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DIY / Hardware FMCG Retail Management Supply Chain and Logistics

Solutions to tackle waste empower people and drive socio-economic development in SA – PETCO

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Londiwe Mbuyisa

Amidst the challenging issues of job creation and waste management, there are beacons of light as South Africans look to inventive ways to find solutions for themselves.

Recycling buy-back centres, where recyclable materials are brought and exchanged for money, play an important role in managing waste by keeping it out of the environment and diverting valuable resources from landfills.

Now, entrepreneurs are taking the initiative to start up such buy-back centres, recognising that they not only contribute to getting valuable resources out of the waste stream, but that they can also potentially generate sustainable income opportunities, both for themselves and others.

In doing so, environmental and litter issues are tackled, while communities are empowered and developed from a social-economic perspective.

Companies such as PETCO – a Producer Responsibility Organisation whose main responsibility is facilitating the collection and recycling of Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET) plastic bottles – provide support to these entrepreneurs on this journey.

“The PET recycling sector has an important role to play in contributing to the transformation of the South African economy. Few issues are more important,” said PETCO CEO, Cheri Scholtz.

“PETCO provides financial and other support to the collection and recycling value chain to increase the street value of PET packaging and stimulate its collection.

“The majority of these support projects are aimed at recycling partners or buy-back centres through the sponsorship of infrastructure and equipment that allows them to improve efficiency as well as the quantity and quality of the materials they collect.”

Recently, three such innovative entrepreneurs were recognised in the annual PETCO Awards for the work they have done in driving sustainability and contributing to the circular economy.

They have created formal and informal jobs and income opportunities within the communities within which they operate. Linah Duduzile Ndala is the co-ordinator of the Zonda Insila Programme, based in the Msukaligwa local municipality in Mpumalanga.

The programme first launched in March 2019, with four buy-back centre projects, and has since grown to an impressive total of 14 projects: five in Nkangala, two in Bohlabela, one in Gert Sibande and six in the Ehlanzeni District.

“People have got very different opinions regarding waste, but there is one that is outdated, which is that ‘waste is trash,’” explains Ndala. “I have come to learn that waste can actually be equated with wealth and money.”

The initiative, which collected over five tonnes of Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET) recyclables in 2021, now employs 240 people. The majority of those benefiting from this project are women, giving them the opportunity to create an income from their recyclable materials.

In Umlazi, Durban, there were no PET collection facilities available. However in 2020 Isphepho Enviro Ambassadors was formed to change that.

“We started our business in 2020 with just three collectors,” says Londiwe Mbuyisa from Isphepho Enviro Ambassadors. “We now support 65 waste collectors selling us the PET waste that they have collected and we are currently collecting a minimum of 12 tonnes of plastic waste every month.”

She stresses the need for skills development and knowledge sharing in the industry, explaining how, when she started, she needed to learn about the different kinds of plastic and other materials that could be recycled, as well as how to run a business. She now shares this knowledge with those taking their first steps in the industry.

“We have empowered over 40 individuals from the areas who are first-time collectors of PET by providing training and skills development. We share our resources, which include supplying a one tonne woven bag to each of them and PPE gloves, so that collectors can get started and earn

an income and feed their families,” she continues.

For Mbuyisa it is not just about creating jobs for adults, but also about developing skills within the youth which can translate into opportunities later in life.

“With this programme, we thought that we needed to teach youngsters about the values of recycling and the possible opportunities that exist within the circular economy. Maybe when they grow up, they will become entrepreneurs and come up with innovations that give solutions to the problems of waste management that we are facing now,” she continues.

Another waste-treprenuer is Ahmed Scholtz, founder of The Artell. He started off 30 years ago by repurposing PET bottles into water feeding containers for chickens. Fast-forward to the present and he is Mahikeng’s biggest trader of post -consumer PET recycler.

This business is the town’s biggest buy-back centre, and now employs 11 staff, services 1 200 collectors and collects 10 to 15 tonnes of recyclables every month.

“If I can look back many years, I can say the difference is that the waste that was laying around, scattered all over, is there no more. This is because collectors are now picking it up. They bring it to the buy-back centre where they earn a living every day,” says Scholtz.

“My mission is to ensure that each and every PET bottle in my community never ends up in a landfill,” he says. “We also support the vulnerable families by enabling them to make a decent living in a dignified manner.”

“The message that I would leave to South Africans about recycling, is that it is of vital importance, because of our environment. We only have this one world and we all must look after it, because if we lose it, we won’t have anything else,” he continues.

The inspiring stories of these entrepreneurs, along with six other winners of the PETCO Awards, have been celebrated in a first-of-it’s-kind documentary series, “Message in a Bottle”, that provides a behind-the-scenes look at the operations and efforts made by these innovators.

It also highlights the invaluable contribution that these local heroes are making in bettering their communities and the environment.

The documentary series can be viewed on YouTube here:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLKYPzMp5FaeSgH5qd0LT5YQCQPvGB39AD

Watch each entrepreneur’s story here:

• Linah Duduzile Ndala from the Zonda Insila Programme: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RN25c-isgSg&list=PLKYPzMp5FaeSgH5qd0LT5YQCQPvGB39AD&index=8&t=39s

• Londiwe Mbuyisa from Isphepho Enviro Ambassadors. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGZOAT7hmb8&list=PLKYPzMp5FaeSgH5qd0LT5YQCQPvGB39AD&index=6

• Ahmed Scholtz, founder of The Artell: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xDfCwtueO4&list=PLKYPzMp5FaeSgH5qd0LT5YQCQPvGB39AD&index=9

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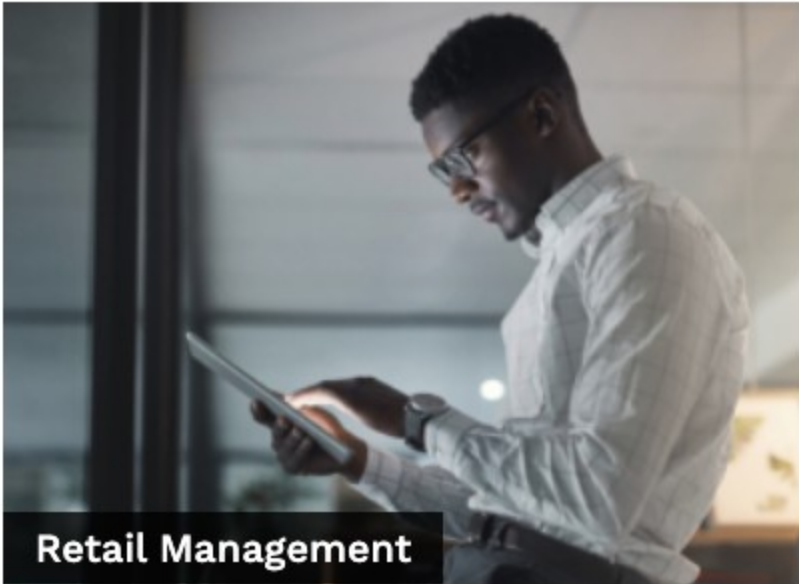
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