

2021 African Circular Economy Alliance: Giving waste a second chance

Decreasing plastic waste and enhancing plastic recycling remains a focus area for South Africa according to forestry, fisheries and environment minister Barbara Creecy.



Image source: Gallo/Getty

“A central focus of all our efforts has been to decrease plastic waste and enhance the recycling of plastics. This is in line with our commitment to reducing plastic waste in the environment and preventing this dangerous pollutant from entering our rivers and oceans,” said the minister on Thursday, 15 April. Creecy was addressing a virtual session of the 2021 African Circular Economy Alliance (ACEA).

She said the economies of the African continent have been severely affected by the global Covid-19 pandemic.

“As we recover, we will have to use all the innovative tools at our disposal in order to build back better. One of the important ways in which we can do this is by fully integrating circular economy initiatives into our nation’s recovery plans,” she said, adding that the circular economy is consistent with South Africa’s Constitution.

“Our country’s post-Covid-19 Reconstruction and Recovery Plan includes a green economy component, which promotes waste recycling, renewable energy generation, revitalising our ecotourism and forestry sectors, and retrofitting government buildings to improve climate resilience and save on water and energy consumption.”



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Eliminating single-use plastics

Creecy said efforts to reduce plastic waste have spanned across the retail and fast food sector, where significant initiatives by the Consumer Goods Council to eliminate single-use plastics have been seen.

This includes the promotion of changes in product design to facilitate recycling, and investment in research and development to promote new products made from plastic recycle.

Government is also in the process of amending plastic bag regulations. As a result, from 1 January 2021, plastic bags must be made of a minimum of 50% post-recyclate material; 75% recycled materials from the start of 2025, and must comprise 100% post-consumer recyclate by 2027.

“These targets will be met by ensuring that post-consumer recyclate is made up of household, industrial and commercial waste diverted from landfills, thus further entrenching circularity in waste management and product development,” said Creecy.



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Informal waste recyclers

Creecy said waste reclaimers and the informal sector must be accommodated in the value chain by addressing their role in the circular economy.

“In many towns and cities in South Africa, waste reclaimers are important actors in diverting recyclable material from landfills. Investment here will be focused on the economies associated with transporting of recyclables to waste processing facilities, separation at source, and addressing the skills gaps within the sector.

“Central to our efforts is a commitment to ensuring we transition reclaimers from a precarious hand-to-mouth existence, to sustainable and dignified livelihoods,” she said.

Reflecting on circular economy initiatives on the continent, Creecy said the implementation of the Africa Green Stimulus Programme (AGSP) is at the forefront of Africa’s response to the economic downturn caused by the pandemic.



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Regional forum

The minister said the African continent is the first region to establish a regional forum for circular economy implementation. This, she said, is a significant development for a continent with a growing population and a large informal business sector.

“At a continental level, we want to see recycling growing not only for effective waste management and resource use, but also to help us in addressing our challenges relating to unemployment and economic recovery.

“Incorporating informal economy actors, such as waste reclaimers and recyclers, is crucial, particularly in areas where there is limited government waste management capacity,” she said.

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