

TURNING PACKAGING INTO PROFIT

Gcwalisa pilot project delivers groundbreaking results in reuse of plastic packaging in Alexandra township



Johannesburg, 2 July 2025. A bold new reuse initiative in Alexandra, a suburb on the outskirts of Johannesburg, is proving that circular economy principles can deliver measurable environmental, economic, and social benefits even in some of South Africa's most underserved communities. The *Gcwalisa* project, which means "Refill" in isiZulu, is a ground-breaking pilot that empowers township residents to reuse plastic packaging, reduce household costs, and build sustainable livelihoods especially for women.

Supported by [Plastics SA](#), GIZ's [Circular City Labs \(CCL\)](#), and social entrepreneur Miles Kubheka, the project is redefining what reuse looks like in informal urban settings. The initiative caught the attention of Plastics SA, who had been approached by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) through the Circular City Labs (CCL) project. They were on the lookout for South African projects that championed the reuse of plastic packaging — and ideally, were led by black women. Out of 17 applicants, the Gcwalisa project stood out — not just for its ingenuity, but for its community-centered approach.

According to Anton Hanekom, Executive Director of Plastics SA, "the Gcwalisa project proves that reuse is not only viable in low-income areas, but also highly effective when it's community-driven. This initiative demonstrates how quality, recyclable packaging such as polypropylene (PP) jars and PET bottles can be reused safely and repeatedly, while also creating jobs and reducing waste."

From Pandemic Crisis to Circular Opportunity

The idea was sparked during the COVID-19 pandemic, when job losses and rising food prices forced Alexandra residents to adapt to buying daily essentials in small quantities. Gcwalisa responded by creating a refill system that allowed customers to purchase everyday items in affordable quantities while reusing containers — either their own or those provided by the outlet.

Containers used in the project are durable, lightweight, food-safe, and 100% recyclable, supplied by two trusted South African manufacturers. Each container carries a product-specific label, a QR code for tracking reuse, and clear instructions to encourage repeat returns. "By enabling consumers to reuse containers and access affordable products, we are building a circular economy that is inclusive and resilient. It's a model that turns packaging waste into economic opportunity," Hanekom added.

Strong Uptake, Stronger Impact

Between April and June 2025, Gcwalisa's four outlets in Alexandra recorded impressive results:

- Over 2 400 container reuse purchases and returns
- 1 194 active returns — a clear indication of growing consumer commitment

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- Four local women employed as Reuse Ambassadors through the *Pathways to Possibilities* training programme

“These figures reflect more than statistics. They demonstrate how meaningful change is possible when reuse is made simple, convenient, and rooted in trust,” Hanekom highlights.

Packaging Waste Transformed into Opportunity

The success of the project hinges on using the right type of packaging i.e. containers that are not only recyclable and safe, but also suitable for multiple reuse cycles. By focusing on polypropylene and PET containers, Gcwalisa ensures that all reused packaging can be returned, cleaned, refilled, and eventually recycled, helping to divert valuable material from landfill and cut carbon emissions.

A cash-back incentive system further encourages container returns, and packaging labelling supports education and traceability.

Women at the Heart of the Model

Gcwalisa has put women at the centre of its implementation. Nearly 78% of all participants are women, many of whom were unemployed before becoming involved in the initiative. Community activations, music, and live demonstrations have become trusted ways to engage households and encourage reuse. In addition to these face-to-face methods, Gcwalisa maintains a strong presence on social media platforms where they share updates, educational content, and success stories. These digital channels help build a sense of community, provide real-time feedback, and expand the reach of the campaign, making it easier for participants and supporters to stay informed and connected.

“Gcwalisa is restoring dignity while promoting environmental responsibility. It’s empowering women, creating income streams, and proving that reuse can be aspirational,” says Hanekom.

Looking Ahead

The next phase of Gcwalisa’s journey will focus on scaling the model, reinforcing positive consumer behaviour, and measuring long-term impact, including waste reduction, greenhouse gas savings, and household financial relief. With WhatsApp and SMS reminders, continued staff training, and in-store education, the project aims to entrench reuse as a permanent habit and inspire similar models across South Africa.

“This is more than a project — it’s a blueprint. We are incredibly proud to support Gcwalisa and believe its success will inspire other communities to rethink packaging and embrace the power of reuse,” Hanekom concludes.

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