

Single-use plastic, circular economy, ethical supply chains and climate action to drive retail in 2019



By [Feroz Koor](#)

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More than ever before in 2018 we saw sustainability playing a major role in shaping trends in the retail sector. Sustainability took the centre stage in Cape Town as it came close to being the first large city in the world to run out of water. We also saw the rise of global commitments on packaging improvements as well as phasing out of single-use plastic.



Feroz Koor, Woolworths.

Reducing plastic waste

Did you know that the Collins Dictionary named 'single-use' as one of its words of last year? The popularity of the phrase – which refers to plastic items which are used once before being discarded – is a representation of how sustainability has permeated public consciousness. And it gives me hope that we are moving in the right direction in addressing the challenge of plastic pollution.

We at Woolies announced the bold commitment and vision of zero packaging waste to landfill last year in our drive to do our part in reducing plastic pollution. Part of this commitment is to ensure that all our plastic packaging is either reusable or recyclable by 2022 and to phase out plastic shopping bags from our stores by 2020.

Phasing out plastic shopping bags is no easy task if you want to ensure that your customers still have a great convenient shopping experience. We also decided that rather than just shifting from a plastic bag to a paper or compostable bag – which each, unfortunately, have their own environmental challenges – we would rather partner with our customers and encourage them to use reusable bags.

This requires a substantial behaviour change so we embarked on a trial in the Cape area late last year which included removing plastic shopping bags from one store. We had a few nervous moments, but I am pleased to confirm that now a couple of months into the trial it is all going well. We hope to roll out more plastic bag free stores in 2019 as we move closer to towards our 2020 commitment.



Woolworths announces 'plastic bag free' store

9 Oct 2018



So what else in 2019?

I expect the recent focus on plastic is just the tip of the iceberg and will gain even more momentum over the next year. And it won't just be plastic for 2019.

Ethical supply chains, sustainable sourcing

I believe that South Africans are becoming more and more aware of their environment and the impact of their consumerism

so will be posing more questions to retailers. Questions like, where does my food and clothes come from? Who made them? Where were they grown or made? How much water and pesticides were used? Were the farm and factory workers paid a living wage? How far have these products travelled to get to me?

Ethical supply chains and sustainable sourcing will continue to drive retailer behaviour. Last year we launched the [first beauty and food products](#) made with RSPO certified palm oil in South Africa. This was a significant milestone for us and was testament to the dedication of our various teams who worked tirelessly to shift whole supply chains to enable this.



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Palm oil has received a lot of media attention recently, and rightly so. We believe that responsible sourcing is the right approach, and do date at least 50% of our palm oil is RSPO certified. Taking this approach means that we and our suppliers can help drive the demand for the production and supply of sustainably sourced palm oil throughout the sector and into the communities where it is produced.

Whether it is sourcing sustainable palm oil, cocoa, coffee, sugar or cotton we know that retailers can't do it on their own so another key trend is collaboration. Be it partnering with other retailers, suppliers, communities or environmental organisations we have to all work together with our customers to ensure that real sustainable change can happen throughout the supply chain.

Circular economy

Alongside 'single-use', another phrase that I expect to hear more of in the next year is 'circular economy'.

Circular economy forces product designers and businesses to re-think how they do things in order to retain as much value of products and materials as possible and minimise waste. Circular economy thinking is turning the manufacturing and design industry on its head and will lead us into a new age of innovation with the aim of creating products with the end of life in mind.



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The demand for food is also increasing due to the growth of the world's population, at the same time climate change is making farming even more challenging than previous years. So even more than ever there will be pressure to improve farming efficiencies, adapt farming principles to be more resilient and redistribute food to reduce food waste.

These are, however, more than simply trends for a new year. They are concepts that are helping to shape and mould modern retail. The winners will be those that are able to successfully integrate sustainability seamlessly into their business.

ABOUT FEROSZ KOOR

Feroz Koor is the Group Head of Sustainability at Woolworths.

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