



DISGRACE: At least 90% of all household rubbish ends up in giant dump sites that are already full.
Photos by Alon Skuy/Gallo Images and Leon Sadiki

Experts in plastic waste management kicked off the Plastic Conference to discuss the impact of plastic waste on the environment and the challenges in eradicating this waste. Here is their take on what the problem is, what needs to be done, and what is being done.



LET'S TALK PLASTIC POLLUTION SOLUTIONS

Plastic waste management experts kicked off the colloquium to discuss the impact of plastic on the environment and challenges related to eradicating waste. Here is their take on what the problem is, what needs to be done, and what is being done:

■ **Bala Nengovhela, head of waste management at the SA Local Government Association:**

"About 64% of household waste is collected by municipalities. There are pockets where separation at source takes place, but there is not enough infrastructure."

■ **Mark Gordon, deputy director-general of waste management at the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries:**

"Plastic pollution has the attention of the world. We need to facilitate a circular economy, closing the loop through reuse and recycling, and ensuring a restorative and regenerative economy where the value of plastic is not lost by being thrown away. Pressure from consumers makes a big difference. There is no legislation banning plastic straws, but many restaurants simply choose not to offer straws any more."

■ **Professor Cristina Trois, University of KZN:**

"Municipalities are the owners of post-consumer waste, but that waste is totally unsorted – 90% of all waste ends up in landfills and we have no idea what the composition of that waste is. Citizens should demand to know if waste is really recycled."

■ **Dr Morne du Plessis, head of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature in SA:**

"The plastic problem is far bigger than visible pollution is. Plastic pollution is fundamental to the climate crisis and human health as 20%

of all carbon emissions come from plastics. By 2030, the carbon emissions from plastics will be equal to the carbon emissions from 100 Medupi power stations. Government must get much more serious as waste management is not enough. We must fix the accountability across the life cycle of plastics."

■ **Anton Hanekom, executive director of Plastics SA:**

"The problem in SA is that there's no proper waste management system. There's no infrastructure – waste has value, but if we can't collect it at the source, we can't recycle. We

need to change behaviour so that we collect what we're producing – we need to collect all of it."

■ **Luis Avellar, Coca-Cola Africa general manager:**

"One year ago, Coca-Cola launched the World Without Waste initiative, and our aim is to collect and recycle the equivalent of every bottle and sell globally by 2030. We are also looking at better designs for our products. We produce products that contribute to the global packaging problem – it is our responsibility to fix the problem."

■ **Simon Mbata, chairman of the SA Waste Pickers Association:**

"Waste pickers are the backbone of the recycling industry in South Africa, but, if the waste problem is managed properly, we should be the last generation of waste pickers in this country. We're working closely with the department and there is support from the industry, but the challenge is to make people understand that waste management is a service, and services must be paid for."

What you can do about plastic problem

IT'S easy to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the plastic pollution problem, but we're not helpless.

There are many ways each of us can address the problem and be part of the solution. Here are just a few tips:

- 1 Separate at source.** This means that you don't throw all your household rubbish into the bin and then put it outside. These are the items that have value in the recycling industry: paper, glass, plastic, metal, tetra pak (foil-lined containers) and polystyrene. Wash them and put them in a separate, clear bag outside, where waste pickers can remove them and earn a living.
- 2 Do not litter.** Just because there are waste pickers and municipal workers cleaning up after us does not mean we can just throw things on to the ground. It is harmful to the environment and ugly to look at. It affects our health, blocks our waterways and disturbs vegetation. It can get washed into our rivers, streams and oceans, resulting in water pollution. If you can't find a bin nearby, keep the rubbish until you get home and then properly recycle it.
- 3 Use your muscle as a consumer.** Tell shops and fast food outlets that you want sustainable, recycled containers. Use social media to boost your voice.
- 4 Always reduce, reuse and recycle – it will save the world**



In partnership with the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries