

Collective action needed in dealing with waste, water and food security

Experts at the co-located IFAT Africa, food & drink technology (fdt) Africa, and analytica Lab Africa in Midrand this week called for urgent collective action from civil society, industry and the public sector in addressing waste and food and water security challenges.



Image source: Gallo/Getty

In an opening panel discussion on how environmental technologies could support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Ranjit Baxi, past president of the Bureau of International Recycling (BIR) and founding president of the Global Recycling Foundation, said the plastic problem was a complex one, and would not be solved overnight.

“Over 8.5 billion tonnes of plastic has been produced, and if we continue at the rate we are going, it is estimated that over 35 billion tonnes could be in circulation by 2035. Plastic remains a massive challenge for mankind, and it won’t just go away. We need collective efforts and the right legislation to ensure that we reduce single-use plastic and produce only plastics that are recyclable,” he said. He also noted that pollution was global, and that legislation enforced in one country could not curb the problem if other countries did not enforce similar legislation.

Douw Steyn, director: sustainability at Plastics SA, said much of the plastic that ended up in the ocean originated upstream, and that efforts were underway to launch river catchment projects, educate civil society and improve recycling infrastructure. “As much as 60-70% of the material coming to recycling plants in South Africa at the moment comes from landfill reclaimers and trash pickers. They play a key role in recycling,” he said. The panelists said stricter legislation and enhanced support for efforts such as these would go some way to improving the success of recycling efforts in South Africa.



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Over-regulation counter-productive

While the panelists believed the public sector had to commit to achieving the SDGs, over-regulation and certain approaches could prove counter-productive. For example, they noted that there were no guarantees that taxes on carbon emissions or plastic bottles would be channeled into environmental initiatives.

“With a basic legislative framework in place, the market needs to be allowed to manage themselves,” said Emmanuel Rurema, MD of Pentair in Kenya. He said manufacturers were keenly aware of the need to become more sustainable, with the beverage industry, for example, striving to cut water use and wastage in production.

United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) national programme officer Levy Maduse highlighted that "no-one should be left behind" when addressing environmental issues - from educating rural communities about waste management, through to sustainable food production and water management.

With panelists noting that billions of litres of drinking water was lost globally every day, Dr Lester Goldman, CEO of the Water Institute of South Africa (WISA), said fourth industrial revolution technologies needed to be harnessed to improve water and waste management: “We need to use technologies to be more efficient, and at the same time we need to change mindsets and educate civil society.”

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