

opinion

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Don't relax ban on polythene bags

Frank Kweronda Polythene bags

Plastic bags are one of the most visible signs of the pollution problem that extends across our planet. It is rare to see a strip of road, river bank or drainage channel that does not have a few plastic bags littering the environment. The result, besides being an eyesore, is often the death of wildlife. The problems that plastic bags cause, however, do not begin and end with the littering of the environment and the filling of landfill sites. Plastic bags are created using energy and non-renewable resources such as oil. The creation of each new plastic bag sucks a little more out of the environment.

We all know how terrible plastic bags are for the environment—they choke wildlife, they don't break down in landfills, they add to our demand for oil, and they aren't easy to recycle, which is the biggest reason why 92 per cent of plastic bags in Uganda are not recycled. Plastic does not dissolve; it breaks into tiny pieces and stays there for up to 1,000 years, contaminating soil, waterways and oceans and entering the food web when eaten by animals.

At this size it is eaten by every single organism in the world. Since the 1950s almost every piece of plastic that we have ever made, used and thrown away is still here on this planet and will be here for centuries to come.

Therefore, with this background information, the debate over paper or polythene/plastic bags should not be compromised. Arguments can be made for either paper or plastic as the most environmentally responsible material, but some few have settled the issue by switching to reusable materials like cloth sacks. While this solution may be elegant, most consumers are still confronted with the paper or plastic question whenever they go shopping. In order to decide between the two choices, it might help to examine what is meant by "better for the environment."

Polythenes were introduced in Uganda as a substitute to the paper bags which were initially used for packing especially the light commodities. As a result of polythene wastes; this has indeed been a hazard to the Ugandan environment. These bags are non-biodegradable substances that are used by the majority of Ugandans as packing materials. Despite the fact that they are cheap as well as light, they are hazardous in the following ways; First and foremost, they are non-biodegradable and this makes them hard to dispose and as a result, they can act as breeding places for many of the disease germs which, sooner than later cause an epidemic in the surrounding people.

Secondly, the fact that they are very light also makes it very easy for them to be blown

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from place to place and as a result, the unending littering of the environment.

They are also used by many people for cooking and this gradually impact on the health of those people because of the acidic combination they have. We should admit that some of these bags have been used by a number of ignorant or careless people as mobile toilets considering their light nature and this has not gone well with the hygiene/sanitation in most settlements including some in Kampala for example Katanga area.

As a result of this time spun they can cause further problems like blocking water percolation into the soil which in turn affects underground water flow, food growth and development. Unnecessary littering of the polythene bags on the roadsides destroys the would be beautiful scenery and also death of domestic animals specially the cows and the

goats after eating the polythene bags. Taking a look at paper bags, sometimes shoppers are still faced with the question, "Paper or polythene?" It would be nice if the case in our country was clear so that we didn't have to make the decision at all.

Unfortunately, it's not so simple. The other doesn't degrade. Fortunately, there are a few more factors that might make the decision easier. When it comes to ability to be recycled, the paper or plastic debate leans towards paper. Paper bags are biodegradable, are made from renewable natural resource, can be reused again and again, can be shipped to paper mills to be made into new paper, require less energy than plastic to be recycled, and they pose less of a threat to wildlife. This can also be a justification for policy makers to start implementing this.

In a nut shell, paper bags in their current form seem to be better from an environmental standpoint, though anything that is not re-usable is taking its toll on our natural resources. As an alternative of having to suffer the unending plight of environmental down fall, I would suggest that an alternative means of packaging materials should be encouraged as masses are also being sensitised on the dangers of improper waste disposal. "Enforcement is the major challenge in implementing such orders. Officials will have to be given definite responsibilities and the power to take immediate action against violators.

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Mr Kweronda is a civil engineer.

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