

Plastic Bag Ban in Kenya Proposed as Part of New Waste Strategy

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Nairobi, 23 February 2005– Flimsy plastic shopping bags should be banned and a hefty levy slapped on thicker ones to rid Kenya of an increasing environmental and health menace, a report released today urges.

At least two million plastic bags are now being handed out each year to people shopping at supermarkets and kiosks in Nairobi alone, the study by experts at the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA) says.

The bags, many of which are so thin they are simply thrown away after one trip from the shops, have become a familiar eyesore in both urban and countryside areas.

Plastic bags also block gutters and drains, choke farm animals and marine wildlife and pollute the soil as they gradually break down.

Wangari Mathaai, the assistant environment minister in Kenya and 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner, has also linked plastic bag litter with malaria.

The bags, when discarded, can fill with rainwater offering ideal and new breeding grounds for the malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

A ban on bags less than 30 microns thick and the levy on thicker ones are among a raft of proposals aimed at reducing the use of polythene bags and providing funds for alternative, more environmentally-friendly, carriers such as cotton or sisel bags.

Cash raised from the levy would also go towards the setting up of efficient and effective recycling schemes, says the report funded by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) of Kenya.

Operating the plastic bag levy could become a blue-print for similar schemes aimed at the rising tide of other wastes confronting Kenya and countries across Africa and the developing world.

The proposal is contained in a report, Selection, Design and Implementation of Economic Instruments in the Kenyan Solid Waste Management Sector, authored by KIPPRA's Moses Ikiara and Clive Mutunga.

The report's findings, launched at a meeting of UNEP's Governing Council where over 100 environment ministers have gathered, are based on the outcome of several meetings between UNEP, NEMA, manufacturers, suppliers, supermarkets and other interested groups held in Kenya and abroad.

The conclusions and recommendations are also based on lessons learnt from waste management schemes introduced elsewhere including Australia, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Rwanda, South Africa and several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Klaus Toepfer, UNEP's Executive Director, said: " I applaud this thoughtful and comprehensive study on the problems and possible solutions to Kenya and particularly Nairobi's waste problems. This is not just a problem for this country. Wastes are an increasing problem everywhere, particularly in developing countries. The lessons learnt from those countries who use so called economic instruments is that they can change behaviour and generate income for more environmentally-friendly ways of dealing with waste and rubbish.

"What works in one nation, may not work elsewhere. But there are some solid proposals on how Kenya can use and adapt lessons from abroad to make a real difference to the health and appearance of this city in the sun. I understand there is also real political will to take this forward. With the enactment of the Environmental Management and Coordination Act in 1999 and the setting up of NEMA, there are also the institutional structures in place to deliver

it. Plastic bags can be the start, the test bed, to what I hope will be wide ranging and creative action cut pollution and stimulate new, modern, businesses and jobs here,” he added.

Mr Toepfer also launched today a UNEP children’s book entitled Theo and the Giant Plastic Ball written by Carole Douglis and illustrated by Adrienne Kennaway.

It is the second book in a series under the UNEP Tunza Environmental Series which aims to inspire caring for the Earth through creative literature that sparks the interest and awareness of children, their parents and teachers.

The story, in which a boy called Theo, alerts communities to the menace of discarded plastic bags by collecting and rolling them into a giant ball, is aimed at educating children in a lively and engaging way about how they can take action for a cleaner, healthier world.

The book is in line with the recommendations by KIPPRA which, as part of the Kenyan strategy on waste and plastics call for public awareness campaigns.

Nairobi’s Rising Waste Mountain

“Like many developing country cities, Nairobi’s solid waste sector.....is largely characterized by low coverage of solid waste management services, pollution from uncontrolled dumping of waste, inefficient public services, chaotic or unregulated private sector participation, and lack of key solid waste management infrastructure,” says the report.

Only about 25 per cent of the 1,500 tonnes of solid waste generated daily in this city of three million are currently collected.

While the Nairobi City Council and private refuse companies are collecting around three quarters of the waste from high-income homes, formal collection services for waste produced in slums and unplanned settlements are virtually non-existent.

Up to 60 per cent of Nairobi’s residents live in these low-income areas.

The report also points that there is widespread indiscriminate dumping in illegal sites, that the only official rubbish tip at Dandora is full and that the city council has no waste transfer facilities.

Plastic Bags in Kenya

An estimated 4,000 tonnes of the thin plastic bags, known in the report as “flexibles”, are produced each month in Kenya mainly for shopping purposes but also for products like bread. About half of them are less than 15 microns thick and some are as little as seven microns thick.

The industry is growing at between eight and ten per cent a year supplying both the local market and nearby countries in particular Uganda.

“With the exception of some paper bags, there are hardly any alternatives to plastic shopping bags. Shopping bags made from natural products are available in the market but are hardly used because of the easy and free availability of plastic shopping bags in market outlets and the low price which they are sold in outdoor markets,” says the report.

Lessons from Abroad

In 2002, Ireland imposed a 15-euro cent levy or surcharge on plastic bags provided by stores and shops. It is estimated that this has reduced the use of plastic bags by 90 per cent.

The revenue raised goes to an Environmental Fund which plans to spend 35 million euros on recycling centres. The introduction of the so called PlasTax scheme has been backed up by public awareness campaigns.

In Australia, the retailer IKEA put a 10 cent charge on its plastic bags while also providing a re-usable alternative. It reports a 97 per cent drop in the use of plastic bags.

Rwanda has banned plastics less than 100 microns thick and backed this up with public awareness campaigns. The black plastic bag has disappeared from Kigali.

In 2003 South Africa banned plastic bags thinner than 30 microns and introduced a plastics levy some of which goes to a plastic bag recycling company.

It has witnessed a decrease in bag litter, a reduction in the manufacture of plastic bags with some layoffs and a growth in alternatives such as canvass bags.

A Plastic Bag Strategy for Kenya

A seven point plan for tackling plastic bags in Kenya is proposed. It includes:

- A ban on the 30 micron or less bags;
- Consumer and anti-littering campaigns;
- A plastic bag levy collected from suppliers with the costs passed on to the consumer;
- The levy would be partially targeted to support the development of environmentally-friendly bags such as cotton ones which would have the double benefit of helping Kenya's cotton agriculture and industry;
- Support for a proper plastic bags recycling scheme.

The report proposes a new body known as the Plastics Levy Management Committee, set up and chaired by NEMA to manage and implement the new measures.

The committee should have a wide membership including government ministries, the Kenyan Association of Manufacturers, the city council, textiles groups, the Kenya Cotton Ginners Association and We Can Do It which is an umbrella of residents associations.