

# FFT Ep 1 Transcript New

[00:00:00] **Redi Tlhabi:** It was almost a decade ago that I sat down for a conversation that would forever impact me, but a personal journey actually began that day too. So it was September, 2013 and I was interviewing three great minds for Al Jazeera's global talk show, South 2 North, which I presented at that time. Our conversation really centered around waste.

[00:00:24] That is garbage, trash, rubbish, whatever you want to call it. And the figures I'd been reading, the numbers I heard that day really, really scared me. We were heading for a global landfill catastrophe if something was not done and fast. Yet today, nine years later, I walk into a supermarket and I still see shelves and shelves of packaging plastic from floor to ceiling.

[00:00:52] And I know I'm not the only one. I'm sure you might have thought about it too. Why don't the retailers do something about it? [00:01:00] With 90% of our waste ending up in landfills in South Africa, what happens to all these tubs and bottles and packets? The ones that go to landfill, the ones I recycle, the ones that I can't recycle.

[00:01:15] I'm Redi Tlhabi, and this is Food For Thought, the first episode of a podcast designed to discover the big, small, and unexpected stories that are gripping the global food landscape brought to you by Woolworths. Just a quick note that the content shared on this podcast is for discussion and information purposes only and should not be taken as advice.

[00:01:37] The views and opinions discussed here are those of the podcast host and guests, and do not represent those of Woolworths. So let's get going. In this episode, we'll explore the reasons we got here and what we can do about it, and meet everyday heroes who are at the forefront of sustainability. You'll discover things that will make you say, "What?

[00:01:59] I didn't know that." And find out exactly what happens to that plastic tub and several tons of other packaging, if you don't wash it thoroughly before chucking it in the recycling bin. I'll get personal too, sharing my own journey towards a deeper understanding of the complexities of the food landscape. I'll share my questions and concerns and the ways I'm growing as a consumer in the 21st century, and you'll hear how I went from feeling overwhelmed and helpless to becoming empowered, an active participant in shaping the future around me.

[00:02:42] As a broadcast journalist, my career has taken me around the country and around the world uncovering the most unbelievable stories, searching for the facts in unexpected places. But one question for which I haven't yet found a satisfactory answer is, why so much packaging? [00:03:00] Every time I shop for groceries, I wonder why more is not being done to eliminate the waste we produce as a society.

[00:03:08] I decided it was time to get answers. I wanted to know why our retailers don't stock more loose fruit and vegetables as our ancestors would've consumed. What our supermarkets are doing, if anything, to reduce the plastic that ends up in landfills, and I wanted to know what I can do to play my part in lessening the burden on our environment.

[00:03:32] The obvious place to find answers of course was from my go-to grocery store, Woolworths, which has a vision to be one of the world's most responsible retailers. I wanted to get answers about their food packaging.

[00:03:45] Long regarded as a pioneer of sustainable business practices in South Africa, Woolworths has eliminated plastic shopping bags from stores, and their good business journey addresses everything from energy and climate change to water and sustainable farming.

[00:04:00] But I asked Latiefa Behardien, Chief Technology and Sustainability Officer at Woolworths Food about the packaging of food in South Africa. And what I heard took me by surprise.

[00:04:10] **Latiefa Behardien:** In previous years, uh, most of us, our forefathers lived on farmland and therefore we grew our own food. And, uh, the distance between food was basically from the lands, in the fields, right onto our plate. With rapid urbanisation

[00:04:26] Uh, we have become far more removed from farmlands and therefore our food has to travel a great distance. There are many touchpoints associated with that, uh, distance between farm to fork, and we therefore need to make sure that our food lands very safely onto our plate. So to ensure our food products are safe, we really need to take into consideration all preparation, handling,

[00:04:52] storage and transport related to ensure that our food is free from any foodborne illnesses. Packaging also protects [00:05:00] our product from a quality perspective. Light can impact the quality of our product, um, and it can change the colour. Secondly, uh, packaging also protects the product. If we talk

about safety, we talk about external factors, um, like chemical, biological, and physical.

[00:05:18] And that's all associated with the handling process along the supply chain.

[00:05:24] **Redi Tlhabi:** These various threats to food, which has to travel long distances to our cities, was something I actually had never fully considered yet it made so much sense, but that wasn't all. Don MacFarlane, Packaging Senior Technologist at Woolworths, explained that legislation is a factor too.

[00:05:43] **Don MacFarlane:** That's 100% correct. Absolutely. Packaging has many hats and many critical areas that it needs to fill. One of it is the legal side. You've got to name your product and provide the correct information as per the [00:06:00] legislation of a specific country. So you've got to provide ingredients, list them in a descending order of mass.

[00:06:07] You've got to identify allergens and I, and, and prescribe them in the format, as per the legislation. You've got to identify the country of origin, the name and address of the manufacturer, for obvious reasons. And then there's batch numbers, use by dates and best before dates that also need to appear legally on your packaging.

[00:06:29] The contents, or the weight of the product must be declared in metric. So too agricultural products must comply with the relevant agri standards in this specific country.

[00:06:41] **Redi Tlhabi:** Perhaps most importantly, I discovered the extent to which food packaging actually prevents food waste. I remembered that when I did the Al Jazeera interview in 2013, I learned some facts that shocked me.

[00:06:55] I was astounded when I read that at least a third of the world's food production goes to [00:07:00] waste. How do we justify that in a world that is so full of hungry and vulnerable people? And while packaging may be another type of waste altogether, the tragedy of food waste cannot be underestimated. Ralph Jewson shared some interesting insights with me.

[00:07:18] **Ralph Jewson:** And if you think that in 2017, WWF, uh, published a report that alluded to the fact that 10 million tons of food is lost to waste in South Africa every year. Now that's a lot of food that people could have eaten. Uh, even consider that South Africa is a country that struggles with this dynamic of, uh, social dynamic of people going to bed hungry, et cetera. So

there it, it plays a crucial role in delivering food and plays a crucial role in diverting, uh, food loss and waste.

[00:07:51] And one of the key things that it does do is it starts to extend shelf life. Um, and it starts to provide specific [00:08:00] solutions for, let's say, for example, meat where the barriers required in terms of the material used to, uh, the film over the pack, whatever starts to enhance the appearance. And everybody knows we shop to an extent based on appearance.

[00:08:13] Um, in the case of something like cucumber, uh, that thin film, uh, everybody recognises that thin plastic film is a, is a problematic material in the larger recycling landscape, but that film on a cucumber extends a shelf life by something like 12 days. So that's a crucial role, uh, that it plays in averting or, or, or stemming the loss of food.

[00:08:35] Um, in that it extends a shelf life, but it also extends a shelf life within your fridge at home. So it enables you to keep that longer and eat more of it. In a recent report published by CSOR, it was estimated that the amount of energy that went into producing food that typically is wasted in this country every year can power the city of Joburg for 16 weeks.

[00:08:59] The amount of water that [00:09:00] was used to produce that food, 600 Olympic swimming pools. That's a lot of resources that a country like ours can ill afford to waste.

[00:09:12] **Redi Tlhabi:** I was shocked to hear that about 90% of waste in South Africa is disposed of to landfills, meaning only 10% is recycled. After hearing these statistics from Ralph, I needed to hear some good news.

[00:09:26] If packaging is here to stay, that left me with the question, how can retailers improve the way they package? It was a conversation with Woolworths Product Development Manager Produce and Horti Sally Holderness, that really gave me some hope in this regard.

[00:09:42] **Sally Holderness:** So in our journey, um, to less embedded packaging as a produce team, it's really critical for us to understand each and every different type of product, whether it's a vegetable or a, or a piece of fruit or, um, a plant even.

[00:09:57] Um, and understanding how it reacts within and [00:10:00] without packaging and in different substrates. Um, and with our tomatoes, which were previously in a PET punnet, which in those days wasn't recyclable, um, we have

subsequently done work with one of our suppliers on, on really driving the industry to change around that, which is which landing shortly, which is really great and very exciting.

[00:10:21] But we looked at different substrates. So for example, board packaging was one of them using FSC, which is Forestry Stewards of Council paper, which is all happy paper. Um, we looked at a board punnet for our tomatoes with a PP lid, which meant that that was recyclable at the time. And obviously the, uh, board we used for the tomatoes would be a hundred percent recyclable because it was paper.

[00:10:46] And that was a really happy story because what in actual fact happened is that the tomatoes reacted really well with the board, so any little bits of moisture were absorbed by the board, and it actually improved our shelf life of tomatoes. So [00:11:00] we had less splitting and less molding, which was an absolute ideal situation.

[00:11:04] So, coming from that, we were super excited and obviously would've liked to roll it out to everything that we could. We did try a couple of things like lemons and pineapples, which worked perfectly as well. So really happy scenario there. We found a totally recyclable, um, a film that could hold them in place so that they didn't get any bruising or scratching in stores.

[00:11:26] Um, and then we also tried avos, which was, which was less easy. That was a long, long journey with many tears. Um, but we have had great success there. More success on our, on our harder skinned, um, varieties like Hass and our amazing gem avos. Um, and our fuerte green skins are a little more sensitive, so we have had a bit of a tricky time then it's taken a lot of engineering in terms of the packaging. So all of these things take many years, two, three years of in store trials to get right. Likewise, some things like [00:12:00] mushrooms, we would've loved to have put into craft punnets, like the tomatoes. Unfortunately, their respiration rate is extreme, so they, they're heavy breathers.

[00:12:09] And what happens then is that we get a lot of, uh, condensation in the packaging as well, so that causes kind of rotting and molding. So that wasn't ideal and unfortunately we haven't been able to come up with a, with a board solution there yet, but we are still looking at options for everything.

[00:12:26] **Redi Tlhabi:** I was beginning to understand that there was a lot more complexity around this issue than I'd ever realised. My attitude towards retailers was changing. I was starting to see that in many ways there were good

reasons for using packaging to provide food for urbanised populations, and that retailers are actually forced to choose between using adequate packaging and wasting food, a difficult choice no matter which angle you consider it from.

[00:12:51] A story about bananas shared with me by Sally, really brought home this point.

[00:12:58] **Sally Holderness:** That's also a really interesting [00:13:00] one. So we are actually looking at an alternative for bananas as well. But, um, bananas give off ethylene and ethylene is a, it has a ripening effect on fruit. So, um, whilst you know, the bananas all know their own ethylene, the bananas do, and you would've heard lots of old not old wives tales, but tricks and hacks about how to ripen other fruits is by putting a banana with them. And that's the effect that bananas have on other fruits. So we are looking at that at the moment In terms of, um, solutions, if we do remove the packaging, which we are keen to do, then we've got to relook the, what we call planogram.

[00:13:35] So where the fruit sits next to each other, some things are more susceptible to it, so they'd have to be separated from the loose bananas. Um, and then also, you know, we would do many, store trials, um, just to understand the effect of them being loose we do on our current loose offer, so we do have packaged and loose and on our loose offer, we do get a lot of bruising and a lot of scratching of the bananas. And that leads to food waste, which is [00:14:00] obviously something that we is very close to our hearts. And for us, food waste is just not an option. We work so hard on trying to minimise food waste, um, and look at solutions around that.

[00:14:12] **Redi Tlhabi:** Throughout these conversations I was having, I kept coming back to one thought. If our urban lifestyles deem packaging so important, could recycling be even more essential than I realised, and could it be the most effective solution to the world's growing landfill crisis? The answer, as you may have guessed, was yes. But first I wanted to understand the mysteries of those little recycling symbols on my plastic packaging.

[00:14:39] Is it true that plastic is not just plastic, but much more complex? As it turns out, the well-recognized chasing arrows symbol on plastic containers does not mean the product is recyclable. The little number inside the triangle tells the real story. I asked Roan Snyman, a circular [00:15:00] economy and SA Plastics Pact analyst at GreenCape to decode these symbols and learned some amazing and essential information.

[00:15:09] **Roan Snyman:** Um, yeah, so the, the seven plastic codes, it's obviously not very straightforward. It is very complex. Um, and it's not always just about, um, one of the codes being recyclable and the other not being recyclable. Um, usually the, the type of label used on the packaging or the contents of, of the product, um, all of that has an impact on the recyclability, um, of that specific item.

[00:15:34] So for, from a customer perspective, uh, the, the, the seven codes will always be confusing and complicated. Um, and that's why, uh, the, the South African Plastics Pact together with, with retailers, uh, we've been collaborating to, um, to introduce, uh, uh, a much simpler on-pack recycling, um, labelling system, which Woolworths has already been doing for, for a number of years.

[00:15:57] Uh, and the whole idea is to communicate more [00:16:00] effectively to customers so that they understand what are they supposed to do with that packaging, um, in their house or they're supposed to recycle it. Are they supposed to, to separate it out or are they supposed to discard it in, in their waste bin. Um, so the seven codes, uh, are usually referred to the type of material

[00:16:17] um, that the, the plastic is made of. So if you think of the number one, for example, usually beverage bottles, you know, cooldrink bottles, things like that. Um, that's the number one. And it is usually, um, highly recyclable. Um, but that all depends on, on what type of label is used. So, so that's why it's so important for, for companies to, to evaluate their packaging and to understand, uh, if, if there's anything that they're doing that's actually hampering something that, that should be recycled quite effectively, but is actually not being recycled, uh, just because of the type of label used or the type of, of adhesive used on the label or something like that.

[00:16:56] So it does become quite tricky. Um, it's important to, to keep in mind that, um, any packaging that you used, um, it doesn't matter what material needs to be processed in some way. It needs to be collected in some way and it needs to be recycled in some way. If, if you think of other materials alternatives like glass for example, um, glass can obviously also be recycled, but it's very, very heavy.

[00:17:20] So in, in terms of transport and logistics, it has a higher impact on, on carbon emissions in that way. Um, and if you think of biodegradable packaging on the other hand or compostable packaging, um, that's also not like a silver bullet solution. Um, because often, um, compostable packaging needs to

be processed in industrial composting systems, uh, which means that that material needs to be collected from customers.

[00:17:46] Uh, and it needs to find a way to get to an industrial composting facility, which in South Africa it's not really as widespread, um, as you would want.

[00:17:55] **Redi Tlhabi:** As I spoke to the sustainability experts at Woolworths, I was amazed to learn that since 2018, Woolworths has been on a journey to send zero packaging waste to landfills, and that they aim to ensure that all packaging will be reusable or recyclable by 2022.

[00:18:12] That is this year. Of course, zero packaging to landfill implies that consumers will actually recycle the packaging they use, and this is where the idea of the circular economy comes in. The circular economy refers to a model of production and consumption, which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing, and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible.

[00:18:40] This approach is not only vital to stop plastic pollution, but could also offer strong economic, social and climate benefits. By 2040, a circular economy has the potential to reduce the annual volume of plastics entering our oceans by 80% and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25%. It could also generate savings of 200 billion US dollars per year and create 700,000 net additional jobs.

[00:19:10] I wanted to know the best way for me, an individual South African, to make a difference in creating this circular economy and whether that was even possible.

[00:19:19] **Ralph Jewson:** If we start with the, with the understanding that, when we've finished using something i.e. end of life, be it packaging or whatever the case might be, there's an element of disposal that comes into play.

[00:19:32] So we've finished using an item of packaging and let's say for example, it's recyclable. Um, if we then connected to a system that will be able to recycle it, we need to go through sort of a few steps and one of the first things we kind of need to sort of just change our terms of reference on is throw away.

[00:19:56] There's no such thing as throw away. When you say, we throw it away, we put it in a in a hole, or we put it in a bin. When I say a hole, a hole in a set of bins or whatever the case might be, so there might be three holes in a big



bin, might say, recyclable plastics, paper, whatever the case might be. And we'll drop it in up and we'll walk away and it's away.

[00:20:16] So as far as we are concerned, problem solved. We've done a bit for recycling and everybody's happy. Well, if somebody comes along and puts something in the wrong bin and let's say for example, it's organic, so banana peel in the plastics bin, uh, could disrupt everything that happens thereafter. And when I say there's no such thing as away, so we'll walk away and we'll think, well, that's my job done.

[00:20:40] It's a way. It's not away, it's just somewhere else. It'll be collected, it'll be moved, and if it isn't recycled, it'll be taken over a hill far away where nobody sees it. A big hole will be dug, which is called a landfill, and they'll bury it, and it doesn't necessarily go away. It just waits there for something else to happen.

[00:21:04] And everybody will tell you that plastics takes years to decompose and, and, uh, so there's a whole problem that we sort of creating by sending it away over the hill in a hole. That's, that's a problem. So we need to start thinking about, so when we use plastic, we should be recycling it and to recycle it, we need, it needs to be clean.

[00:21:28] And when I say clean, it needs to be two things in terms of clean. It needs to be clean in terms of if it's got any food or any, uh, residue in it. Ideally that should be washed away or rinsed or washed or whatever, so that it is clean and then it should be clean in that it is a single waste or material type.

[00:21:48] Um, so let's use a good example, which is something that is quite good success in this country is PET. So whether it's a PET beverage bottle or a PET container that might have had food in it or whatever, you don't necessarily need to rinse the PET bottle because you put the cap on and it retains the contents.

[00:22:11] And typically it's a, a, a small residue and it'll be okay. Typically, it's also water and that's fine, but where there's food, um, that might present another challenge that needs to be rinsed so that when all the PETs collected, and also remember that all that PET collected may not be recycled today, tomorrow, or next month.

[00:22:30] It might hang around for a long time. It might even be sold into the international market where it is recycled in another country. Um, 'cause

recycling systems, like many things, are connected, uh, and not just regionally or locally, it might be internationally as well.

[00:22:46] **Redi Tlhabi:** In speaking to the team at Woolworths, I heard mention of a new recycling facility in Black Heath, Cape Town.

[00:22:52] Don MacFarlane was able to shed some light on this exciting new development.

[00:22:56] **Don MacFarlane:** One of the things about plastic, it's so varied and, and different. And therefore every plastic stream requires a recyclable fac recycling facility. And polyist or PET packaging, as you refer to, comes in many forms. And two of the most common forms found in the packaging industry is the rigid format that you would find for water bottles and mayonnaise jars, peanut butter jars, juice bottles.

[00:23:24] And then there's the other side, what we refer to as lightweight thermo forms. Those are your pots and your trays, and your skillets and punnets and cake domes. Those are also PET plastic, but not currently collected and recycled in South Africa. And the exciting news is that a local manufacturer of these packaging formats is setting up as we speak, setting up a multimillion rand recycling facility in Black Heath in Cape Town. It's scheduled to be online by the end of June, mid July. And then all these PET thermo forms these pots and trays and punnets and, and cake domes and sandwich wedges will be collected and recycled as well in South Africa. This is all part of our vision and our goal to have all our packaging recyclable on shelf.

[00:24:18] And it's something that we approached, uh, the company Zibo Plastics about, and this is how they responded, which we all very excited about.

[00:24:26] **Redi Tlhabi:** But of course, it's not only plastic that can be recycled, as Don pointed out.

[00:24:31] **Don MacFarlane:** Plastic is often spoken about, um, most commonly when it's when in, in the packaging environment. But there are other forms of packaging as well. Glass and metal packaging, paper board packaging. All these have established recycling streams in South Africa, although the collection of these glass metal paper, and even plastics are not up to scratch, and therefore our volumes of recycling is very low.

[00:24:59] But one of the things I want to point out is that metal packaging, for example, aluminium beverage cans are recycled in world class numbers in

South Africa, largely because of the value of the aluminium that the cans are made of. And those are some of the things that support good recycling numbers in South Africa.

[00:25:21] Other stumbling blocks like the cost of transporting packaging to recyclers, for example, glass, a very heavy product that's used for packaging. It's expensive to transport them to recyclers in and around the country, and so that affects the volume of recycled glass in South Africa.

[00:25:45] **Redi Tlhabi:** It made such an impact on me to discover that every ton of paper recycled saves 17 trees.

[00:25:52] And if all household paper was recycled, 750,000 cubic metres of landfill space would be saved a year. When it comes to glass, the energy saved from recycling, just one bottle can power a hundred watt light bulb for almost an hour. And every ton of glass recycled also saves 1.2 tons of raw materials. But I still kept coming back to plastic pollution.

[00:26:21] As I ploughed through the research, I came across something called the South African Plastics Pact. This pact brings together key stakeholders in the plastics, value chain businesses, governments, and NGOs behind a common vision to address plastic waste and pollution issues. GreenCape is the implementing organisation, and WWF SA is a supporting member.

[00:26:46] I was thrilled to discover that so many big brands from Woolworths to Coca-Cola and the Clicks Group, from Danone to Distell are members of the Pact. The Pact's roadmap to 2025 sets out an aim to see 70% of plastic packaging effectively recycled in South Africa. There were more surprises to come on this journey into the world of the circular economy, not least of which was a deep dive into the subject of the men and women we call waste pickers.

[00:27:17] In South Africa, the collection infrastructure to get recyclable packaging to a recycling facility is still largely left to our informal market of recyclers. These recyclers contribute in a large manner to ensuring plastic waste is put back into the system. I was fascinated to learn that according to a report by the CSIR, waste in South Africa has contributed 8.2 billion rands worth of resources into the South African economy. And that the recycling industry provides income opportunities for between 60,000 to 90,000 recyclers alone. Recycling is not just a matter of recovering recyclable material, it's a total economic system. I was intrigued by the work of Musa Chamane from Groundwork, a nonprofit environmental justice service, and developmental

organisation who has been instrumental in getting the Waste Pickers Association in South Africa off the ground.

[00:28:15] **Musa Chamane:** A waste picker it's someone who have dedicated his or her own life in making sure that the recycling industry, uh, does exist in this country. A waste pickers could be someone who's working at the landfill site or who's working on the streets, or who's working in the township. Uh, picking things like, uh, PET bottles, picking cans, picking plastics, picking, uh, paper, newspapers, and so on, for the purpose of recycling it, for the purpose of taking it to a buy back centre or to a recycling centre in exchange for cash.

[00:28:53] South African Waste Pickers Association was formed solely to, uh, fight for the rights of the vulnerable groups. In this case, it's waste pickers. Uh, in the early 2000s, uh, government, uh, did not want to hear anything to do with waste pickers or reclaimers, and, uh, we showed them a bigger picture as an environmental, uh, justice NGO we tried to explain to them to say they actually doing us a favour by saving the environment, by saving space at landfills and so on, by making sure that the climate impacts are mitigated through their recycling. So that's why it was formed. And for waste pickers, it was formed because they wanted the, to make sure that their rights are not infringed and they should continue having a livelihood, uh, that they've found for themselves.

[00:29:50] **Redi Tlhabi:** These recyclers who are responsible for 80 to 90% of the recycling done in South Africa play an integral and extremely valuable role in establishing the circular economy. It is quite ironic that we as residents discriminate against the people who go through the rubbish and that we are repulsed, that they will go through our waste instead of being repulsed with ourselves for producing so much waste.

[00:30:17] I also felt challenged to look out for these waste warriors and interact with them, to hear their stories, hear what I could do to help them not only earn a living, but prevent more waste going to landfill. After all the conversations I'd already had. I was starting to feel a lot more empowered and certainly motivated to take action in my day-to-day life.

[00:30:40] I had a newfound appreciation for the immense work it takes behind the scenes for a retailer like Woolworths to become more sustainable, and I was impressed by their attitude to do more and to keep growing and learning along the journey just like I was, like we all are. I had realised that perhaps the greatest difference I could make was to consume less.

[00:31:04] If I don't absolutely need it, I don't buy it, and I'll automatically reduce the amount of waste I send to landfill in my lifetime. And when I do make any purchase, I'm resolved to choose a brand with the least amount of packaging or the kind that can be reused, recycled, or composted. It is also an idea to look for products that are made from recycled material because if there's a demand for recycled plastic products, more plastic will be recycled and less will end up in landfill or polluting oceans.

[00:31:37] And finally, before I throw something away, I'm determined to think if there's any way it can be reused. We've been living in a disposable culture for so long that we sometimes forget to ask these kinds of questions. Taking what might be considered waste and transforming it into something useful and beneficial to society.

[00:31:57] And that's a story in which I'm more inspired and more equipped than ever to play a role. Food for Thought, indeed.

[00:32:04] I'm journalist, producer and author, Redi Tlhabi, host of Food for Thought, a podcast designed to discover the big, small, and unexpected stories that are gripping the global food landscape brought to you by Woolworths.

[00:32:19] Thank you for joining us. If you enjoyed this podcast, you can dig deeper at [www.woolworths.co.za](http://www.woolworths.co.za).

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