

Tackling polythene menace requires no plastic solutions

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Environmentalists collecting plastic bags. Plastic bags have been banned by the government. PHOTO | FILE

In Summary

- Some reports indicate that by 2050, if no drastic measures are taken, global waters will have more plastic than fish.
- Public appreciation of the impact of plastic bags and behaviour change are critical for the success of the ban.
- Unep, which has been fighting plastic bags globally, welcomed the ban, while the Kenya Association of Manufacturers warned that it would hurt the economy,

The recent government decision to ban the manufacture, importation and use of polythene bags appears to have won the support of many Kenyans, if social media comments are anything to go by.

In a notice published in the Kenya Gazette, Environment Cabinet Secretary Judi Wakhungu ordered a ban on the carrier and flat bags used for commercial and household packaging by August 28, to end its devastating environmental effects.

There is an elephant in the room, however. Will the excitement lead to the abandonment of polythene bags? Or will it stop the careless disposal? Previous attempts to ban polythene bags failed mainly due to lobbying by the industry.

The ban, if implemented, will go a long way in ensuring environmental integrity. Some reports indicate that by 2050, if no drastic measures are taken, global waters will have more plastic than fish. However, there wasn't sufficient stakeholder participation prior to this gazette notice.

Public appreciation of the impact of plastic bags and behaviour change are critical for the success of the ban. The fact that there is a ready market explains the proliferation of manufacturers.

MORE RETAILERS

The responsible government agencies should work with major retailers to set up an incentive system for not using plastic bags. These may include discounts on shopping and surprise cash rewards if a customer is found with an environment friendly bag.

Unep, which has been fighting plastic bags globally, welcomed the ban, while the Kenya Association of Manufacturers (KAM) warned that it would hurt the economy, taking away jobs and tax revenues.

This, by all accounts, is a weighty matter. So let us put things in a context. Plastic bags are used widely both at a commercial and domestic levels. They are affordable and convenient. You walk into a supermarket with nothing but cash and walk out with a bagful of shopping.

Every item you will have purchased, from food items to detergents and toiletries, is wrapped in polythene bags. In the absence of an advanced waste management system, the plastic bags find their way into the environment, blocking drainage and sewerage systems, polluting water systems, endangering livestock and making the environment unsightly.

Since they are light, they are easily carried by wind and the negative impact felt far away from the point of use. The bags don't biodegrade easily and can remain in the environment for hundreds of years.

SAVINGS ON ENERGY

The narrative around polythene bags is not all doom and pain, however. Compared to paper bags, they require 70 per cent less energy to manufacture and produce less greenhouse gases. If Kenyans can recycle all used plastic bags, the benefits will be evident in savings on energy and amount of emissions.

According to KAM, there are more than 170 plastic manufacturing firms, which employ 2.89 per cent of all the Kenyan workers and 60,000 people indirectly. However, a ban on polythene bags is one of the most effective ways of dealing with the menace.

But there is another way, which will not only preserve jobs, but could also create related industries and additional employment. It is recycling. The flipside to this is that it can only work where citizens are conscious and disciplined and where county governments are effective.

To begin with, used polythene bags cannot be put in the same collection bags as other waste. They must have their own separate collection bins.

Citizens can run a campaign where shoppers return used bags to the supermarket for reuse and refuse to accept new ones. This shifts the burden of recycling from consumers to the stores. Citizens can also bring their own bags.

SUSTAINABLE METHOD

The other way of recycling, which is already happening but not as much as it should, is to use them as bin-liners. However, the sheer amount of plastic that finds its way into homes daily means this method can only use a small amount. However, the sustainable method is private sector-led recycling.

We simply can't take in more polythene bags. They are not only clogging drainages and sewerage systems, they are clogging our lives, too.

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