

Press release for immediate release

NO PLASTICS? ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THAT?

Plastics SA pushes back against anti-plastics sentiment with a call for responsible use, not uninformed bans

Johannesburg, 4 July 2025. As global attention intensifies around the “Plastic-Free July” campaign and preparations continue for the second part of the fifth session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC-5.2), set to take place from 5-14 August 2025 at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Plastics SA is calling for a more balanced, informed, and practical conversation about plastics.

With negotiators aiming to finalise a draft international treaty that addresses plastic pollution across its entire lifecycle, from production and design to consumption, waste management and financing, Plastics SA warns against the wholesale elimination of a material that plays a vital role in modern society. Instead, the umbrella organisation representing the entire plastics value chain in South Africa urges South African citizens to prioritise responsible consumption, improved collection, sorting and recycling systems, and innovation in product design and end-of-solutions.

“Modern life would be impossible without plastics. From the food we eat and the devices we rely on, to the clothes we wear and the medical treatments that save lives – plastics are not a luxury. They are a necessity. And when used and discarded responsibly, they contribute significantly to the health, safety, affordability and sustainability of our society,” says Anton Hanekom, Executive Director of Plastics SA.

Despite the global narrative that seeks to vilify plastics, South Africa has made notable strides in developing a robust circular economy for plastics. Each year, thousands of tonnes of plastic are diverted from landfill through recycling efforts, creating jobs, reducing environmental pollution, and supporting livelihoods across the country – particularly among waste pickers and informal collectors.

South Africa boasts some of the highest mechanical recycling rates in the world for developing countries, with over 28% of post-consumer plastics being recycled locally. This material is turned into everything from plastic wood and construction products to furniture, shopping bags, water bottles and school shoes. Local producer responsibility organisations (PROs) and recyclers are working closely with brand owners and manufacturers to increase recyclability and design-for-recycling initiatives that make it easier for plastics to remain in the value chain.

“We should be showcasing South Africa’s recycling successes, not blindly copying international narratives that don’t reflect our local context,” says Hanekom. “The truth is that the plastics industry is already a powerful enabler of environmental, social, and economic development in this country.

Plastics | SA
No plastics?
Are you sure about that?

Sweaters, shoes and accessories are often made from recycled plastic and plastics removed from the oceans.

Plastic packaging extends the shelf life of fresh foods, preventing food wastage and greenhouse gas emissions.

Plastics technology has enabled reductions in the size of hearing aid components, improving life for people with hearing loss.

Technological advancement, from smartphones to intricate components of high-tech devices, has fostered a digital revolution, enabling communication, no matter where you are.

Disposable syringes, IV bags, and surgical gloves, all made from plastic, have enhanced hygiene and safety, reducing the risk of infection and cross-contamination.

BY EMBRACING INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS, IMPLEMENTING THOUGHTFUL POLICIES, AND FOSTERING RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION, COLLECTION, SORTING AND DISPOSAL, SOCIETY CAN WORK TOWARDS MITIGATING THE SCOURGE OF POLLUTION AFFECTING ALL OF US.

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Interestingly, while the benefits of plastics are clear and evident in our daily lives, the average South African's actual plastic consumption is relatively low. Research shows that South Africans use around 26 kilograms of plastic per person per year – which is about the weight of one packed suitcase on an overseas trip or just two 12.5 kg bags of maize meal. This modest consumption provides immense value, ensuring access to clean water, safe food, affordable healthcare, connectivity, and convenience.

A quick look around confirms just how indispensable plastics are:

- **Healthcare:** Disposable syringes, IV bags, surgical gloves, hearing aids and even PPE are all made from plastic and are essential to modern medicine. They save lives, reduce the risk of infection, and ensure safe, affordable healthcare delivery.
- **Food Security:** Plastic packaging extends the shelf life of fresh produce, helping to reduce food wastage and greenhouse gas emissions. It keeps food fresher for longer, especially in areas without refrigeration.
- **Water Infrastructure:** Plastic pipes are the unsung heroes of South Africa's water and sanitation infrastructure. Lightweight, durable and corrosion-resistant, plastic piping systems are vital in bringing safe, clean drinking water to even the most remote rural communities, empowering millions of citizens and supporting public health.
- **Technology and Connectivity:** From smartphones to laptops and high-tech devices, plastics make modern communication and connectivity possible – lightweight, efficient, and affordable.
- **Clothing and Consumer Goods:** Faux leather jackets, sneakers, sunglasses, and accessories are increasingly made from recycled plastics – including materials recovered from our oceans. The fashion and consumer goods industry is showing that sustainable, circular innovation is not only possible but stylish and scalable.

Plastics SA is not suggesting that we ignore the problem of plastic pollution – far from it. Rather, it is calling for evidence-based, pragmatic solutions that address the real issues: littering, illegal dumping, insufficient waste infrastructure, and a lack of public awareness.

"We need to stop blaming the material and start fixing the system," says Hanekom. "The solution lies in fostering responsible use, encouraging recycling, improving collection and sorting systems, and supporting the millions of South Africans who work in the recycling and waste management sectors."

Plastics SA is urging citizens to take up the challenge of Plastics Smart July, not Plastic-Free July. This means:

- Supporting local recycling initiatives and separation-at-source programmes
- Choosing products that are recyclable or made from recycled content
- Disposing of waste responsibly to keep plastic out of nature and in the economy
- Educating others about the importance of plastics in modern life

"Plastic isn't the villain it's made out to be. In fact, it's often the unsung hero," concludes Hanekom. "The real question we should be asking this July is not 'How can we live without plastics?' but 'How can we live smarter with it?'"

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