

The Reuse Opportunity and the Global Plastic Treaty

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What is reuse & returnable packaging?

Imagine you buy a coffee or snack in durable packaging and when finished, you place the empty container into a reuse bin on the street, the office, or at home. The container gets picked up, washed, and redistributed. This cycle is repeated dozens or hundreds of times - all enabled by smart technologies that move the packaging through washing and logistics. The system is efficient, convenient, and affordable, and works for most packaged goods. It also reduces plastic packaging production by 90% and saves up to 80% of carbon emissions compared to single-use packaging^{1,2}. This is the kind of reuse system the Global Plastic Treaty can enable and help scale around the world.

Standards are essential

Most current reuse pilots are brand-specific, expensive, and inconvenient. These proprietary systems require unique distribution, collection, phone apps, and other technologies - an inefficient and unscalable approach. Also, proprietary and high-tech systems are inaccessible and inequitable to diverse economic, social, and physical needs.

PR3, a project of RESOLVE, aims to preempt this misaligned and inequitable future for reuse. PR3 is leading global stakeholders in the development of [standards for returnable packaging systems](#) that enable shared, interoperable, and inclusive reuse infrastructure³. These standards include parameters for designing returnable packaging and return points, shared digital language and labeling for reuse, and requirements for washing, safety, and hygiene. The standards are moving through the American National Standards Institute with the aim of being integrated into global bodies like the International Organization for Standardization. The standards are being launched in new reuse infrastructure in at least a dozen global cities, including in Asia, Europe and North America.

How can the Treaty enable the reuse opportunity?

The Global Plastics Treaty offers an unmatched opportunity to drive innovation and demand for returnable packaging, limiting the need for plastic production and downstream waste solutions. Below are 4 crucial treaty elements to enable the reuse opportunity.

¹ Based on returnable containers that are at least twice the mass of their single-use alternatives and used 20 times or more.

² EarthShift Global, *The Case of Reusable PET Bottles vs Single Use: Screening Results*, 2021.

³ PR3 standards available here: <https://www.resolve.ngo/site-pr3standards.htm>

1. Adhere to the Zero Waste Hierarchy

As packaging comprises 40% of plastic demand, returnable packaging has the potential to eliminate more plastic waste than any other intervention, while also reducing carbon emissions and system costs at a much greater rate than other interventions^{4,5,6}. As such, returnable packaging systems must be prioritized over recycling and other single-use systems and waste management.

2. Support reuse standards

To benefit industry, governments, communities, and other stakeholders, the Treaty must support global cooperation on reuse standards. Standards are the only way to ensure a swift and affordable transition to returnable packaging. These standards will also serve the recycling industry by ensuring containers can be easily recycled after multiple uses.

3. Fund standardized reuse

The cost savings potential of returnable packaging is enormous, both from direct and indirect costs. But early adopters will face higher costs, just as solar pioneers did. Funding mechanisms must prioritize standardized returnable packaging infrastructure, such as packaging return points, collection trucks, and wash facilities. In developing regions, there is an opportunity to leapfrog over more traditional waste management systems including recycling. Funding mechanisms must also support workers transitioning into the reuse economy. National Action Plans should fund the early costs of returnable packaging in government institutions, as well as establish subsidies, tax incentives, and preferential funding mechanisms for businesses and communities that establish standardized reuse.

4. Establish the World Reuse Organization

The Global Plastic Treaty must establish a [World Reuse Organization](#) wherein global standards and technology transfer can be deployed to align disparate reuse initiatives⁷. Balanced representation from labor, consumers, communities, governments, industry, and the public is needed to guide the transformation to a better packaging paradigm.

Only the global community can enable and safeguard this vital solution for global commerce.

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⁴ The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Breaking the Plastic Wave: A Comprehensive Assessment of Pathways Towards Stopping Ocean Plastic Pollution*, 2019. See Figure 17 on Page 41, available here: https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2020/10/breakingtheplasticwave_mainreport.pdf

⁵ Rethink Plastic and Break Free From Plastic, *Reusable Solutions: How Governments Can Help Stop Single-Use Plastic Pollution*, 2019. Available here: https://rethinkplasticalliance.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/bffp_rpa_reusable_solutions_report.pdf

⁶ EarthShift Global, *The Case of Reusable PET Bottles vs Single Use: Screening Results*, 2021.

⁷ World Reuse Organization information available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hQVwdGLg57NbmQ1q5FgsLiJmh9czRU4xb7ExVWVw1vQ/edit>