

Regional News

Arua City residents turn plastic waste into money

While many people are collecting the plastics to sell to recycling facilities to make money, it has also helped curb pollution and makes the city look tidy.

BY FELIX WAROM OKELLO

As early as 7am, 13-year-old Samson Anguyo is already on the streets, sack in hand, collecting plastics.

Anguyo's first target is the bars where he moves from one to the other looking for the plastics discarded by revellers the night before.

He collects them into sacks and sells them at a nearby selling point at Awindiri Cell in Arua Central Division.

After making his first sale of the day, he pauses for a cup of tea at a nearby restaurant at about 9am.

Throughout the day, Anguyo collects plastics in the trenches, on roadsides and in people's compounds.

Along the way, he is joined by friends who are also in the same trade. He fills one or two sacks before returning home for lunch. He then resumes his search for plastics and works until 8pm.

Anguyo says he joined the business after dropping out of school and friends who were already collecting and selling plastics encouraged him to join them.

He says in a day he earns about Sh355,000.

What Anguyo and his friends are doing is not just earning money. It is helping to clean up their city.

By collecting plastics that would otherwise be thrown anywhere, they are reducing pollution and keeping their surroundings clean.

Like many cities around the country, Arua is struggling with poor disposal of plastic waste.

It is common to find bottles, jerry cans, buckets, baskets and water containers scattered on streets, in drainage channels, and even in people's homes.

The plastics are generated from factories and used to package different products.

Many people do not dispose of plastics properly. This not only makes the environment look untidy but also pollutes it.

Ms Jolly Lenia, a resident of Tanganyika Ward in Arua City, says: "Plastic is everywhere because it is useful. It is light, cheap, and durable. But that durability is also the problem. People do not know how to dispose of them."

Some plastic waste also ends up in drainage channels, causing flooding that leads to loss of property and lives.

Ms Salima Salma, a resident of Oli B Cell in Arua Central Division, says: "Whenever it rains, you find these plastics are swept by water from the upper areas to our lower side. They get stuck here. We do not know what to do with them."

Ms Salma adds: "...so, by removing plastic bottles and bags before they can



Some of the plastics that are collected for sale in Arua City. Many of them are collected from the streets and in home-steads on outskirts of the city. PHOTO/FELIX OKELLO WAROM

reach drainage systems, community clean-ups help prevent these costly and dangerous things. A few hours of collection can save days of recovery. It is also dangerous to burn them."

Health effects

Plastic waste does not only affect the environment, it also has serious health effects on both people and animals.

Discarded containers can trap rainwater, creating small pools that become breeding sites for mosquitoes.

In regions where mosquito-borne diseases are a concern, reducing these breeding spots can make a real difference.

Animals are also negatively affected by plastic pollution. Stray animals often rummage through litter in search of food. In doing so, they may ingest plas-

tic fragments, leading to internal injuries and death.

Birds can become entangled in plastic rings or strings. By removing plastics from streets, plastic collectors and municipal workers are not just cleaning up, they are protecting urban wildlife.

Recently, Arua City authorities placed garbage bins across the city to foster proper disposal of plastic waste.

However, few people are utilising the facilities.

The Arua City mayor-elect, Mr Lawrence Alionzi, said ensuring a clean and safe environment is a priority.

"We need to clean the town, the trenches, and manage waste properly so that people live in a better environment. This will be a priority once the budgets are well laid out and machinery is put in place," he adds.

Similar issues have been raised in other districts across the West Nile Sub-region.

In the neighbouring Terego District, a resident of Katrini Trading Centre, Ms Sally Candiru, says: "Many people in the city prefer to drink water from sachets or plastic bottles. Most of these plastics are discarded on the street, which clog up drains and consequently increase the risk of destructive flooding during the rainy season."

The situation is now left in the hands of the good Samaritans, who are now collecting the plastics for recycling in factories.

One of the companies that have stepped up to address the challenge is Ewuata Composite, a garbage collection centre that is helping to manage plastic waste in Arua City.

Mr Godfrey Onyuthua, the site manager, says they receive 50 tonnes of garbage daily and 200 tonnes in a month. And this is 30 to 40 percent of the garbage collected within the city.

"We make sure that the garbage is well managed to protect the environment," he says, adding that they ensure that they control the temperature and moisture content of the waste.

"When waste is brought here, they are segregated. The ones that are not decomposable, they are in recycling plants. These wastes, if not well managed, can be dangerous to health and the environment," he says.

"Wastes generate a lot of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide, methane, moisture or water, which contribute to climate change. When decomposing is controlled, the release of methane and water into the environment is minimised," he adds.

He says they also control the open burning of plastics, which emits carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide that affect the climate and human life.

How it can be managed

An environmentalist in Adjumani District, Mr William Amanzuru, says: "We need to review our policy documents on plastic production, distribution and disposal. That is why many people who venture into this business find it easy to deal in the business. There should be a policy on plastic production, distribution and disposal."

He adds: "There are grades of plastics that we should look into for packaging for service delivery. Can we move away from non-biodegradable plastics production in this country to degradable plastics? There is a need for tax regulation on disposal of plastics."

Mr Amanzuru suggests the use of local materials like palm trees to serve the same purposes as plastics.

"In every trading centre in West Nile, there are piles of plastics being sold because those buying are well connected in every area. With the absence of proper management, the regulator and producers of plastics get lost on who is to do what legally," he adds.

Some cities and town council authorities have introduced designated collection days or partnered with recycling companies to ensure that gathered plastics are properly processed.

Recycling cleans the environment, conserves materials, saves energy and reduces the amount of garbage in the landfills.

Economic impact

Plastic waste, while a major challenge, also presents an opportunity. Plastics can be recycled, transforming them into raw materials for new products.

This has in turn created jobs for people like Anguyo and Ms Chandiru. By collecting and selling the plastics to recycling centres, they turn what was once litter into a livelihood.

"I collect these plastics for sale. We have buyers from Arua City who come to buy from us. A kilo of plastic waste costs Sh5500. In the past, these were not a form of income," Ms Chandiru said.

Back on the streets, the plastic collectors and volunteers tie up their final sacks. The stretch of pavement that was once scattered with bottles and bags now looks clean and open.

As the sun sets, they head home, leaving behind quiet proof that collective effort can make a difference. And the next day, when someone walks along that same road and chooses to throw a bottle into a bin instead of on the ground, the impact of their work lives on, keeping the environment clean, safe and shared.

THE POLICY IN PLACE

According to the National Environment Management Authority (Nema), the National Strategy for Promoting Plastics Circularity in Uganda (2023-2028) is designed to tackle the growing problem of plastic pollution.

The approach focuses on a circular economy, encouraging reuse, recycling, and the development of more sustainable alternatives.

The strategy sets clear goals to reduce plastic waste, improve recycling systems, and raise public awareness.

It also promotes partnerships between government, private sector players and communities to ensure the plan is effectively implemented.

In 2024, during presentation of Plastic Waste Management Strategy Document, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Nema, Prof

James Okot-Okumu, said: "Cabinet recently approved the 10-Year Action Plan for Restoration of the Environment and Natural Resources (2021-2031), which is a blueprint for the holistic restoration of the environment across the nation."

He added: "Together, we can make a significant difference in the journey towards a circular economy for plastics. We welcome the collaboration between Nema and Uganda Manufacturers Association, to establish an Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme for Uganda, first targeting the beverages industry."

He added that protecting the environment is a shared responsibility.

He called on all stakeholders and citizens to work with Nema to ensure plastics are reused and recycled more efficiently, for a healthier environment.

Uganda also commissioned a

study with support from UNEP, which found that the country produced about 12,330 tonnes of recycled polyethylene between 2018 and 2021.

Estimates further showed that production could increase by 91 per cent between 2022 and 2025, even if import levels remain the same.

According to Nema's analysis, plastics make up about 4 per cent of Uganda's total waste. Of this, 42 per cent is not properly disposed of. Around 10 per cent ends up in water bodies, while 20 per cent is either left on land or burned.

As a member state, Uganda is also working towards achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their 169 targets. The current strategy on plastic waste management is aligned with these goals and is expected to contribute to a cleaner and more sustainable environment.