

Population growth presents key opportunity to reinvigorate the waste sector

By [Kate Stubbs](#)

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The UN has estimated that the global population will near 11.3 billion by 2060. Populations in Africa are expected to experience just as much exponential growth - with the continent expected to reach over 2.5 billion by 2050, representing - quite interestingly - 26% of the world's total population by that time. But what does this mean for the amount of waste being generated in Africa - do we have what it takes to manage it effectively and what needs to be done to ensure that we don't run into a waste crisis?



Image source: Gallo/Getty

There is no doubt that such growing populations allude to a very serious challenge that threatens future resilience and sustainability, especially in developing regions in Africa if we don't change our attitudes to what we consider resources versus waste. Whilst growing figures mean solid opportunities for investors and businesses – where Africa hosts the fastest growing consumer market in the world but, for the waste sector, it means serious intervention, innovation and management if we hope to see a positive outcome.

If we consider that the world's cities generated 2.01 billion tonnes of solid waste – equating to approximately 0.74 kilogrammes per person per day, and that annual waste generation is expected to increase by 70% from 2016 levels to 3.40 billion tonnes in 2050 – with its root cause in rapid population growth and urbanisation – then it's evident that if we continue on the same waste trajectory and mentality that has driven this sector for many years, we will head towards an unprecedented waste crisis.

With landfills across the globe already over-capacitated, it is critical for both government and corporate South Africa to implement drastic changes wherever possible to divert waste from landfill and make better use of the waste that is generated.

So, when looking at this, we have to decide what the most strategic approach is to best manage both resources and waste and, more importantly, turning waste into a sustainable resource – creating alternatives from existing waste streams to reduce and reuse.

Circular economy



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In Africa today we are witnessing a relatively new but emerging concept that promises to address the challenge of waste in an overpopulated world – the circular economy.

This model aims to strip out all unnecessary waste materials, energy losses and related carbon emissions across supply chains and – through innovation – promotes closing these gaps to allow materials, energy and resources to be ‘fed’ back into the cycle. It aims towards achieving a more sustainable eco-cycle through long-term design and planning, maintenance, repair, reuse, remanufacturing, refurbishing, recycling and upcycling.

On a continent that has so much entrepreneurial spirit, as we grow, this model offers significant opportunities to truly deliver on more inclusive economic growth. In fact, through a circular economy we will even start seeing new business streams – driven by innovative ideas.

From an industry perspective, we are already starting to witness some strong movement in this direction. Reprocessing industries with a focus on reuse, recycle and repurpose is resulting in businesses taking cognisance of how they make their products sustainably – either through what they put in, or what

can be extracted from their waste.

Additionally, in cases where recycling and reusing is not possible, there is much innovation in the safe destruction and waste-to-energy space. In fact, waste-to-energy plants for example.

As our populations continue to grow, and grow they must, we must form a critical pillar as waste managers and generators to making a change – to finding alternative ways to create an economy that is underpinned by useful waste, waste that can be used over and over and waste that has sustainability at its core. It is up to us to change the status quo and make a difference in creating a sustainable future by ‘giving back to the system’ – turning a waste crisis into an opportunity.

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