

Burning plastic killing us slowly

By Gerald Tenywa

The blue-grayish smoke keeps Amelia Kagere busy as she waves her tiny hands to keep it away from her face. It is early in the morning and Kagere is firmly strapped on her mother's back who is lighting a charcoal stove with some of the plastic bags that litter their homestead in Kasokoso, Kireka, Wakiso district.

Kagere's mother does not know that burning plastic bags creates a much bigger problem. So, every weekend, she picks up any plastics her hands can land on and keeps them in one corner of her two roomed house.

"It has become easy to light the charcoal stove. I simply light the plastic bags under the charcoal on the stove," Ann Nantongo, Kagere's mother says.

Burning plastic bags is dangerous as they release toxic fumes that lead to impotence and birth defects among both human beings and animals, Dr David Ogaram, an expert in toxicology has revealed.

Ogaram points out that dangerous chemicals; dioxins and furans are produced when materials containing chlorine are exposed to heat.

He said globally, dioxins and furans are listed among the 12 deadliest chemicals, referred to as the dirty dozen or Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). The POPs are

toxic because they have the ability to damage and kill living organisms.

Other complications that can arise from exposure to Persistent Organic Pollutants are cancer and skin and teeth defects. He also said dioxins and furans affect the endocrine system, which produces hormones that influence biological and chemical reactions in the body.

Ogaram noted that most people and public institutions, particularly the health and urban authorities, get rid of waste by burning it.

"Burning plastic waste is a case of overcoming one problem and creating even a bigger one," Ogaram said.

"The toxic fumes also affect wild animals and accumulate in the fatty tissues of fish and red meat," he added.

"Uganda lacks a specific policy that deals with Persistent Organic Pollutants. The Government is silent on how to deal with pollutants," Ogaram said.

Dr Tom Okurut, the executive director of NEMA said the implementation of existing policies like the ban on plastic bags was failing because of lack of political will.

Activists on environment have been questioning why the policy to eliminate plastic bags was working in Rwanda, but has failed in Uganda.

About a decade ago, Uganda imposed a ban on plastic bags but the intervention is yet to bear any fruit.



In Rwanda, where the plastic bag ban has been reinforced, bread is packaged in bio-degradable wax paper

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"We still see *buveera* all over and people are still waiting for the Government to enforce the ban," Nicholas Ssenyonjo, the executive director of the Uganda Environment Education Foundation, said.

At the same meeting, Silver Sebagala from the Cleaner Production Centre said waste management strategies supported by a policy on waste management and enforcement should be put in place.

"The biggest source of the dangerous fumes is poor waste mismanagement," he said, adding that the population was relying on burning waste as a way of getting rid of waste.

Moses Musoke, a resident of Kakajo Zone in Bweyogerere, Wakiso district, pointed out that the population has a negative attitude of 'waste not in my backyard'. So, they throw waste anywhere so long as it is out of their compound.

There is need for people like Nantongo to know about the dangers of plastic waste and stop burning it. The incoming local councils could provide a breath of fresh air by ensuring that people clean up the environment and avoid burning the waste. They could also have a policy of separation of waste into bio-degradable and non-biodegradables to ensure that urban residences are not buried in waste.

The biodegradable could be used as manure to support urban farming or manure for gardening. The plastic bags could be rolled together to form a lump or a ball. This will reduce the space occupied by plastic bags and reduce the amount of litter in the environment.

Even without the Government implementing its bans on plastics, self-help initiatives should be encouraged by people's organisations (civil society organisations), religious groups, and cultural institutions.

The people also have the power to say no to plastics. They can move with cloth bags that can be used for a long time. Why should people wait for the Government to deal with waste, yet they are the biggest losers from the use of plastics.