

Annual survey reveals plastics recycling figures for 2019

On behalf of Plastics SA, a detailed survey into the state of the South Africa's plastics recycling industry is conducted annually by independent consultant Annabé Pretorius of Plastix 911. The results, featuring the plastics recycling figures for the year ending December 2019, were [recently released](#).



Image source: Gallo/Getty

"The collection, documentation and publication of updated and detailed data regarding the amounts of plastics that were produced, processed and recycled in South Africa provides us with an important instrument to gauge the growth and development of the industry. It goes without saying that end-of-life solutions for plastics waste are an important focus for us. In order to get an accurate assessment, Annabé interviewed the 288 plastic recyclers who were operating in South Africa at the end of 2019," said Anton Hanekom, Plastics|SA's executive director.

During 2019, 503,600 tonnes of plastics waste was collected for recycling. Of this, more than half (362,800 tonnes) was packaging – giving South Africa an input recycling rate of 45.7%.

"The amount of plastics we recycled back into raw material was the equivalent of 24 million two-litre milk bottles every day! 244,300 tonnes of CO₂ were saved – the equivalent emissions of 51,000 cars in the same year.

"Considering the economic downturn that was experienced, the rising cost of electricity, the impact of load shedding and other deterring factors, this is still a terrific accomplishment of which we can be proud," Hanekom said.

Growing acceptance of including recycled plastic in packaging

South Africa's plastics industry continues to be dominated by the packaging industry, which accounts for 49% of the local market. It is, therefore, encouraging to see the growing number of brand owners who are committed to including recycled content in their packaging. Thanks to this growing end-market, 119,000 tonnes of recycled plastics were used in 2019 to manufacture new rigid and flexible packaging items. Recycled flexible packaging was the largest market for recyclate, with 24% of all recycled materials finding a market in shopping bags, refuse bags and general flexible packaging.

Supporting the economy, creating employment

The recycling of plastic made a direct contribution to South Africa's GDP of 2.3% and an 18.5% contribution to the manufacturing GDP in 2019.

R2,065bn was injected into the informal sector through the purchasing of recyclable plastics waste. 58,750 income opportunities were created – which include waste pickers and employees of the smaller entrepreneurial collectors.

Input vs output?

There are various ways in which recycling figures can be analysed. Some researchers prefer “input recycling” – which measures the tonnage of recyclables collected for recycling. Others advocate for using “output recycling” figures, i.e., the actual amount of material that was processed and sold as new raw material, after the recycling process for the purpose of understanding material flow.

“The debate over input vs output is a very old one. Both ways of measuring offer their own advantages and disadvantages. In Europe, they prefer calculating the percentage of collected waste that is sent away for recycling, i.e., input recycling. Because we are often compared with Europe, the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF) agreed that it makes sense for us to follow the same methodology as our European counterparts when reporting on the recycling rate of plastics, paper, glass and cans,” Hanekom explained.

Local production down, plastics recycling up

In 2019, SA converted 1,842,745 tonnes of polymer (locally produced, imported and recycled) into plastics products. This was a decrease of 1.8% from the previous year. What is encouraging, however, was that recycled content made up 18% of these locally converted polymers.

South Africa converted 337,745 tonnes of recycled material into new products.

Although only a 0.1% improvement on the 2018 figures, it does not accurately reflect the bigger emphasis we have seen being placed on recycling and the growing awareness amongst government, industry and civil society. Instead, it is a reflection of the economic challenges the manufacturing industry experienced in general, said Hanekom.

Increased recycled content in packaging

The basic economic principle of supply and demand will drive recycling rates upwards when potential buyers (converters, brand owners and retailers) commit to using recycled plastics. Recyclers have proven that recycled plastics can be (and are being) used in food packaging, containers, bottles, closures, jars and caps.

As soon as the demand for high-quality recyclate picks up, recyclers can invest in sorting and recycling capabilities. The increased demand will spiral down the complete value chain with benefits to all, ultimately resulting in less plastic in the environment and higher recycling rates.

Need for separation-at-source, effective waste management infrastructure

More than 70% of all the recyclable plastic collected in 2019 came from landfill and other post-consumer sources. Thanks to these successful collection and recycling operations, 2.2% less plastic waste ended up in landfill.

However, these valuable materials are extracted at a high cost to the recyclers who have to wash the contaminated material, and to the waste pickers themselves who put their lives and health at risk. South Africa needs to follow the example of other developed countries where the necessary infrastructure has been put in place to get the recyclables out of the waste stream as early as possible.

Declaring war on plastic waste

"Plastics help to reduce transportation costs, prevent breakage, extend shelf life and make modern life more convenient. A world without plastic is almost unimaginable. What we all want to see, however, is a world free of plastic litter," said Hanekom.

"For this reason, the South African plastics industry has declared a war on waste. As part of our commitment to finding sustainable solutions that will work for our unique South African context, we helped form the South African Initiative to End Plastic Pollution in the Environment in 2019. With this initiative, the plastics industry joins forces with government, retailers, brand owners and other interest groups to prevent and ultimately end plastic pollution spilling over into our streets, rivers and oceans. However, even our best efforts will be futile if we don't have the support of the general public and a commitment by every South African to be a responsible user and recycler of plastic. Only by working together, will we truly begin to make a lasting change," Hanekom concluded.

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