5. **Cities as Enablers, Not Sole Implementers:** Although reuse is not part of city mandates, municipalities can play a pivotal enabling role by creating supportive policy environments, aligning budgets, and engaging private sector partners to mainstream reuse within urban service delivery.





Cross-Cutting Learnings from The Workshop Series

The workshop series was deliberately structured so that information to one built on the other. The first workshop introduced the concept of reuse, framing its challenges and opportunities within the South African context. The second moved into the practical levers available to local governments, using case studies to demonstrate how city action could enable systemic change. The third clarified sector-specific roles, responsibilities, and opportunities for collaboration, while also surfacing shared barriers across stakeholders. The final workshop consolidated these insights, using design-thinking exercises to explore future scenarios and co-develop practical solutions. Taken together, the series created a layered progression, from shared understanding to practical levers, to role definition, and finally to visioning and solution design - laying the groundwork for the consolidated pathways outlined later in the document.

The cross-cutting learnings from the workshop series highlight that building a reuse economy in South Africa requires coordinated, multi-stakeholder action that addresses both structural and cultural barriers. Across all four sessions, a strong consensus emerged that awareness and behavioural change are foundational. Entrenched habits of reliance on single-use packaging cannot be shifted through policy alone; rather, they require infrastructure and systems paired with deliberate consumer education campaigns, visible advocacy from leaders, and community-driven initiatives that build trust in the value and applicability of reuse. Embedding these shifts into schools and cultural practices was seen as critical for long-term success, creating a new social norm where reuse is the default, not the exception.

Another key theme was the role of municipalities as enablers rather than sole implementers. While local governments face capacity, budgetary, and institutional constraints, they hold important levers such as public procurement, by-laws, and event permits that can help normalise reuse in public life. The workshops demonstrated that, although cities lack a direct mandate to implement reuse systems, they are well-positioned to create enabling environments through supportive regulation, awareness-raising, and partnerships. International examples, like Paris' zero single-use plastic events, combined with local pilots such as Gcwalisá's expansion, show how municipal leadership can unlock practical pathways for scaling. However, this requires overcoming fragmentation and policy misalignment at national and local levels, as well as reforming Extended Producer Responsibility frameworks that currently prioritise recycling over reuse.

The workshops also reinforced the pivotal role of the private sector in designing, funding, and mainstreaming reuse. Brands and manufacturers are essential in driving packaging redesign, investing in infrastructure such as washing hubs, and supporting innovation through partnerships with start-ups and SMEs. Industry collaboration, including shared systems and collective investment in reusable packaging pools, was repeatedly highlighted as necessary to achieve economies of scale and lower costs. At the same time, clear national standards for safety, labelling, and compliance were seen as critical to build consumer confidence and avoid confusion. Without these, both households and businesses will remain hesitant to commit to reuse.



Finally, inclusivity and accountability were persistent cross-cutting concerns. The informal sector, through waste pickers and reclaimers, must be integrated into reuse systems to ensure that livelihoods are not undermined and that circular economy practices are socially just - recognising the historic heavy lifting these individuals and civil societies have been doing for material management. Similarly, accountability mechanisms are needed to ensure that ideas generated in workshops and commitments signalled by governments and organisations are translated into municipal practice and business operations. Across all sessions, the importance of linking reuse to broader systemic change, connecting it with reduction, and recovery, was emphasised. The series thus underscores that while systemic barriers remain, coordinated leadership, infrastructure development, policy reform, inclusive planning, and cultural change can together transform aspiration into sustained impact for South Africa's reuse economy.



Reuse in Action: Gcwalisa Case Study

In parallel to the work being carried out for CCL by ICLEI Africa, Plastics SA hosted a reuse accelerator and a reuse pilot project. While the accelerator engaged a number of businesses, the pilot was rolled out together with Gcwalisa⁴. Gcwalisa, meaning 'to fill' in isiZulu, is working to provide access to nutritious food and affordable household goods by addressing 'poverty tax' through their weigh-and-pay model, currently operating in Alexandra in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Gcwalisa, aimed to expand on their existing refill model and add on a reuse system. The pilot was designed to test and refine a reusable packaging model that could reduce reliance on single-use plastics while offering affordable access to everyday essentials. The initiative sought not only to address environmental sustainability but also to empower women in township communities through job creation and active participation in a circular economy.

The pilot was more than a technical trial, it was a demonstration of how reuse systems could become embedded in local retail ecosystems, particularly in Alexandra, and provide a replicable model for broader adoption.

The pilot had three key objectives:

1. Sustainability: Reduce single-use plastics through a viable reusable packaging system.
2. Affordability & Accessibility: Make essential goods more cost-effective for local households.
3. Community Empowerment: Create economic opportunities for young women and establish community-driven retail solutions

The pilot focused on two key product categories: household staples such as sugar beans, rice, maize meal, and sunflower oil, and cleaning products including detergents, dishwashing liquid, and bleach. Customers were able to purchase these goods in reusable packaging, which they could return for a cashback incentive. To support adoption, four young women from Alexandra were employed as full-time ambassadors whose role was to engage with shoppers, explain the process, and encourage participation.

The results demonstrated encouraging levels of adoption and engagement. There were 1,562 first purchases and 1,470 returns logged, with only four damaged items. The average return rate was just over 35% of unique purchases, a figure that falls within the expected window for new habit formation, as behavioural research suggests it takes around 66 days, or two to three months, for habits to take root. Importantly, 71% of existing loyalty card holders purchased at least one product in reusable packaging during the pilot, and the overall packaging return rate surpassed 60%.

Community and customer engagement were also notable. The initiative generated over 1,000 in-person interactions, while its social media reach extended to 165,400 views, 15,700 likes, and 299 comments. Women emerged as the primary participants, with 81% of users identifying as female, reinforcing the

⁴ <https://www.gcwalisa.com/>



central role women play as household shoppers and community change agents. Local accessibility was another defining feature, as 94% of participants walked to the store, highlighting the importance of convenience while also reducing transport emissions.

Customer motivations further illustrated the appeal and challenges of reuse. The primary driver was cashback, cited by 51% of participants, though environmental concern (26%) and convenience (16%) also played significant roles. The ambassadors proved to be the most influential channel for participation, encouraging 74% of customers to take part, far outpacing in-store operators, social media, or word-of-mouth. Looking forward, participants indicated that higher financial incentives, such as greater cashback or alternative rewards like airtime and points, would encourage them to return more consistently. Digital nudges, such as WhatsApp reminders, also showed potential for supporting behavioural reinforcement.

Key lessons:

1. Behavioural Reinforcement is Essential: Customers require 2-5 months of consistent reminders before reuse becomes habitual. Ongoing encouragement is critical.
2. Small Rewards Drive Habit Formation: Cashback and small incentives reinforce positive behaviours and help embed reuse as a norm.
3. Ambassadors are the Backbone: Personalised engagement was the most effective channel. Continued investment in ambassador training and operator buy-in is vital.

The Gcwalisa pilot successfully demonstrated that a reusable packaging model can work in township communities, achieving strong customer participation, creating meaningful economic opportunities for women, and sparking both local and online engagement. While adoption remains at an early stage, the pilot indicates clear potential for scale, particularly if supported by sustained customer reinforcement, improved reward structures, and the continued empowerment of ambassadors. Far from an end point, this pilot marks the beginning of a scalable, community-led journey towards a circular economy.



GCWALI SA



Consolidated Pathways: Accelerating Reuse in South Africa

The consolidated pathways for scaling reuse in South Africa are structured in response to the outcomes of the workshop series and some of the results from the Gcwalisa-PlasticsSA pilot. They are built on the recognition that reusable packaging systems offer a powerful opportunity to reduce packaging waste, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and strengthen local economies, all while empowering women and integrating informal sector workers. At the same time, these pathways must contend with South Africa's institutional realities: fragmented governance, capacity constraints, infrastructure limitations, entrenched consumer behaviours, and regulatory systems that often lag behind innovation.

For this reason, the pathways are presented not as a prescriptive checklist but as a flexible roadmap that acknowledges dependencies, political hurdles, and the need for adaptive sequencing. The intent is to balance urgency with realism, providing concrete entry points for action while recognising that progress will require negotiation, leadership, and iterative learning. The guiding principles remain ensuring safety; promoting equity and access; fostering multi-sector collaboration; and establishing locally led but nationally applicable guidelines that enable interoperability between systems.

What Are the Priority Challenges to Untangle?

Several critical challenges must be addressed before reuse can take root at scale:

- Institutional fragmentation: Municipalities lack coordinated leadership on circular economy implementation, and national policies on reuse remain underdeveloped. Passing by-laws or allocating budgets is therefore slow, often delayed by competing service delivery priorities.
- Capacity and resources: Many municipalities already struggle to meet basic waste service obligations. Staff are overstretched, budgets are tight, and skills for developing new reuse systems are scarce.
- Market inertia: Brands and retailers often prioritise waste management or recycling over reuse, and reuse service providers cannot yet compete with the low cost of single-use plastics. The absence of economies of scale hampers growth. This is coupled with an overall lack of formal CE and ESG commitments.
- Consumer trust: Cultural habits favour disposability, and there is low public confidence in the hygiene and safety of reusable packaging, particularly in food and beverage contexts.
- Infrastructure gaps: Washing hubs, return bins, and tamper-proof packaging systems are limited. Without capital investment, most reuse pilots risk remaining small-scale.
- Policy misalignment: Regulations designed for recycling or disposal do not yet accommodate refill or reuse, and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes are not structured to support reuse infrastructure.

These challenges highlight that accelerating reuse requires not only technical fixes but also political will, cultural shifts, and systemic investment.



What Are the Select Pathways for Action?

The pathways are structured into three overlapping phases that will play out differently across municipalities and sectors depending on political readiness and resource availability. Actors, roles, dependencies and risks are also interlinked.

Here we see that national government must set standards, legislate frameworks, and direct funding, though progress is often slowed by competing priorities and limited enforcement. Municipalities are then central to piloting and enabling reuse through by-laws and infrastructure but face resource and capacity constraints. Local government associations must support knowledge-sharing and provide templates, though uptake depends on voluntary municipal action. The private sector drives system design and investment yet may resist shared solutions or favour recycling over reuse. Start-ups and service providers bring innovation but rely on capital and partnerships to avoid collapse. The informal sector, particularly waste pickers, plays a critical role in collection and trust-building but risks exclusion if not formally integrated. Finally, consumers and civil society hold power to normalise reuse and hold institutions accountable, though scepticism and ingrained single-use habits remain significant barriers.

While the phases in Table 2 recognise that adaptive sequencing may be required rather than a linear roll-out, Table 1 breaks down roles that need to be embodied in order to advance reuse in South Africa.

Table 1. Actors and roles in advancing reuse in South Africa

Actor	Role	Dependencies	Risks
National Government (Key Departments)	Set national standards, legislate supportive frameworks, direct EPR allocations.	Alignment across departments; political leadership; budget availability.	Slow legislative timelines; competing policy priorities; limited enforcement capacity.
Municipalities	Draft by-laws, implement pilots, provide local infrastructure, engage communities.	Technical support from SALGA and DFFE; cross-department coordination (waste, health, planning).	Political turnover; overstretched staff; lack of financial resources to maintain systems.
Local government associations (SALGA, SACN, etc)	Facilitate knowledge-sharing across municipalities, provide templates for by-laws.	Mandate from members; collaboration with DFFE.	Limited enforcement; reliance on voluntary municipal uptake.
Private Sector (brands, retailers, logistics providers)	Finance, co-design, and operate reuse systems; invest in interoperable packaging.	Regulatory clarity; economic incentives (subsidies, tax breaks).	Resistance to shared pool systems; prioritisation of recycling over reuse due to lower upfront costs.



Reuse/Refill Service Providers & Start-ups	Innovate and deliver washing, logistics, and digital tracking solutions.	Access to capital; partnerships with retailers and municipalities.	Risk of collapse without subsidies; limited capacity to scale nationally.
Informal Sector (waste pickers, reclaimers)	Collect, manage, and return reusable items; act as champions for community trust.	Inclusion in formal contracts; training and safety standards. Need to be collaborated with.	Marginalisation if systems are formalised without their participation; loss of livelihood.
Consumers & Civil Society	Adopt and normalise reuse practices; hold government and business accountable.	Incentives, awareness campaigns, affordable and accessible reuse options.	Consumer scepticism around hygiene; limited willingness to pay deposits or change behaviour.

These phases cover roughly the next 1 to 5 years. This timeline may seem short to some, but it is intended to motivate for the urgency of action related to circular economy implementation and the acceleration of reuse systems in order to address plastic proliferation; limited space in landfills; and associated GHG emissions.

These pathways are designed as a practical roadmap for both public and private sector actors. It sets out a phased approach: short-term (0-1 year), medium-term (1-3 years), and long-term (3-5 years) to guide stakeholders from early awareness-building and pilot projects through to the establishment of infrastructure, standards, and policies that enable systemic reuse. Each phase outlines clear focus areas, including education and consumer incentives, regulatory reform, infrastructure development, and cross-sector collaboration, making it possible for organisations to situate their efforts within a broader national transition.

To apply this section effectively, users should first identify their role, whether as municipalities, businesses, civil society, or informal sector partners - and then select the actions most relevant to their capacity and mandate. The tables and guidance provided can be used to shape policies, align investments, or design local initiatives that contribute to scaling reuse. Taken together, the pathways serve as both a planning tool for immediate action and a reference guide for tracking progress towards an inclusive and resilient reuse system across South Africa.

The actions to be taken forward by these actors in their roles are summarised in the following table and expanded on in the section below.



Table 2: Select Pathways for Action to Advance Reuse in South Africa

Pathway	Focus Areas	Actions	Who is Leading	Who is Supporting
Short-term (0–1 year): Laying the Groundwork	Education & Knowledge	Awareness campaigns; training municipal “reuse champions”.	Municipalities, NGOs	Civil society groups, private sector
	Regulatory & Planning	Develop template by-laws; draft national guidelines on packaging standards.	SALGA, DFFE	Municipalities
	Cooperation	Establish cross-departmental municipal task teams; coordinate stakeholders across SALGA, DFFE, Treasury, private sector.	Municipalities, SALGA	National government, civil society
	Economic	Secure commitments to ring-fence EPR funds; explore donor and corporate co-financing.	DFFE, Treasury	Producer Responsibility Organisations, private sector
	Implementation	Institutionalise ownership across departments to avoid reliance on individuals.	Municipalities	SALGA, DFFE
Medium-term (1–3 years): Testing and Building Systems	Education & Knowledge	Systematic evaluation of pilots; feed learnings into policy.	Municipalities, SALGA	NGOs, academia
	Regulatory & Planning	Apply interoperability guidelines within pilots; adapt municipal by-laws.	DFFE, municipalities	SABS, private sector
	Cooperation	Integrate informal reclaimers with contracts, training, and safety standards.	Municipalities, NGOs, informal reclaimers	Private sector, civil society
	Economic	Provide tax incentives/subsidies for SMEs and retailers adopting reuse.	Treasury, DTI	Business associations, DFFE, municipalities



	Implementation	Launch targeted pilots (spaza shops, events, food outlets); operationalise washing hubs and return systems.	Municipalities, SMEs, private sector	Civil society, reuse service providers
Long-term (3–5 years): Institutionalising and Scaling	Education & Knowledge	Long-term consumer engagement campaigns; embed reuse in everyday practice.	National government (DFFE)	NGOs, private sector, municipalities
	Regulatory & Planning	Scale deposit-return systems nationally; mandate reuse in high-waste sectors; embed monitoring and reporting frameworks.	DFFE, Treasury	Municipalities, SALGA, informal reclaimers, civil society
	Cooperation	Create shared pool systems coordinated by a Reuse/Refill Industry Body with government oversight.	Private sector (brands, retailers)	DFFE, NGOs, municipalities
	Economic	Ring-fence EPR allocations for reuse infrastructure, incentives, and monitoring.	DFFE, Producer Responsibility Organisations	Treasury, municipalities
	Implementation	Expand infrastructure; institutionalise reuse in law and EPR frameworks.	National government, private sector	Municipalities, NGOs, civil society

Short Term: Laying the Groundwork (0-1 year)

Objective: Build readiness through institutional, policy, and cultural foundations.

The initial phase's emphasis is on creating readiness, developing the institutional scaffolding, and initiating early public engagement. The first phase is about creating an enabling environment that allows later interventions to succeed - putting in place the essential conditions that make future action possible. South Africa's institutional landscape is highly fragmented, and municipalities often face capacity and funding constraints that make new initiatives difficult to sustain. Without clear frameworks, early coordination, and shared responsibility across departments, reuse risks being tied to individual champions whose departure could halt progress altogether. By concentrating on preparatory activities such as drafting



templates for by-laws, commitments to EPR funding, and initiating awareness campaigns, this phase helps to build resilience into the system. It creates institutional continuity, ensures that knowledge is embedded across multiple actors, and begins shaping public attitudes before infrastructure or services are in place.

Actions

- Coordinate stakeholders across municipalities, SALGA, DFFE, Treasury, industry, and civil society to agree on objectives and responsibilities.
- Develop and circulate template by-laws and national guidelines on packaging interoperability, hygiene standards, and monitoring.
- Establish municipal task teams that cut across departments (waste, health, planning, finance), ensuring responsibility does not sit with a single person or office.
- Secure commitments to eventually ring-fence a portion of EPR funds for reuse and explore co-financing models with donors and corporates.
- Begin early consumer awareness and engagement campaigns to normalise the idea of reuse.
- Identify and train municipal “reuse champions,” while ensuring knowledge and responsibility are shared institutionally.

Dependencies

- Political will and leadership to prioritise reuse amidst competing municipal demands.
- Alignment between SALGA, DFFE, and municipalities.

Risks

- Over-reliance on a small number of champions; loss of momentum if they move on.
- Preparatory activities deprioritised if not linked to visible outcomes.

Medium-term: Testing and Building Systems (1–3 years)

Objective: Deliver targeted pilots supported by institutional backing.

Once preparatory work is complete, pilots can be introduced in selected contexts. These should be carefully designed to test multiple system elements, supported by adequate resources, and framed as learning opportunities that inform policy and practice. This period is not just about testing consumer behaviour, but also about stress-testing governance arrangements, financial flows, and operational logistics. By situating pilots in everyday contexts such as spaza shops, events, and food outlets, the focus is on making reuse accessible, visible, and practical. At the same time, broader reforms, including subsidies for SMEs, early interoperability standards, and the integration of informal reclaimers, ensure that pilots feed directly into systemic change rather than remaining isolated experiments. This balance of experimentation and institutional embedding helps bridge the gap between proof of concept and long-term viability.



Actions

- Launch targeted pilots in spaza shops, events, and food service outlets, linked to consumer incentives (e.g. deposits, discounts, loyalty points).
- Operationalise washing hubs and return systems, designed for hygiene and accessibility.
- Introduce early interoperability guidelines for packaging within pilots, building proof of concept for broader adoption.
- Provide tax incentives or subsidies to SMEs and retailers adopting reuse.
- Begin integrating informal reclaimers into reuse pilots with formal contracts, safety standards, and training.
- Evaluate pilots systematically and feed learnings into municipal by-laws and national standards.

Dependencies

- Regulatory flexibility to allow pilots and adapt existing systems.
- Continued resourcing from EPR funds, and private sector actors.

Risks

- Pilots fail if not properly resourced or institutionally supported.
- Industry resistance to shared standards and pooled systems.
- Elections or personnel changes cause delays in scaling.

Long-term: Institutionalising and Scaling (3–5 years)

Objective: Mainstream reuse across sectors, supported by policy and industry-wide collaboration.

The final phase is about moving from demonstration to integration, ensuring reuse is not a niche practice but a recognised part of the circular economy. This requires institutionalising reuse in law, embedding it in EPR systems, and scaling through industry-wide collaboration. Achieving this requires strong political leadership at national and municipal levels, as well as industry-wide collaboration to establish shared pool systems and interoperable packaging standards. It also depends on ring-fencing financial resources through EPR, ensuring that reuse infrastructure and consumer incentives are adequately funded over the long term. Importantly, this phase is not only about scaling the visible elements of reuse but about embedding it into governance and cultural practice so that it becomes part of everyday life. Success will mean reuse is no longer seen as a niche innovation, but as a practical and expected way of managing packaging in South Africa's circular economy.

Actions

- Scale deposit-return schemes nationally, with clear cost-recovery mechanisms.
- Create shared pool systems coordinated by a dedicated Reuse/Refill Industry Body, with oversight from the government.
- Mandate reuse in selected high-waste sectors (fast food, events, retail packaging).



- Ring-fence EPR allocations specifically for reuse infrastructure, consumer incentives, and monitoring.
- Establish robust monitoring systems to track adoption, inclusivity, and environmental outcomes.
- Continue long-term consumer engagement to build cultural trust and shift everyday behaviours.

Dependencies

- National policy commitment and reform of EPR frameworks.
- Corporate commitment to interoperable systems and co-investment.

Risks

- Weak enforcement undermines compliance.
- Consumer pushback if systems are not accessible, convenient, or affordable.
- Capture of reuse systems by large corporations, marginalising SMEs and informal actors.

How Do We Measure Success?

Measuring success for reuse in South Africa must reflect whether the enabling conditions for systemic change are in place, whether government and industry have institutionalised their commitments, and whether consumers and communities are adopting reuse practices as part of daily life. The indicators below are structured to align with the phased pathways for action:

By end of year 1:

- Institutional readiness: # of municipalities with cross-departmental task teams established.
- Policy preparation: # of template by-laws and national guidelines drafted and shared.
- Funding commitments: # commitments to ring-fence EPR funds for future reuse-related activities.
- Capacity building: # of municipal staff and reuse “champions” trained.
- Public engagement: % of consumers reached by awareness campaigns introducing reuse concepts.

By end of year 3:

- Pilot activity: # of pilots launched in priority areas (spaza shops, events, food outlets) and percentage that meet inclusion and equity criteria.
- Infrastructure: # of decentralised washing hubs and return systems operational.
- Policy alignment: # of municipalities that have adopted reuse-supportive by-laws
- Market incentives: ZAR value and uptake of subsidies/tax incentives by SMEs and retailers for reuse.
- Equity integration: % of informal reclaimers formally engaged in reuse initiatives, with safety and training provisions.
- Funding: # of EPR funds ring-fenced for reuse-related activities.
- Consumer uptake: # of consumers participating in reuse pilots, including return rates and redemption of deposits/incentives.



By end of year 5:

- Policy integration: # of high-waste sectors with mandated reuse requirements in place.
System expansion: % of beverage and food packaging covered under deposit-return schemes nationally.
- Industry cooperation: Existence and functioning of a Reuse/Refill Industry Body coordinating pooled systems.
- Funding stability: % of EPR funds consistently allocated to reuse infrastructure and consumer incentives.
- Socio-economic impact: # of women and informal workers integrated into formal reuse systems;
of jobs created in reuse related activities
- Cultural adoption: % of consumers reporting regular use of reuse systems in daily life.
- Environmental outcome: % of single-use packaging waste going to landfill.

The overall impact of reuse in South Africa will be measured by % reduction in single-use packaging waste (tonnage) and % CO₂ emissions reduction.



Conclusion

Advancing the uptake of reuse in South Africa is no longer a question of isolated pilots but of building systemic, multi-stakeholder pathways that address both structural barriers and cultural habits. Municipalities hold critical enabling levers through procurement, by-laws, public awareness, and partnership-building. Their role is to create the policy, financial, and infrastructural conditions under which reuse can move from niche practice to mainstream urban service delivery.

The private sector must go further than innovation alone: collective investment in interoperable packaging, shared infrastructure, and industry-wide standards will be key to achieving economies of scale. By pooling resources and collaborating across established corporations and start-ups, businesses can help normalise reuse in ways that are both affordable and accessible. In parallel, the informal sector must be integrated into formal reuse systems, recognising their existing contributions and ensuring that circular economy transitions are socially just.

Civil society, NGOs, and community organisations remain vital drivers of advocacy, behaviour change, and trust-building. By embedding reuse into cultural norms, schools, and community livelihoods, these actors ensure that reuse is not only a technical intervention but also a social movement. Their efforts help anchor systemic reforms in local realities, keeping inclusivity, equity, and empowerment at the centre.

Together, these coordinated efforts can advance the short-, medium-, and long-term pathways identified in this document: from laying the groundwork with awareness campaigns and template by-laws, to testing reuse through pilots and washing hubs, to institutionalising national standards, shared pool systems, and mandated reuse in high-waste sectors. Success will depend not only on technical solutions but also on visible leadership, accountability mechanisms, and cultural and behavioural shifts.

If municipalities, businesses, and communities align their priorities and resources, reuse can become a driver of environmental resilience, social equity, and economic opportunity. Embedding reuse into everyday practice offers South Africa the chance to move decisively towards a circular economy - one where cities are not only cleaner and greener, but also more inclusive, resilient, and future-ready.



Written reflections

Siyathemba Silungile Ncube - Green Economy Project Manager, City of eThekweni

Advancing Sustainability in eThekweni: Enforcing Plastic Reuse at Major Events to Support the Green Economy

eThekweni Municipality, encompassing the city of Durban, is a vibrant urban centre known for hosting large-scale events at iconic venues such as the Durban International Convention Centre, the Moses Mabhida Stadium, the Greyville Racecourse and the beachfront. These events, while economically beneficial to the city, generate substantial plastic waste, much of which ends up in landfills or pollutes the marine environment. In response to these environmental and economic challenges, eThekweni has adopted a Green Economy strategy led by the Economic Development Unit and supported by the Cleansing and Solid Waste Unit. This paper explores how enforcing the reuse of plastic at major events can significantly contribute to waste reduction, enhance service delivery, and support the municipality's broader sustainability goals.

Large events in Durban attract thousands of attendees, generating high volumes of single-use plastic waste, primarily from food packaging, beverage containers and promotional materials. Despite existing recycling initiatives, most of this waste is not recovered due to contamination, lack of infrastructure or limited public compliance. The environmental consequences are serious, ranging from increased pressure on landfills and marine pollution to blocked drainage systems that have contributed to recent urban flooding, as well as the visual degradation of public spaces. The concept of plastic reuse offers a more sustainable alternative to recycling. Whereas recycling often involves energy-intensive processes, reuse extends the life of products through repeated use, thereby reducing the demand for new plastic production and minimising waste generation.

Implementing a plastic reuse strategy at the Durban International Convention Centre, the Moses Mabhida Stadium and beachfront events present several practical and economic opportunities. Vendors could be required to use reusable cups, plates and containers, supported by deposit-return systems that encourage attendees to return items for cleaning and reuse. Reusable items could be branded with event logos or sponsor names, delivering marketing value while promoting sustainability. This not only enhances the visibility of sponsors but also extends the lifespan of the plastic products themselves. Local cooperatives could manage the cleaning and redistribution of reusable items, creating employment opportunities and supporting the informal economy. A substantial decrease in single-use plastics would also reduce the volume of waste collected and processed by the Cleansing and Solid Waste Unit, thereby lowering operational costs.



The Economic Development Unit of eThekweni Municipality has adopted a Green Economy strategy that emphasises inclusive growth, job creation and environmental sustainability. According to the 2025/26 Draft Budget Statement, the city is investing in catalytic projects that stimulate business activity and create informal jobs. This strategy is underpinned by a focus on green jobs in sectors such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and waste management; on the circular economy, with systems that promote reuse, repair and recycling to minimise waste; and on climate resilience, ensuring that infrastructure and economic systems are able to withstand environmental shocks. The Cleansing and Solid Waste Unit supports this strategy by implementing waste minimisation programmes and exploring innovative waste-to-energy solutions. The 2025/26 budget allocates R2.4 billion to this unit, including R454 million for community-based contractors, signalling a strong commitment to inclusive service delivery.

Plastic reuse aligns seamlessly with eThekweni's Green Economy goals and offers strategic benefits across multiple areas. Establishing centralised cleaning facilities for reusable plastics could create employment in low-income communities, while training programmes would upskill workers in logistics, hygiene and quality control. Local entrepreneurs could also benefit by developing reusable product lines or managing logistics for reuse systems at events. The municipality could attract green investment by positioning Durban as a leader in sustainable event management. Public campaigns would further shift consumer behaviour, encouraging residents and visitors alike to embrace reuse over single-use plastics. With landfill sites nearing capacity and disposal costs rising, reuse would significantly ease landfill pressure by reducing waste volumes at source. Items designed for repeated use could last dozens or even hundreds of cycles before disposal, generating cost savings through fewer collection trips, lower landfill fees and reduced environmental remediation costs.

Plastic reuse also has the potential to enhance municipal service delivery. Cleaner public spaces would improve the aesthetic appeal and hygiene of the city, enhancing the experience of residents and tourists. More efficient waste management would allow the Cleansing and Solid Waste Unit to allocate resources more effectively. Reduced plastic pollution would also help mitigate public health risks by lowering the likelihood of vector-borne diseases and contamination of water sources.

Examples from elsewhere demonstrate that reuse systems are both feasible and effective when backed by strong policy and public engagement. San Francisco banned single-use plastic bottles at city events and introduced reusable alternatives, achieving high compliance through education and enforcement. Amsterdam applies a deposit-return system for reusable cups at festivals, reaching return rates of over 90 per cent. In South Africa, Cape Town has piloted reusable food containers at community markets with the support of local NGOs and businesses. These case studies illustrate that reuse can be scaled successfully when supported by infrastructure, regulation and public awareness.

To institutionalise plastic reuse, eThekweni Municipality could establish a clear regulatory framework mandating the use of reusable plastics at municipal events and venues, supported by penalties for non-compliance and incentives for early adopters. Collaboration with event organisers, hospitality businesses and NGOs could strengthen public-private partnerships in developing reuse systems. Investment in



centralised cleaning hubs and logistics networks would underpin these systems; while monitoring and evaluation mechanisms would ensure strategies are refined based on evidence and feedback.

Enforcing the reuse of plastic at major events in eThekweni is a strategic opportunity to advance the city's Green Economy, reduce pressure on landfill sites and enhance service delivery. By aligning reuse initiatives with the Economic Development Unit's inclusive growth strategy and the Cleansing and Solid Waste Unit's waste management goals, the municipality can position Durban as a leader in sustainable urban development. With the right policies, partnerships and public engagement, Durban has the potential to turn the tide on plastic pollution and build a cleaner, greener future for all.

Key Takeaways

1. **Adopt Reuse at Large Venues:** Require vendors at event spaces (like the Durban ICC, Moses Mabhida Stadium and beachfront) to use reusable cups, plates and containers, supported by deposit-return systems.
2. **Support Green Economy Goals:** Reuse aligns with eThekweni's strategy for inclusive growth, job creation and environmental sustainability, while reducing landfill pressure and improving service delivery.
3. **Enable Jobs and Enterprise:** Establish cleaning facilities and logistics systems for reusable items, creating employment in low-income areas and opportunities for local entrepreneurs.
4. **Policy and Infrastructure Investment:** Mandate reuse at municipal events, incentivise compliance, invest in centralised cleaning hubs, and measure progress through monitoring and evaluation.
5. **Boost City Image and Resilience:** Cleaner public spaces, improved waste management and reduced plastic pollution enhance Durban's reputation as a leader in sustainable urban development.



Francois Cloete - Founder, Reusefy

A Reuse Champion for South Africans

South African consumers need a champion to raise awareness of reusable packaging systems and services, which are still largely absent in our country. We also need a champion to push us towards this new system, to demonstrate how it works, what it looks like, and how we can interact with it.

When organisations make a policy change or launch a new initiative, they often appoint an implementation “champion”. This individual drives the process of change and plays an integral role in ensuring its success. I would like to unpack several categories to explain where such a champion is most needed to motivate and drive change.

There are three types of packaging: primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary packaging is in direct contact with products and is handled by the consumer. Secondary packaging groups individual units (primary packages) together for transportation and may be designed to be shelf-ready, displaying the primary packaging in retail outlets. Tertiary packaging is used for the storage and handling of secondary packaged products.

The end user responsible for disposing of packaging is either a consumer or a business/organisation. Consumers handle and dispose of primary and secondary packaging (B2C packaging). For example, Jungle Instant Oats sachets (primary) are sold inside a box (secondary) containing ten sachets, purchased at Spar and carried home in a shopping bag (secondary). Businesses, on the other hand, handle and dispose of secondary and tertiary packaging (B2B packaging). For instance, pallets (tertiary) wrapped in plastic (tertiary) may contain boxes (tertiary) holding multiple six-packs (secondary) of bottled water.

Broadly speaking, there are two systems in which reuse operates: the Open System and Closed Systems. The Open System refers to primary and secondary packaging that consumers purchase in-store or online, consume anywhere, and dispose of in the nearest bin. Examples include retail food and grocery packaging, beverage bottles, takeaway food packaging, coffee cups and shopping bags. Closed Systems are smaller, less complex environments where packaging is used, consumed and disposed of within a contained space. Food and beverage packaging at events is a clear example, as the items are received, used and discarded on the event premises.

For reuse to succeed, packaging released into the system must return for reuse; otherwise, the system fails economically and environmentally. Closed Systems require far less infrastructure and staffing to ensure that all items are returned compared with an entire city operating as an Open System. Observing reuse service providers in Europe and North America, it is clear there has been a marked shift from open systems to closed systems. Today, it is rare to find a provider working only in open systems; most now focus on servicing closed environments such as events, catering, workplaces and educational institutions.



B2B packaging already operates in Closed Systems, and reuse is being adopted successfully. Designed for durability, reusable packaging enables businesses to incorporate features such as smart sensors, digital IDs and added functionality. These enhancements create real value through efficiencies in inventory management, cost savings in logistics and transport, improved space utilisation, and reduced inventory damage during handling. With ambitious reuse targets, significantly higher extended producer responsibility fees, and tax incentives for reuse-related capital expenditure, the government could nudge businesses further towards reuse, as the business case is already compelling. Combined with an effective Global Plastics Treaty and South Africa's commitment to it, this should provide sufficient momentum.

The biggest obstacle remains transitioning to reuse in the Open System, where consumers are responsible for disposal. The fundamental challenge is that consumers have become accustomed to the ultra-convenient disposal of single-use items, and there is a strong status quo bias in favour of them. Single use is, and will remain, the most convenient packaging option in Open Systems. Established and efficient reuse systems in the future may approach, but will never surpass, that level of convenience. Moreover, B2C primary packaging such as plastic bags, bottles, cups and food containers are the most common items polluting our environment. This is therefore where reuse can make the most meaningful impact.

Unlike B2B packaging, which can compete with and outperform single use on nearly every measure, reuse struggles to match B2C single-use packaging's convenience. Consumers will require significant nudging to adopt reusable B2C packaging. We need a champion to push us away from the ultra-convenient single-use status quo towards reuse, which, while slightly less convenient, is vastly more sustainable. The ideal candidate for this role in South Africa is a mandated Deposit Return System (DRS) for beverage bottles.

Fabian Barthel, co-founder of VYTAL, a leading reuse service provider in Germany, explains that so far, there are only three incentives that reliably shift consumer behaviour towards reuse:

1. A discount on goods purchased in reusable packaging.
2. A surcharge on single-use packaging when consumers opt against reusable packaging.
3. A ban on single-use packaging or a mandate to use reusable packaging.

Without effective government-implemented incentives, a reuse champion will fail to win over consumers. Bianca Robinson, Head of Innovation at ALPAL Bulk Packaging, further highlights a critical point: sustainability pursued for its own sake (desirability) is not sustainable in the long run (viability). This insight applies to politics as well. A reuse champion must also tackle urgent socio-economic issues such as job creation and food security, rather than focusing solely on environmental benefits. Put differently, such a champion must solve a problem that political parties would be eager to claim credit for.

New research by Eunomia and the University of the Western Cape has found that a mandatory Deposit Return System in South Africa could generate up to 31,500 new jobs for waste reclaimers in the informal sector. In the formal sector, a DRS could create between 4,600 and 8,700 jobs across the beverage supply chain. With beverage bottles being so ubiquitous, a mandated system would reach every consumer in the country, effectively doubling as a nationwide awareness campaign that both demonstrates and reinforces



the concept of reuse. Fabian notes that when Germany's mandated DRS was introduced in 1991, the deposits made the concept of reuse instantly recognisable to everyone.

A voluntary version already exists in South Africa. SAB's returnable 750ml quart glass bottles can be returned to retail and liquor stores, with consumers receiving a deposit refund included in the original sales price. Coca-Cola also operates a similar system for its returnable bottles, which are washed and refilled for reuse. Even if many bottles returned under a DRS were initially recycled, consumers would still be interacting with a system reflecting the behaviours required for reuse and return. Transitioning from recycling to reuse in the backend would be easier once the infrastructure is established through a mandated DRS.

In conclusion, a clear pathway forward for reuse in South Africa lies in supporting and implementing a mandated beverage bottle Deposit Return System. This would act as a national reuse champion, embedding the practice of reuse in everyday life and ensuring that all consumers are introduced to and engaged with the concept.

Key Takeaways

1. **Mandate a Beverage Bottle Deposit Return System (DRS):** A compulsory, nationwide DRS would act as a "reuse champion", ensuring all consumers interact with and adopt reuse systems.
2. **Consumer Incentives Are Critical:** Behavioural change relies on strong incentives like discounts for reusable packaging, surcharges on single use, or outright bans/mandates.
3. **Job Creation Potential:** A mandatory DRS could generate up to 31,500 informal jobs and 4,600-8,700 formal jobs across the beverage supply chain, addressing unemployment while advancing sustainability.
4. **Closed Systems First:** Build on existing voluntary reuse schemes (e.g. SAB and Coca-Cola returnable bottles) and shift focus from less efficient open systems to controlled closed systems such as events, catering, and workplaces.
5. **Political and Economic Leverage:** A mandated DRS links sustainability with urgent socio-economic priorities like employment and food security, making it both politically attractive and environmentally effective.



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Appendices

Appendix A

[CCL - Motsedithabatau Persona Mapping](#)

