



ANDREW MAFUNDO > KAVEERA BAN

Support government ban on polythene bags

After waiting for more than eight years, President Museveni has ordered that section 2 of the 2009 Finance Act that prohibits the importation, local manufacture, sale or use of plastic bags or bags of polymers of ethene and polyethene should be effected. The lag was caused by intensive lobbying by plastic bags manufacturers and lack of government commitment to save the environment from plastic pollution.

While this is good news, conservationists have noted that government still has a lot to do if it intends to make good on its directive because enforcement of regulations in Uganda has often been poor, and single-use plastic bags may continue to be widely used and mismanaged despite prohibitions and levies.

But what is the big deal about plastic bags or *kaveera*? The statistics about plastic pollution are as disturbing as its devastating. It is estimated that polythene bags take from 20 to 1,000 years to decompose. They are made from non-renewable resources and contribute to climate change. The material used in their production cannot biodegrade, they remain in the environment for thousands of years clogging landfills, polluting rivers and lakes causing harm to our natural places, our wildlife and our own health.

To put this in perspective, United Nations Environmental Programme Secretariat, estimates that plastic packaging accounts for

nearly half of all plastic waste globally and goes on to warn that if present trends continue, by 2050 our oceans will have more plastics than fish.

If Uganda implements the single-use plastic bags ban, there will be a great reduction in the effects associated with their use and improper disposal. This could be a step towards more comprehensive policies aiming at reducing the generation of plastic waste and at replacing single-use plastics with more sustainable and eco-friendly alternatives.

However, let us not forget the challenge that lies ahead. It is important that we engage in as much public consultation as possible to ensure a smooth transition through the ban to implementation.

Like many environmental issues, what is missing is the long-term vision where all stakeholders work towards joint solutions to reduce the heavy burden of not only single-use plastic bags, but entire plastic pollution. For example, besides the people's negligence, the large presence of single-use plastics in the environment is indicative of poor or failing waste management systems.

The solution lies in tackling the root causes of the problem. The government needs to embark on an effective waste management system and to educate and create awareness among local communities.

At this stage, the government has the opportunity to assess the best process to follow and estimate the time and resources

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needed, namely the institutional capacity and the existing economic conditions to ensure that the steps being considered are realistic and have high chances of being successfully implemented.

It is, therefore, advisable that before the policy comes into force, the government should assess availability of affordable and valid alternatives to plastic bags. The process for enforcement should also be made clear to the users that will be impacted by the policy and carry-out stakeholder engagement for acceptance through calls for early participation, policy debate and nationwide awareness campaigns.

To sustainably enforce and monitor the ban, authorities have to clearly explain the

decision and any punitive measures that will follow, roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders should be clearly defined at all levels of governance.

Lastly, while this sort of environmental issue needs to be government-led, it is not until the public starts to care that something will be done. It would be encouraging to see synergised efforts by all - whether the public, industrialists, NGOs, government, etc to reduce plastic bags and push for a gradual behaviour change and total ban of *kaveera*. At family and personal level, there are things each one of us can do to save the environment. Drainage channels are still clogged with plastics because too many people still don't find it embarrassing to throw garbage out of cars and on the streets.

We cannot continue to blame the government and the inconvenience or forgetfulness for over-reliance on plastic bags. We can encourage people to make small lifestyle changes that can have a significant impact on the environment. It is the daily plastics that we buy or pick from shops, supermarkets and restaurants that have become silent serial killers.

Plastic manufacturers and beneficiaries should know that there are better eco-friendly alternatives namely reusable bags, which present an opportunity to create sustainable products and the jobs that go with them.

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Rwanda's monthly local council clean-ups can be a powerful tool to adopt and achieve positive environmental impacts and community awareness and engagement.

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