

**Series 2 – Social Pillar: Environment, Water, Sanitation and Regional Development**

# Revisiting Kenya's Ban on Plastic Carrier Bags

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## Key Messages

*Revitalize the sisal and cotton industry to provide eco-friendly alternatives and create employment.*

*NEMA should provide sound waste management strategies that promote a circular model of economy which encourages waste recovery.*

*Reduction/removal of taxes on all imports that are aimed at providing healthy and eco-friendly alternatives to the plastics.*

*Integrate public awareness and sensitization sustainable and responsibly consumption through environmental education in national and county development plans.*

Source: Author

## Context

Plastic waste is one of Nairobi's and to a greater extent Kenya's most visible environmental problems, with most of the flooding witnessed in cities attributed to plastic waste that clogs drainage systems, key among them are plastic carrier bags. These are lightweight non-biodegradable materials that take ages to decompose. They reduce the aesthetic value of both the natural and physical environment and have since proven to have negative impacts on marine life, livestock and human beings. It is estimated that in their lifetime, livestock ingest an average of 2.5 kgs of plastics and this has been attributed to losses in the meat industry.

UNEP (2018) reports that between 60% to 80% of waste in the oceans is made of plastics. Also, about 275 metric tonnes of waste generated across 192 coastal countries is made of plastics. Plastic waste generated continued to significantly increase. In 2015, it is estimated that 300 million tonnes of plastic waste were generated. These worrying statistics have got the attention of most governments. According to UNEP, at least 60 nations have banned single-use plastics while others have employed measures that include market-based approaches (levies/tax) and public-private agreements to help reduce the consumption of the material. In these nations, 50% of them have little to report

since most of them enforced the ban recently and there is poor enforcement.

Kenya introduced the ban through Gazette notice No. 2356 in 2017. At the time of introduction, about 1 million plastic bags were consumed annually in supermarkets alone. Nairobi City County generates over 2,400 tonnes of waste daily and has alluded to their inability to manage the waste which mostly consists of food and plastics. Half the waste goes to the Dandora dumpsite while the remaining waste is either illegally dumped or left uncollected.

Nations must strive to produce and consume sustainably in an environment that is clean and healthy. Governance effectiveness is measured when regulatory systems can meet policy needs. More than two years after the ban in Kenya, plastic carrier bags are still in circulation..

## Study Approach and Results

A cross-sectional study was employed with surveys of a sample of 106 small scale traders (butchers, grocers, vendors and retailers) in Karen and Kibera most affected by the ban. The aim was to get a comparative overview of how compliance with the ban was taking shape one year after it took effect.

The response of stakeholders towards a given piece of legislation determines how effective the legislation will be complied with. In Kibera, 57% of the traders responded that the ban was not necessary



and 30% in Karen. However, a majority of respondents (44%) from Karen were conflicting, responding yes and no. They acknowledged the benefit as their environment becomes clean day by day, but they were also making huge losses due to lack of better alternatives.

A majority of Kibera traders report that apart from the business being difficult, the physical environment is still dirty despite the ban being intended to make it cleaner. At least 60% of traders interviewed lamented that there were no clear alternatives and so the ban should not have taken effect in the first place. The lack of clear alternatives to the banned plastic bags has proven to be a threat to nations that have banned plastic bags in the quest to achieve full compliance.

This study established that 70% of the respondents were not personally consulted before the ban took effect. The 30% that were consulted indicated that they heard about the ban through television and radio. Also, there no forum was called to brief them on the ban. Half of the traders reported that they are not aware of which plastics were banned and so the difficulty in complying with the ban.

As some traders switched to other businesses, others looked for ways to access the banned plastics through porous borders from neighbouring countries. "What surprise me is that they banned plastic in Kenya but we're being sold to the banned plastics from Uganda, so it's like we're building the economy of Uganda than our own" – lamented a trader from Makina. A study was done in Ireland (Anastasio and Nix, 2016) established that while Ireland was introducing a levy on plastic bags, they omitted small bags used in separating fresh produce such as meat, fruits and vegetables as a result of a public outcry from the butchers.

A vendor in Kibera points out that since she does not want to lose customers, she ensures the customer is satisfied, "If my customer comes with a container, I serve them the goods they want in them, however, if he or she does not have and since I do not want to lose money, I use the banned plastic bags."

Available Alternatives and their Health Implications

The right to clean and healthy environment in which the Gazette Notice No. 2356 was hinged talks about the safety

of the environment and human beings. The lack of affordable, healthy and eco-friendly alternatives to the plastic bags has since proven to be a threat in the quest to eliminate plastics. Traders report that since the plastic carrier bags ban took effect, it has not been easy doing business. The blame is put on the lack of suitable alternatives to banned plastic bags. The non-woven reusable bags seem to be the typical alternatives, however, they could pose greater health risks by exposing consumers to bacteria if not cleaned. Used newspapers and other paper materials used in packaging could also expose consumers to dangerous chemicals detrimental to human health.

#### Conclusions

Kenya's ban on plastic carrier bags is one of the greatest things to happen in a developing nation with the desire to ensure environmental sustainability. Not only has it tamed the habits of consumers, but has also proven to be a step forward in ensuring that there is a clean and healthy environment as provided for by Article 42 of the Constitution 2010. This study finds that the ban was not necessary: the problem of plastic waste is human-made and hence the solution lies with humans and not the plastics. Nations that have embraced recycling and invested heavily in ensuring a sustainable environment consume fewer plastics and can manage the plastics they do use.

There was a difference in compliance between Karen and Kibera traders (60% and 30%, respectively). Compliance to plastic ban had picked up slowly occasioned by limited sensitization of the public on the ban, therefore public involvement is an important prerequisite for a successful implementation. .

## Policy Recommendations

### Short-Term

- Removal of taxes on all imports that are meant to provide affordable and healthy alternatives to traders and consumers.
- There is a need for a robust public awareness and sensitization of sustainable and responsible

consumption. For example, environmental education should be introduced in the school curriculum.

- Increasing environmental communication in media platforms, industries, offices and along the streets geared towards conservation, for example, using billboards.
- Encouraging citizens and stakeholders to adopt streets and roads, taking responsibility for their cleanliness.

### Medium-Term

- Allocation of funding to recycling sector where all used plastics could be recycled to prevent them from getting into the environment
- Provision of sound waste management strategies by NEMA that will communicate waste recovery to the stakeholders
- Reviving the sisal and cotton industry as a way of providing healthy alternatives and offer jobs as part of the government's Big Four Agenda
- Introduce weekly clean-ups where a day is selected within the week and the business closes from 6 am to 9 am for cleaning purposes before operations resume.

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## References

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