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Recommendations for

# Scaling packaging reuse models in South Africa



Learnings from local organisations

August 2025

# Introduction

Reuse-refill models that replace single-use with reusable packaging have been highlighted in global and national settings as being a critical element to address the growing plastic pollution concerns. Single-use plastic packaging is proportionally the largest littered item globally and in South Africa (SA). In SA, it is estimated that more than 60% of plastics leaked into waterways and the ocean is plastic packaging (IUCN-EA-QUANTIS, 2020, National Guidance for plastic pollution hotspotting and shaping action, Country report South Africa (updated).

This work forms part of the Circular City Labs initiative funded by the German development agency, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the associated project “SA Circular Lab (SACiLa) South African Reusable Packaging Solutions in the Plastics Value Chain” led by Plastics SA. The African Circular Economy Network (ACEN) has partnered with Plastics SA to aggregate local learnings in reuse models, and consider key interventions and success factors for scaling reuse models in SA.

This paper is designed to **seed discussion** and **stimulate action** across

- startups in the reuse space
- brand owners and retailers
- formal and informal settings
- business-to-consumer and business-to-business packaging

**To join the discussion** please contact ACEN at [info@acen.africa](mailto:info@acen.africa)



# Reuse of packaging of products can create jobs and reduce litter in the environment

## What is reuse of packaging?

In packaging reuse, packaging is reused multiple times, in the following cycle

- Packaging is first filled with product (such as flour, or milk etc),
- The product is consumed,
- The packaging is then cleaned, and
- Refilled with product.



The greater number of times a piece of packaging has been reused, the greater the benefits, including\*

### Environmental

Reduced packaging material usage, therefore reduced energy used in manufacturing packaging; less plastic in landfill and the environment.

### Social

There is the potential for more jobs in the supply chain in the retail, collection and washing elements – depending on the reuse model.

### Economic

Product can in some cases be supplied cheaper to consumers – as the consumer doesn't pay for the packaging again on purchase of products.

**\*Note:** each reuse model and context should be assessed to understand if reuse does provide the specific benefits.

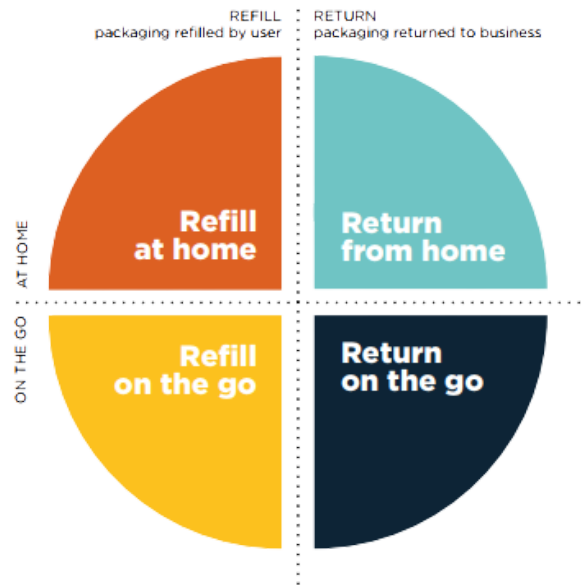
# South African reuse models surveyed: model types and sectors

## Business-to-consumer (B2C) models

In **refill** models the user refills the packaging, either at home or on-go. Packaging is owned by the user who is also responsible for cleaning the packaging before reuse.

In the **return** models, a brand or retailer retains ownership of the packaging and is responsible for cleaning and refilling the packaging with product.

B2C **refill** models are the predominant form of reuse applied in packaging globally at around 60% (Living Reuse Landscape, 2025).



B2C reuse models  
 Source: Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2019

## Business-to-business (B2B) models

In business-to-business reuse models, a brand owner may own and circulate their own reusable logistics packaging, or a brand may outsource the logistics and reusable packaging to a specialised logistics company employing a reuse model.

## South African reuse models surveyed

Most SA models surveyed in fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) are **refill** models, with one **hybrid refill-return** model (offering washing and refilling for consumers), 1 return model for events and takeaways, and 1 **return** model in business-to-business (B2B) packaging.

# Common challenges for reuse initiatives in South Africa

Challenge	Recommendation
 <p><b>Accessing financing</b> from startup to scaling.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most self-funded, limited grant funding</li> </ul> <p><b>Why? New business model</b> – opportunities not clear to investors</p> <p><b>Why? Startup failures</b> – expected in any sector</p>	 <p><b>Collaborative learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand failures</li> <li>• Document success conditions</li> <li>• <b>Awareness-building with investors</b></li> <li>• <b>Innovative impact funding</b></li> </ul>
 <p><b>Establishing and trouble-shooting the modifications to supply chains to reuse</b></p> <p><b>Existing brands and retailers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retrofitting of system in single-use packaging: reuse &amp; single-use models in parallel = high investment and effort</li> </ul> <p><b>Startups in reuse</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Onboarding up- and downstream elements of supply chain (brands and consumers) – high info sharing, much trial and error</li> </ul>	<p><b>Existing brands and retailers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration and info sharing</li> <li>• Careful system design, including behavior change for staff &amp; consumers</li> <li>• <b>Outsourcing</b> certain elements of reuse system to focus on core business.</li> </ul> <p><b>Startups in reuse</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build your <b>community</b></li> <li>• Maximise <b>local supply chains</b>, start with <b>SMMEs</b></li> <li>• <b>Sufficient basket</b> of products to attract consumers</li> </ul>

## Challenge



**Health and safety concerns in refill and return models**



## Recommendation



**Short Term**

- Develop/adapt **standard operating procedures** for reuse retailers and small brands supplying product in refill/return
- To **cover the supply chain** from filling and delivering of product, to decanting and batch tracking, inventory management, dispensing approach (for both low-tech and high-tech), and cleaning protocols for all models.



**Medium to Long Term**

- Develop/ adapt **policy and regulations** (like extended producer responsibility regulations) to **enable reuse**
- Develop/ adopt **formal industry standards**

## Key Stakeholders



- SA reuse businesses (past & present)
- Green finance investors
- Brands and retailers
- Informal waste collectors

# Opportunities in reuse models in South Africa

## Informal or low-income settings

- 25% FMCG in SA in informal market
  - Up to 50% in some products
- Strong driver of very price-sensitive consumers

**Benefits:** safe quality products; reduce waste (poor waste management systems)



## Middle- to high-income settings

- Specialist stores
- Loyal community
- Drivers – environmental and health consciousness

**Benefits:** Could be large volumes of products sold, and therefore large savings in single-use packaging



## Events and food services

In precincts such as stadiums, or markets

- High usage of single-use packaging in stadiums, markets, food courts, in-flight services etc.
- Enclosed area lends itself to reusable packs

**Benefits:** Reduced waste to landfill (reduced costs) – most takeaway packaging will not be recycled.



## B2B reusable packaging models

- Existing businesses with expertise in logistics and reuse of logistics packaging
- Large tonnages in logistics packaging – large proportion not in reuse
- Challenge is theft

**Benefits:** More work needed to scope benefits



# Way Forward

## Join the conversation!

info@acen.africa

**Recommendations and guidance** for startups, brands and retailers from *this study* will be further developed under the Global Environment Facility (GEF) project: Plastic Reboot from a global and a South African perspective:

- Enabling policy, legislation and standards for reuse and reuseable packaging – **guidelines for reuse organisations**, with recommendations for more formal standards, policy and regulations
- Industry engagement to support and develop reuse models in SA

Circular City Labs  
Testing Reusable Packaging Systems in Cities



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