



Without recyclers, South Africa's EPR regulations will simply facilitate greenwashing

Regulations are not enough to help South Africa move to a circular economy. Without the support of an innovative and well-developed recycling and waste management sector, the country's Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) Regulations can inadvertently enable greenwashing and inhibit real environmental impact.

South Africa joined international efforts to reduce pollution and environmental degradation through the introduction of The Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) Regulations in May 2021. These regulations hold producers – which include manufacturers, importers, and brand owners – responsible for the complete lifecycle of the products they sell. This obligates producers to take responsibility for where their products and packaging ultimately end up at end of life by requiring them to join a producer responsibility organisation (PRO) that facilitates this process.

The dangers of greenwashing in EPRBut Patricia Schröder, spokesperson for the producer responsibility organisation (PRO) Circular Energy, says ensuring that producers compliant with regulations is not enough to establish an effective EPR system in the country. “The circular economy needs both producers who are committed to meeting regulations and a system of service providers with the necessary skills and resources to carry out the work on the ground. If all aspects of the system are not in place, EPR ends up facilitating greenwashing by enabling companies to meet regulatory requirements on paper only.”

Greenwashing involves a company enhancing – or fabricating – the environmental impact of its services and products or creating the false impression that it is taking effective steps to curb the environmental impact of its business activities. Schröder says service providers are critical to ensuring that the commitments made by producers can be fulfilled in practice.

“Service providers are needed to ensure that waste is collected and then recycled as it should be and that we develop and expand the country’s recycling and waste management capacity. For example, the intention to recycle is void if consumers return used products only for most of the material they contain to ultimately end up in a landfill because the technology or capacity to recycle it is not available,” she says.

The importance of collaboration for growthIn the recently gazetted Household Hazardous Waste Management Strategy, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) again highlighted the opportunities for and the importance of collaboration between stakeholders throughout the product and waste management value chain, including public entities and private service providers.

The draft strategy recognises that public-private partnerships can help to improve efficiency in waste collection systems, attract technical expertise and increase capital investment in waste management systems. It also recognises the important role that the informal waste sector continues to play in the country’s existing waste management systems. Schröder says EPR regulations can impact and benefit many waste management and recycling service providers – including those in the informal sector like waste pickers.

She says service providers should also play an active part in developing the EPR system as it has the potential to become a great catalyst for growth in their sector. “This contributes to the best possible outcome for the environment, while also creating valuable economic opportunities and social impact. It will not only help to stimulate an increase in the overall recycling capacity of the country but can also help to inspire innovation in manufacturing and recycling.”

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