

WASTE

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 EPR

But Patricia Schröder, spokesperson for the producer responsibility organisation (PRO) Circular Energy, says ensuring that producers are 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 can end 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.