

South African startup Sonke collaborates with Unilever, the UK Government & EY to drive circular economy through refill

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA, June 16, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- [Sonke](#), a South African tech startup, has launched its first automated refill store – SKUBU – in Johannesburg, advancing its mission to revolutionise FMCG consumption in underserved communities by making essential goods more affordable and reducing single-use plastic waste.

According to an IUCN [study](#), South Africa contributes around 35% of plastic pollution leaking into waterways and the marine environment in Southern and East Africa. The issue is posing an increasing threat to people's health and livelihoods, as well as biodiversity.

In collaboration with [TRANSFORM](#), an impact accelerator led by Unilever, the UK Government's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and EY, Sonke is using the new store to test the viability of the refill model and promote consumer behavioural change. In addition to funding and in-kind business support, TRANSFORM has facilitated the enterprise's integration into Unilever's value chain. Sonke's refill store is dispensing products from Unilever brands including Sunlight and Handy Andy.

Customers can refill their own containers at bulk prices, eliminating single-use packaging and providing shoppers with cost savings of up to 60%. Trained SKUBU ambassadors will be on site to guide shoppers through the process and assist with using the refill machines.

The SKUBU store is also equipped with Internet of Things (IoT)-enabled technology, which allows live sales tracking, automated replenishment alerts, and real-time stock monitoring; ultimately, helping retailers to more efficiently respond to customer demand for essential goods.

By removing barriers and making refill convenient and approachable, Sonke aims to inspire a shift toward more sustainable consumption habits, normalising the refill culture in local communities.

Eben de Jongh, Founder and Managing Director at Sonke, said:

"For a refill model to scale, it must be accessible, affordable and responsive to the communities they serve. Our collaboration with TRANSFORM in launching SKUBU is critical in our journey to reach this goal. By combining technology with onsite support from our ambassadors, we are able to respond to consumer needs in real time, building a refill model that is approachable and

fits into everyday life.”

Angela Kow, TRANSFORM Plastics Lead at Unilever, said:

“Not only is Sonke’s store opening a major milestone for the enterprise, but it is also an important step for TRANSFORM. We’re proud to help pioneering enterprises like Sonke scale refillable packaging models. To do this, we need continued cross-industry collaboration and investment in inclusive infrastructure to help these enterprises thrive.”

The first SKUBU is located at Entrance 1 of Chuma Mall in Diepsloot, Johannesburg.

The launch of Sonke’s SKUBU store is part of TRANSFORM’s wider effort to support enterprises tackling plastic waste. By combining grant funding, business insight, practical experience, resources and networks, TRANSFORM funds and supports a range of enterprises to develop refill business models in Africa and Asia.

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About TRANSFORM

- TRANSFORM is an impact accelerator that unites corporates, donors, investors and academics to support visionary enterprises. Together, we test and scale new market-based solutions that build inclusive, sustainable economies, empower marginalised communities, and drive climate-resilient growth.
- We combine grant funding, business insight, practical experience, resources and networks. Our tailored approach creates evidence that we share widely to help leaders across the world solve global challenges.
- The launch of Sonke’s SKUBU store is part of TRANSFORM’s wider effort to support enterprises tackling plastic waste. We have funded and supported a range of enterprises, including Alner, Bopinc, Novek, Refillable and Smartfill, to develop refill business models in Africa and Asia.
- Established in 2015 and led by Unilever, the UK’s Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and EY, TRANSFORM is based on a desire to address urgent issues by learning from each other. We TRANSFORM lives by tackling global challenges through life-changing enterprise.
- Globally, TRANSFORM has supported 140+ enterprise projects across 19 countries and has reached over 18 million lives. For more information on TRANSFORM, visit: www.transform.global

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