

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

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Women sorting plastic waste in Kampala. Although the Government imposed a total ban on plastic bags, the battle against them is far from over

Plastic bags: When money-minters poison human health, environment

For the last two decades, the matter has remained unresolved despite Government intervention with a ban on plastic bags. As the producers and dealers in plastic waste make money, the biggest loser is the environment and human public health. **Gerald Tenywa** expounds on the extent of the danger and what can be done to avert it.

Plastic bags are like a double edged sword. Shoppers need them to pack items, and producers as well as dealers in plastics have become overnight billionaires. But plastics also pose a danger to human health, the environment and the agricultural productivity of the soil.

This has created an epic battle between the profiteering producers of plastic bags on one hand and the environmentalists on the other.

"We are concerned about the impact of plastic bags on public health and pollution on environment," Sam Cheptoris, the Minister of Water and Environment, says. He was recently speaking at the ministry's headquarters, ahead of activities to commemorate the UN world Environment Day. The national celebrations will take place today at

Mbale Cricket Grounds under the theme, *Beat Plastic Pollution*.

Cheptoris says the Government imposed a total ban on plastic bags (mostly single use plastic bags also referred to as flimsy plastic bags). This was effected through the Financial Act of 2010, sending environmentalists into celebration. However, putting an end to the use of plastic bags is a battle that is far from over.

The lobby against the ban on plastics is armed with money from industrialists and dealers. They say they pay taxes and employ many people. They argue that the problem is not the plastic bags, but the behavior of the users who discard them in wrong places.

Dangers

The plastic bags are unsightly. They pollute water bodies and affect fish and other aquatic organisms. They also block water movement into soil and this affects agricultural productivity.

In addition, plastic bags become hazardous when they are exposed to high temperatures as well as fats, which alter the structures that make them up, according to Dr Tom Okurut, the executive director of the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA).

"When meat is packed in plastic

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bags, the plastic changes structure, thereby contaminating it," Okurut says.

He also points out that the rolex, a popular fast food, is packed in plastic, which breaks down parts of the plastic into the food.

Moreover, in most parts of the country, people who clean up the environment burn waste plastics, which according to Okurut, is a case of providing a solution to one problem and creating another.

"Plastics cause respiratory infections and are behind some of the increasing cases of cancer in the country," Okurut says.

He also says cooking food while it is

covered with plastic increases the risk of contamination.

Uganda left behind

Knowing the dangers of plastic bags, Uganda and her neighbours have banned the use of polythene bags. But the difference is that Uganda's neighbours Rwanda and Kenya, are implementing the ban. Tanzania is in advanced stages of imposing the ban, while Burundi and South Sudan have been plagued by political conflicts and are yet to make a move on the matter.

Uganda has spent two decades going back and forth on the policy on plastics. But Cheptoris says: "The law is still in place. However, the Ministry of Trade and Industry appealed and the matter was referred to Cabinet, which handed the matter over to the Prime Minister."

He adds: "Be assured that the Government is committed to protecting the environment. Plastic bags are dangerous to the environment and they must be banned."

What should be done?

Behind the deadly plastic bags is a governance problem. The ban on plastic bags has not been respected.

Sources say the consultations being conducted by the Prime Minister are a ploy by the Government to be

seen to be doing something. "There is nothing being done on plastics," a source who spoke to *New Vision* on condition of anonymity says.

Asked why NEMA has not gone for public awareness in order to reduce the demand for plastic bags, Bob Nuwagira, the education and communication officer at NEMA, says this was being done as they were rolling out the ban.

"We need to go for the 'polluter pays' principle, where the generators of waste pay to have it cleaned up," Nuwagira says, adding that plastics are far cheaper than the alternatives that are supposed to replace them.

"Why not put a tax on plastics so that they sell at the same price as paper bags?" he quizzes.

Nuwagira says recycling plastics could be a sustainable solution, but less than 1% of plastic bags are recycled and recycling plastic bags is costly.

"It is not sustainable to recycle plastic waste because the process is more expensive than using raw materials to make plastic bags," he says.

As plastic bags threaten human health and the environment, the Government will need more than the taxes it collects from the plastic bags manufacturers to treat an ailing population and clean up plastic waste.