

The UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Zero Waste

THEMATIC BRIEF

Rethinking Consumption: The Path to Zero Waste through Reuse and Refill Systems



Image: [Adobe stock/ Bussakon]

REUSE AND REFILL

In striving for zero waste, reuse and refill systems stand out as essential elements in disrupting the linear ‘take-make-dispose’ model of consumption.



Such circular economy systems not only curb waste generation by enabling products and packaging to be cycled back into use but also embody the shift towards sustainable resource management.

Linkage to Zero Waste

Reuse and refill systems are directly linked to the zero waste approach by prioritizing upstream solutions to prevent waste generation at source. Circular economy systems offer a promising alternative by ensuring that packaging and products are designed for longevity, thus eliminating waste before it occurs. This approach aligns with the principle that the best waste is the one that is not generated, positioning reuse and refill as essential strategies in the zero-waste movement.

Key issues and challenges addressed by these systems include the need for a systemic shift that involves multiple stakeholders to enable the reuse of packaging, the logistical complexities of reverse logistics, and the necessity for public policy support to accelerate the transition towards reuse and refill models. Opportunities lie in the proven potential of these models, as highlighted in the “Breaking the Plastic Wave” report by the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the experience gained in specific categories like beverage packaging, home care, and personal care products. The brief also explores the categorization of reuse models into four areas – Refill on the Go,

Refill at Home, Return at Home, and Return on the Go – each presenting a significant impact potential but requiring coordinated public policies, standardization of terms, processes, and packaging, as well as country-specific reuse targets to push businesses and governments towards establishing efficient and regulated reuse systems.

Objective

The objective of this thematic brief is to elucidate the potential of reuse and refill systems as critical components in achieving zero waste goals, emphasizing their significance in the broader context of sustainable waste management and the circular economy. It aims to unpack the implications of adopting these systems and to offer targeted recommendations on what actions should be taken to stimulate and expand the reuse movement.

By doing so, the brief seeks to guide stakeholders, policymakers, and businesses in understanding the pivotal role that reuse and refill practices play in transitioning from linear to circular economy models, thereby reducing waste generation at its source.

Additionally, it intends to communicate the necessity of fostering an environment that enables the adoption and growth of circular business models, focusing on actionable steps that can be taken to ensure a just and equitable transition in the waste management sector. Through this, the brief will highlight best practices and strategic approaches to catalyse the shift towards more sustainable consumption and production patterns, underlining the importance of reuse and refill systems in the quest for a zero waste future.



Key Findings

- 1. Diverse Reuse Models:** The Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF) identifies four main models of reuse: Refill on the Go, Refill at Home, Return at Home, and Return on the Go. Each model caters to different consumer needs and contexts, demonstrating the flexibility and adaptability of reuse systems.
- 2. Potential to Reduce Plastic Waste:** According to the report “Breaking the Plastic Wave” by Pew and SystemIQ, adopting reuse and new delivery models can help avoid nearly one-third of projected plastic waste generation by reducing the growth in plastic production and consumption.
- 3. Environmental and Economic Efficiency:** The EMF’s “Unlocking a Reuse Revolution” report highlights that reuse models, especially for beverages, personal care, fresh food, and food cupboards, are both environmentally and economically more efficient compared to disposable alternatives.

Implications



- 1. Need for Collective Action and Shared Infrastructure:** Successful implementation of reuse systems requires scale and shared infrastructure, such as collection, sorting, cleaning, and transportation. This collective action not only ensures economic viability but also enhances the customer experience by streamlining collection processes.
- 2. Standardization and Pooling:** Standardizing packaging and pooling resources among different companies can lead to significant efficiencies. This approach reduces transport distances, emissions, and costs, while still allowing for brand differentiation through labels and closures.
- 3. Achieving High Return Rates:** High return rates are critical for the economic and environmental success of reuse models.

centivizing returns and providing a seamless customer experience is essential to ensure packaging is returned and reused, closing the loop in the circular economy.

The findings underscore the viability and necessity of transitioning towards reuse and refill systems as part of the broader shift to a zero waste and circular economy. However, achieving this transition requires overcoming challenges such as establishing effective shared infrastructures, standardizing packaging, and ensuring high return rates. The potential risks and consequences of inaction include continued environmental degradation, resource depletion, and failure to meet sustainability targets. Conversely, the benefits of embracing reuse models are clear: significant reductions in plastic waste enhanced economic efficiency, and progress towards sustainable production and consumption patterns

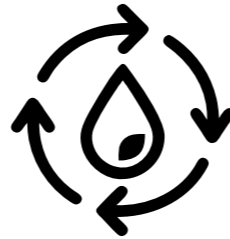
Recommendations and Call to Action

The urgency to scale reuse systems cannot be overstated. As the world grapples with the escalating waste crisis, adopting and expanding reuse and refill initiatives present a tangible solution to reduce waste at its source. The recommendations outlined aim not only to foster the growth of circular business models but also to ensure that the transition to these systems is equitable, sustainable, and inclusive. Collaboration across all sectors and levels of governance is crucial to achieving these objectives within a realistic timeline, making zero waste initiatives more effective and impactful.

Recommendations:

- 1. Advocate for Global Reuse Regulation:** Highlight the urgency of global regulations, such as the Plastic Treaty, to support and standardize reuse initiatives worldwide.
- 2. Implement Holistic Reuse Systems:** Push for integrated reuse and refill models in waste management and circular economy strategies.
- 3. Establish Guidelines and Incentives:** Set health, safety, and hygiene standards, as well as economic incentives to encourage reuse system participation.

- 4. Mandate Targets with Unified Metrics:** Require specific reuse targets using common metrics for consistent tracking.
- 5. Standardize Definitions:** Clarify 'reuse' and 'refill' terms to ensure shared understanding and expectations.
- 6. Promote Product Design Standards:** Advocate for design criteria that enhance product reuse and sustainability.
- 7. Prioritize High-impact Sectors:** Identify sectors with significant reuse potential, like beverages and personal care, for focused efforts.
- 8. Integrate Informal Sector in Reuse:** Recognize waste pickers as key partners in formal reuse systems for socio-economic benefits.



Check out further information:

[Recommendation for Businesses: Global Plastics Policy Centre \(2022\)](#)

[Recommendations for the Global Plastic Treaty: PR3 Standards Reusable vs Single-use Packaging – An Environmental Impact Review: Zero Waste Europe & Reloop](#)

[Reuse Portal for Circular Economy Solutions: WEF-WWF-UNEP's Reuse Portal](#)

[Future of Reusable Consumption Models: World Economic Forum's Insight Report: Future of Reusable Consumption Models. Platform for Shaping the Future of Consumption \(2021\)](#)

Contact us on advisoryboard.zerowaste@un.org

and visit our [website](#).

References

For reuse models introduction:

- [Ellen MacArthur Foundation. \(2019\). Reuse – Rethinking Packaging.](#)

Reuse models potential:

- [The Pew Charitable Trusts. \(2020, July 23\). Breaking the Plastic Wave: Top Findings.](#)

Reuse on regulation and public policies:

- [Global Plastics Policy Centre. \(2022\). March, A., Salam, S., Evans, T., Hilton, J., Fletcher, S. \(Editors\). Guidance for Policy Makers. Revolution Plastics Institute, University of Portsmouth.](#)

Reuse environmental and economic analysis:

- [Ellen MacArthur Foundation. \(2023\). Unlocking a Reuse Revolution: Scaling Returnable Packaging.](#)