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USE-IT

Waste Not, Want Not

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WASTE NOT, WANT NOT

They say that one person's trash is another person's treasure. This couldn't be truer than when talking about USE-IT, the veritable Wombles of South Africa's NGOs. USE-IT research waste to develop new uses for the things we throw away; we spoke with Chris Whyte, USE-IT's Managing Director, to learn more about the group's current projects and their vision for the future of the South African recycling sector.

WRITTEN BY ALICE INSTONE-BREWER

USE-IT'S MISSION IS A SIMPLE ONE: to prevent wastage. They aim to achieve this goal by adding to the technology, facilities and interest in South Africa's recycling arena. To do so, they are committed to researching waste materials in search of new uses that will justify further investment in their recovery and re-processing, as well as working to develop new methods and innovations to improve efficiency in the growing sector.

Unlike similar NGOs, USE-IT work with all types of waste, from the organic waste that is utilised by bioenergy plants (such as wood, garden clippings, food, sewage sludge, agricultural waste and industrial food and beverage processing waste), to less commonly used forms of 'rubbish' such as tyres, electronic waste, demolition waste, chemical waste, hydrocarbon waste and packing materials. As Chris Whyte explains; "Essentially, anything that is currently considered waste is what we would consider potential resources to unlock the green economy."

As well as trying to create a greener future, USE-IT hope to create jobs, both in a direct sense through their operations in South Africa, and in the long-term as their research develops new industries and processes. In a country with 27.7% employment (a statistic that is believed by many bodies to actually be much higher), this is as important a goal as USE-IT's main mission.

"The current state of the recycling and waste beneficiation sector could at best be considered 'emerging'", says Whyte, referencing national statistics that show South Africa recycles less than 10% of what it sends to landfill sites. USE-IT's research aims to find new and viable uses for this waste in order to divert large amounts of it away from landfill and towards a productive alternative. However, whilst progress is slow, Whyte is confident for recycling's future, claiming that in certain areas, healthy, ambitious growth is starting to occur. "Recycling is certainly growing, and as the success of the sector starts to impact significantly on the GDP, as we expect it to do, then we should see exponential growth."

Currently, one of the largest challenges facing the sector is a lack of supporting legislation; "There are huge challenges and obstacles facing the sector. Legislation, regulation and compliance has not really kept pace with it, and under the current framework doing business in this sector is difficult." Developing technologies and sectors are already a financial gamble for businesses - a problem that is impacting green economy solutions the world over. Where there is not legislative support, this hurdle becomes even greater. However, municipalities and local government bodies are beginning to get involved; "We are now seeing a more open-door policy with the government, and currently there are active and exciting initiatives bringing the government sector and private sector together to work towards unlocking these issues, and to pave a way forward for a more enabling business environment."

As this business environment changes, USE-IT hope their research and development will have prepared the way for a slate of innovations. One of the key areas the company are looking to develop is the recycled plastics arena, which is gradually beginning to pick up speed. Their aim is to convert plastics into a liquid energy that is able to replace fuels for lighting, cooking and even generators which are heavily used throughout Africa's more remote locations. This energy would be created from plastics that would have otherwise polluted African waters, and its recovery and processing is estimated to create thousands of jobs nation-wide.

USE-IT are also proud to be embarking on the construction of their greatly anticipated Hammarsdale Waste Beneficiation Centre: an eco-industrial hub centred on recycling and waste beneficiation activities. "This is a green industrial development designed with green intentions. It will be the first of its kind in Africa, and has recently attracted the attention of the national government, who now want to drive this forwards as a priority project," Whyte tells us proudly. This project has been in the works for several years, with legislative and planning delays slowing the process down every step of the way, but USE-IT's frustration finally seems to be at an end.

With challenges facing the developing sector, it is key for USE-

IT and similar companies to work together and pool their resources. "In terms of what we do at USE-IT there really is no competition. There are other agencies across South Africa where there is an overlap in what we do, but because of the emerging state of the sector we all find that collaboration is better than competition."

These collaborations are not just with friendly rivals, but with investors and supporting partners who believe in what USE-IT are doing. These partnerships are particularly crucial when there is a lack of national legislative support. "USE-IT is nothing without its partnerships," agrees Whyte. "Our strongest relationship is with the eThekwini Municipality, who currently provide the bulk of our operational funding and support us in any way they can when it comes to dealing within the complex quagmire of 'administration'. They have provided back-up and support with co-financiers and provided guarantees and structures when we leverage external funds…We could not have gotten to this point without them."

USE-IT's other key partners include the National Treasury, through their support with the Jobs Fund, and the DBSA and Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) via the Green Fund. "We have had some great partnerships with other funding agencies such as TIKZN, SEDA, SEFA, NYDA, Invotech, TIA and other NGO's like LifeCo, Sophia Foundation, Waste Knot, KZN Recycling Forum and too many others to mention. More importantly, every organisation we have assisted, established, facilitated or developed becomes part of our partnership network, and this expands continuously."

As Whyte said, this pool keeps growing. "We work with everyone from individual community members to cooperatives, Enterprise development, SMME's, large corporates, public sector, civic organisations and other NGO's." As well as conducting their own research programmes, the company provides and analyses data for other companies, provides policy advice, assesses market needs, offers training, and even offers support to groups trying to leverage their own project funding. Finally, they use their ever-expanding contacts to offer networking between companies, laying foundations for the future of the country's recycling not only through the research they conduct, but through the relationships they enable.

Personnel-wise, USE-IT is only a small entity, with four permanent staff and eight staff currently contracted on particular projects. However, in an emerging field, an economic approach to research pays – in the past eight years of operations, the company has consistently shown the eThekwini Municipality an impressive 1500% return on their investment and created more than 2400 jobs in the sector. "There are no other companies in the world who can claim to achieve what we have done with such limited

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resources, but it does take its toll. We are currently stretching out to find additional resources to take some of the pressure off the current team. Unfortunately, in this industry it is relatively easy to fund project developments, but nobody wants to fund operational costs."

There may be pressures, but Whyte and his team take great satisfaction from seeing what their work can achieve. As well as the Hammarsdale Waste Beneficiation Centre and their work in plastics, the company is currently securing finances for their glass recycling initiatives, which they predict will create jobs in each province. Currently, the glass recycling sector lacks facilities, which in turn makes the process non-profitable: USE-IT's work has shown that over 30 products currently imported or created with mined materials in the country can in fact be made from recycled glass, which greatly increases its perceived value and makes this a sector worth further expansion. They have also created Africa's first 5-Star rated EcoStandard building product from recycled materials, using the waste soil and rubble that currently fills up 40% of their landfills. Their impressive portfolio hasn't gone unnoticed. "In January this year, we were selected as one of the top six global finalists in Circular Economic Development by the World Economic Forum's Circular Awards. It was an honour to be ranked amongst the world leaders in what we do."

On top of their numerous projects, the prolific and apparently never-sleeping USE-IT are trying to fund a media project that they hope will educate the population on issues of recycling, sustainability and green business. The project will be a TV documentary series titled The Green Journey. "The concept is to not only highlight the problems we are facing nationally, but to showcase the current solutions we have. We want to raise awareness of the opportunities that are available for unlocking the green economy in this country and creating many thousands of jobs. This will extend beyond waste to also showcase energy, water, food, education, health, infrastructure development and community upliftment."

USE-IT are a small team with giant plans, and so far, they've shown that they have the drive, organisation and ability to pull them off. Whyte seems tireless as he talks about the future, propelled by passion for his country and for what his group are doing: "USE-IT has not even scratched the surface of the market opportunities in recycling and waste beneficiation yet, and we plan aggressive expansion in the coming years. We are trying to secure the resources we need to drive this expansion, and after eight years of continued success, we have the track-record to prove that we can do it and the model to show that this works."

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