

Plastic Packaging and E-waste:

Regional Policy Priorities for Circular Transitions

This factsheet presents key gaps and policy-level recommendations for East and Southern Africa's circular economy transition, focusing on plastic packaging and electronic and electrical waste (e-waste). Insights are based on an initial mapping study conducted across 13 ESA countries.

The Case for Circular Economies in Africa

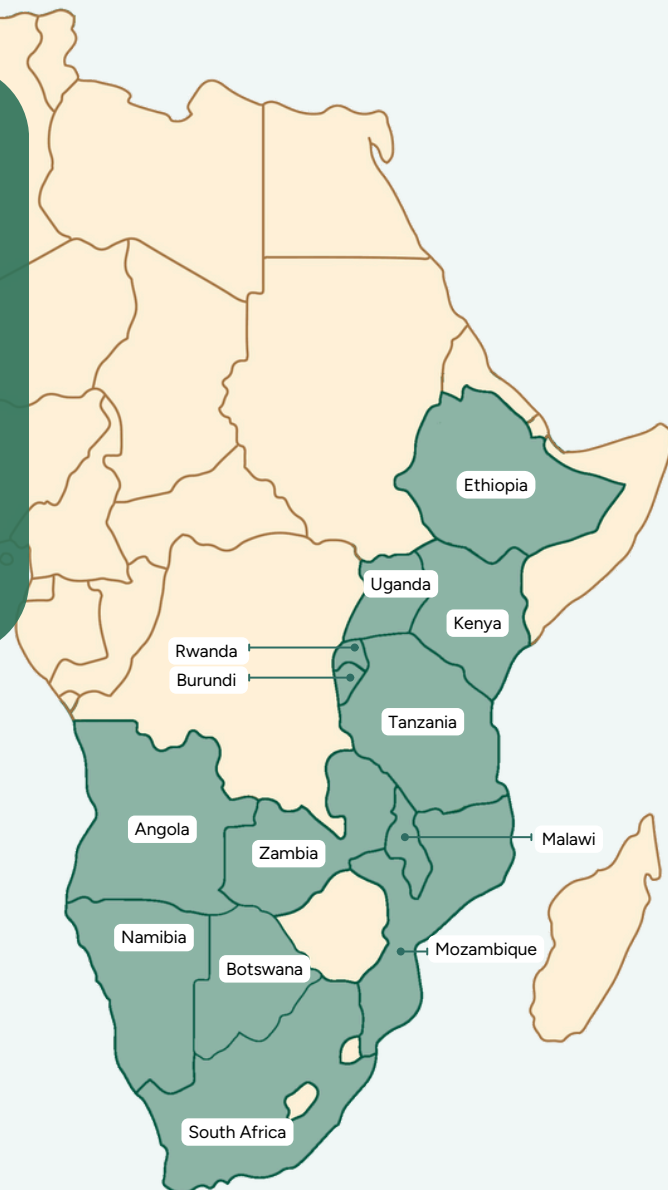
A circular economy keeps resources in use for as long as possible, extracting maximum value before they're returned to the environment—eliminating waste and pollution by design, rather than simply recycling. For Africa's developing economies, circular approaches offer pathways to leapfrog linear consumption patterns while creating local jobs and protecting valuable natural resources. The African Union launched the Continental Circular Economy Action Plan for Africa (2024-2034) in 2025, which aims to steer the continent toward cleaner, more competitive development pathways.

About SWITCH-2-CE in ESA: A Regional Multi-Country Transition Programme

SWITCH to Circular Economy in East and Southern Africa (SWITCH-2-CE in ESA) fosters an inclusive transition to a circular economy (CE) by working to enable policy frameworks, develop skilled workers, support SME participation, and improve financing mechanisms for circular businesses.

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Key Insights: Plastic Packaging and E-waste in the ESA region

Regional Snapshot: Plastic Packaging

Global plastic production exceeds 400 million tonnes annually¹ and Sub-Saharan Africa is projected to use **six times more plastics in 2060** compared to 2019¹. In East and Southern Africa, data gaps and the absence of standardised tracking methods across borders hinder understanding of plastic flows. The current policy landscape is fragmented and largely waste management focused, lacking the systemic circular economy lens to enable up- and midstream interventions.

Available studies from ESA countries indicate relatively low plastic waste (6–41 kg/year)² compared to major plastic-producing nations in Asia (58–74 kg/year)², with correspondingly lower per capita leakage (~1 kg vs ~5 kg²). However, **rapid urbanisation, economic growth, and population expansion** are driving rising plastic use across ESA, particularly single-use packaging.

In spite of a policy downstream focus, recycling and waste management is generally poorly developed. Thus, rapid growth in plastic consumption without considering end of life, will likely overwhelm already stressed systems.



Regional Snapshot: E-waste

E-waste is the world's fastest-growing waste stream, with global generation reaching a record 62 million tonnes in 2022, an 82% increase since 2010, and projected to grow another 33% to reach 82 million tonnes by 2030³. Yet only 22.3% was officially collected and recycled³, leaving the vast majority unmanaged and contributing to a 53% increase in greenhouse gas emissions from global e-waste between 2014 and 2020⁴.

While ESA's per capita e-waste generation remains relatively low at 2.8 kg, slightly higher than Africa's continental average (2.5 kg) but far lower than Asia (6.6 kg) or Europe (17.6 kg)³—Africa bears a disproportionate burden, with over **60% of the continent's e-waste coming from imports**³, particularly from Europe into North, East and West Africa⁵.

The continent has the lowest formal **e-waste collection and recycling rate globally at just 0.7%**³, with collection and processing largely handled by the informal sector under unsafe conditions, while illegal imports and smuggling continue to flood local markets. Despite these challenges, the electronics repair and refurbishment market in Africa is valued at an estimated \$25.7 billion⁶, highlighting significant economic potential for circular approaches.

¹ OECD. Global Plastics Outlook. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022). doi:10.1787/de747aef-en.

² IUCN. As UNEA5 kicks off, ground-breaking plastic pollution hotspotting results published for seven countries in Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean. <https://iucn.org/news/eastern-and-southern-africa/202102/unea5-kicks-ground-breaking-plastic-pollution-hotspotting-results-published-seven-countries-asia-africa-and-mediterranean> (2022).

³ Baldé, C. P. et al. Global E-Waste Monitor 2024. (2024).

⁴ Singh, N. & Ogunseitan, O. A. Disentangling the worldwide web of e-waste and climate change co-benefits. Circular Economy 1, 100011 (2022).

⁵ Baldé, C. P., D'Angelo, E., Luda, V., Deubzer, O. & Kuehr, R. Global Transboundary E-Waste Flows Monitor - 2022. (2022).

⁶ Johnson, S. Elevating the Repair Economy. <https://tomkat.stanford.edu/news/elevating-repair-economy> (2024).

Key Policy Barriers and Recommendations across the ESA region

The following barriers and recommendations focus on enabling policy frameworks across the region, recognising that comprehensive circular transitions also require skilled workers, SME support, and improved financing mechanisms.

Barrier 1:

Limited & inconsistent data undermines effective policy design & monitoring

Fragmented, scarce, and non-standardised data on waste and material flows prevents governments from accurately assessing circularity performance or comparing progress across countries. For plastics, reliable information is largely restricted to trade data, while inconsistent reporting, except in the case of e-waste, makes meaningful regional benchmarking difficult. A more balanced policy approach is required that moves away from a heavy focus on downstream interventions (such as recycling) to also include upstream and midstream interventions (such as product design), which can be informed by both quantitative and qualitative evidence. To address these data gaps and enable evidence-based policymaking, the following actions are recommended:



Establish standardised data-collection methods and develop a region-wide harmonised circular economy data framework.



Strengthen national statistical systems to capture comprehensive waste generation and treatment data, including disaggregated information on plastics and electronics across production, collection, and treatment phases.



Integrate upstream and midstream targets (qualitative e.g., design guidelines and quantitative) into policy frameworks to comprehensively address plastics and electronics value chain.



SWITCH to Circular Economy in East and Southern Africa (SWITCH-2-CE in ESA) Programme

Fostering an inclusive transition to a circular economy

Barrier 2:

Circular economy concepts remain poorly understood, with fragmented policy frameworks

The absence of a shared understanding and consistent definition of CE concepts among institutions and policymakers limits their ability to design effective, forward-looking strategies. This gap means that opportunities to reduce waste, extend product lifecycles, and conserve resources are often overlooked at the national level. The challenge is compounded by fragmented policy frameworks, where responsibility for CE action typically rests with a single environmental ministry rather than being shared across economic, industrial, trade, and social departments. As a result, policies remain siloed, and key instruments such as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes are either missing or weakly enforced. Building a coherent policy environment for CE transitions will require:



Foster CE knowledge and capacity among policymakers; consider strengthening CE governance within regional economic communities and national governments; collaborate with regional organisations advocating for circular economy adoption.



Develop national circular economy roadmaps with measurable targets and monitoring indicators, ensuring a systemic approach across departments and connection with broader socio-economic and environmental policies as well as funding for implementation.



Capacitate stakeholders through national workshops and structured knowledge-exchange platforms to strengthen understanding and implementation of EPR; for countries with established EPRs, explore technical assistance to help Producer Responsibility Organisations achieve circularity objectives while meaningfully integrating informal-sector workers into scheme governance.

Barrier 3:

Regional trade and policy frameworks do not yet support harmonised circular economy action

Circular economy concepts are growing across all three regional economic organisations (SADC, COMESA and EAC), but implementation remains fragmented and limited. Lack of regional standards on plastics production and e-waste management, combined with insufficient mechanisms for sharing best practices and scaling successful initiatives among countries with similar challenges, limits regional progress. Advancing regional harmonisation and collaboration requires the following priority actions:



Establish regional working groups to set standards for e-waste management (safe handling, recycling, disposal) and facilitate regional trade alignment, building on EACO's Regional E-Waste Management Strategy and its focus on harmonised regulations.



Build on existing regional economic organisation efforts to establish standards for plastic packaging composition and transition away from toxic materials.



Facilitate structured public-private collaboration mechanisms, convened by independent organisations, to accelerate circularity initiatives in plastics and electronics. This could include co-investment models, knowledge-sharing platforms, and joint pilot programmes.

Addressing these barriers through coordinated regional action will be essential for East and Southern Africa to unlock the economic, environmental, and social benefits of circular economy transitions in plastic packaging and e-waste.