



# **WHERE NOW FOR PLASTIC PACKAGING?**

**With the Recycling Myth  
Exposed, Time's Up for  
Disposability**

**MAY 2025**

[reusefoundation.org](https://reusefoundation.org)

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Join REUSE Foundation as we drive meaningful progress toward a sustainable and circular future

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# WE NEED TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT PLASTIC PACKAGING

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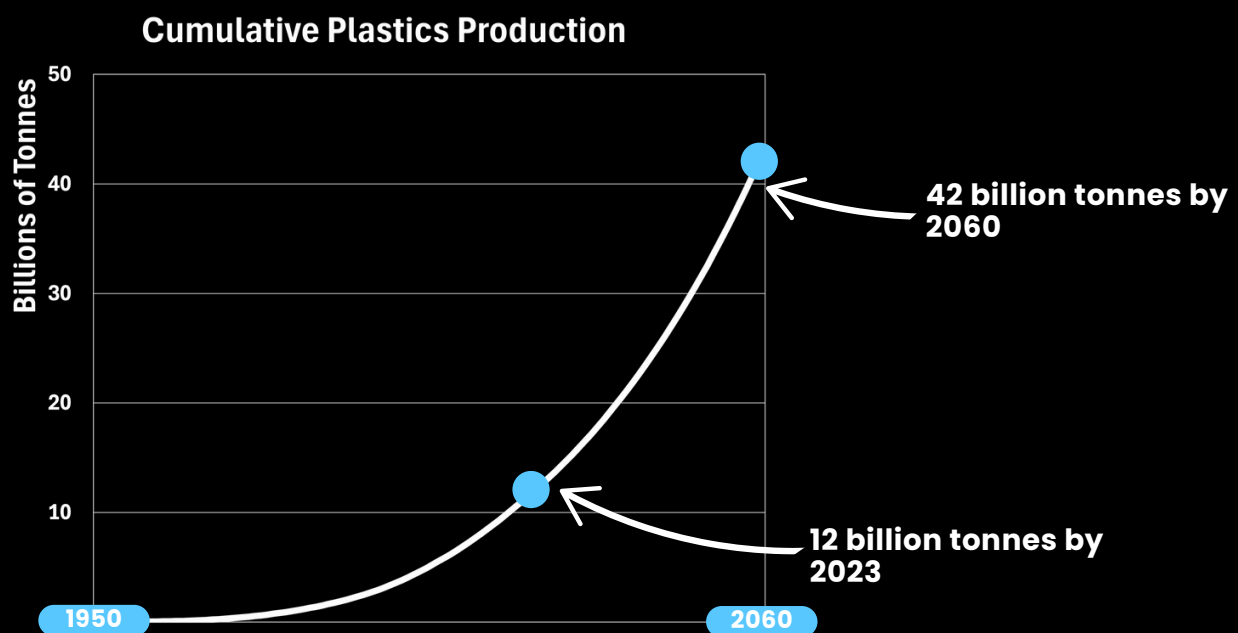
**Over the last 70 or so years, plastic has revolutionized human life by providing lightweight, durable and cost-effective materials for countless applications.**

Its versatility makes modern conveniences possible, from household goods to large-scale infrastructure

Plastic use and the waste that results is still accelerating.

In 2022, OECD estimated that on current trends the amount of plastic we produce will almost triple by 2060.

This means that by 2060 we will have produced over 42 billion tonnes of plastic, much of it now in landfill or leaked to the environment.



**A glaring problem is that much of the plastic is used wastefully. Around half of all plastic is for packaging, almost all of it used once and discarded.**

But while the amount of plastic used is accelerating, we're starting to understand its impact on our environment and our own health. Microplastics are expected to reduce agricultural yield globally as well as lower fish stocks. And they've been implicated in a wide range of diseases and ailments that affect humans.

We urgently need a solution and have been told recycling is the answer.

# WE'RE TOLD RECYCLING WORKS, BUT IT'S A LIE

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**We're encouraged to sort and recycle our plastic, but plastic recycling doesn't work.**

Here's why:

We don't have the capacity to recycle plastic and won't have for decades. OECD estimates that globally just 9% of plastic is currently recycled and by 2060 this will only reach 17% (under its baseline scenario). The rest is burnt, goes to landfill or escapes to the environment.



Even when plastic is separated by households for recycling, by far the majority goes to incineration or landfill, neither of which are circular solutions. In the UK, for example, almost half of all UK plastic waste is incinerated for energy recovery, with 25 percent sent to landfills and just 12 percent recycled in UK reprocessing facilities. The rest is shipped abroad, ostensibly for 'recycling', but research shows most is either burnt, goes to landfill or is dumped in the environment. Most countries have considerably leakier systems with much more plastic reaching terrestrial and marine environments.

And even if plastic is actually recycled, it's not a great solution. Recycled plastic degrades and its toxicity rises. It can typically only be recycled once or twice before it must become waste.

Recycled plastic usually needs to be blended with a larger amount of virgin plastic, over 99% of which comes from fossil fuels, before it can be reused, especially for food-grade applications.

Using recycled plastic effectively ensures ongoing demand for virgin plastic and fossil fuel. It's not at all a circular solution.



# WE ALREADY HAVE A WAY TO PREVENT SINGLE-USE PLASTIC: **REUSE**

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**Fortunately, we have a solution.** For plastic packaging, other than removing plastic entirely, reuse is the best solution to plastic waste. Numerous environmental and development bodies say reuse is the key to solving the plastics crisis.



Shifting to reuse solutions has the potential to reduce waste from plastic packaging by 90%. World Economic Forum says reusing just 10% of plastic products would reduce the amount of plastic waste reaching the ocean by 50%.

**Some of the largest CPG companies also acknowledge the plastic crisis and need for reuse.**

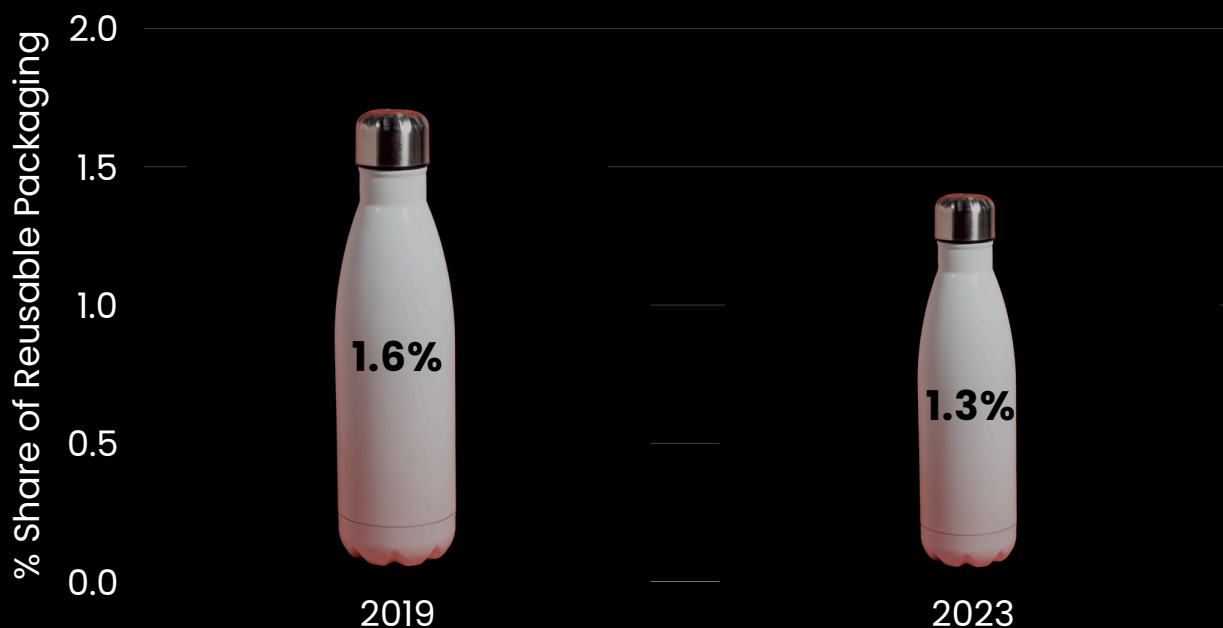


# BUT COMPANIES CONTINUE TO NEGLECT REUSE

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**Despite the potential of reuse to make a difference, companies are failing to implement reuse solutions and are instead sticking with disposable plastic packaging and perpetuating the illusion that recycling works.**

## Reuse is at a very low level and falling



The best data we have on reuse adoption by companies is from the brands and retailer signatories to the Global Commitment . These show that, as a share of packaging, reuse fell from 1.6% in 2019 to 1.3% in 2023.

This despite growing evidence that consumers are keen for brands to offer more reuse and refill options. A 2025 study from GoUnpackaged found that 68% of 2,000 UK adults said they would integrate reuse into weekly shopping if the solutions were convenient.

It is true that introducing reuse brings challenges, but it is also true that many successful companies offer products and solutions that shows reuse can be economically viable.

With a concerted effort and sufficient investment, solutions are within reach.



# COMPANIES OVERLOOK REUSE BECAUSE THEY ARE ENCOURAGED TO FOCUS ON RECYCLING

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**By far the most important effort to manage plastic packaging is the Global Commitment, a program conceived and led by The Ellen MacArthur Foundation and The United Nations Environment Program.**

Its scope is impressive, uniting: “...over 1,000 organisations from across the world, including businesses representing 20% of all plastic packaging produced globally and over 50 government signatories”.

The Global Commitment seeks to make plastic packaging use more circular by changing its composition, promoting recycled content over virgin plastic and removing non-recyclable elements.

There is no specific target for reusable packaging. Instead, reuse is bundled in a target to make packaging 100% ‘reusable, recyclable or compostable’. This leaves signatories free to focus on the easiest element – recyclable – which they typically achieve by removing non-recyclable plastics and replacing them with plastic that can technically be recycled.



Since the Global Commitment started in 2018 signatories overall have moved from some 60% of plastic packaging being ‘reusable, recyclable or compostable’ to 70% in 2023.

Almost all the achievement towards this target is due to making the plastic more ‘recyclable’. The share of plastic packaging that is reusable is small and has fallen, and the share that is compostable has remained at zero.

**While progress against this target sounds promising, it doesn't help solve the plastics crisis.** The target effectively just encourages companies to do something of negligible benefit and perpetuates linear supply chains while claiming progress toward 'circular' solutions.

Plastic recycling is more a cover than a solution.

To compound matters, the definition of 'recyclable' is poorly constructed.

## THE 'RECYCLABLE' FARCE

*The mis-definition of 'recyclable'*

The Global Commitment deems a plastic 'recyclable' if it is recycled in practice and at scale: **recycled at a rate of at least 30% in multiple regions representing 400 million people.**

400 million is just 5% of the world's population and can be reached, for example, by selecting the EU and a few other countries with good recycling capability. It overlooks the fact that in most areas of the world these plastics are not even captured in waste streams, never mind recycled.

Under this definition, therefore, **a plastic can be designated as 'recyclable' if it has a global recycling rate of just 1.5%,** even if the companies don't actually sell their products in those regions.

The result is that the Global Commitment puts a lot of effort into classifying different plastics as 'recyclable', even though it knows most of the plastics will not be recycled and are almost certain to end up burnt, in landfill or in our environment.

As the callout above shows, the Global Commitment's definition of 'recyclable' is lax and very distant from what most people understand from the term.

**And all the while companies focus on changing the composition of their plastic packaging to make it more 'recyclable', they continue to increase the amount of plastic they use: since 2018 brand and retail signatories' plastic use is up 6.5%, with no cap in sight.**



# TIME FOR ACTION

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We need to move faster and push for solutions that work. Instead of focusing on recycling and permitting business as usual, we need genuinely circular solutions that prevent plastic waste.

**For plastic packaging, reuse is the best option we have.**

Support REUSE Foundation as we work for change, promoting circular solutions that make a difference, funding innovative solutions in low-income countries and working to change consumer habits.

***Let's tackle the plastic crisis together!***

- Donate to help us continue our work

Donate with  
**JustGiving**

- Get in touch to discuss supporting a particular project or campaign

- Interested in reuse? Why not *join a study*? We're embarking on a investigation into what hinders reuse and what makes it work. Covering the largest 20 markets worldwide, over 10 product categories and with detailed interviews and analysis, it will be an invaluable resource for CPG companies as they work to solve the plastics crisis.

# ABOUT REUSE FOUNDATION

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REUSE Foundation is a registered charity working to develop and support pragmatic solutions that reduce our reliance on plastic and can deliver change at scale. It's a broad coalition that brings together experts in the field, reuse companies, refill brands, entrepreneurs, consultants, practitioners and other motivated individuals and organisations.

We are more than advocates—we are doers. From supporting grassroots innovations like India's **Beat the Sachet** project to upcoming campaigns like **Refill. Not Landfill!**, we are dedicated to driving meaningful change in developed and developing economies.

BEAT THE  
SACHET!



**Beat the Sachet in India shows that refill solutions can work for low-income communities**

## Find out more

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