

Banning plastic bags long overdue

Despite compelling evidence of looming disaster posed by continued mass usage of plastic bags in the country, the government is not anywhere near to taking the necessary and bold step of banning them.

There is no doubt that powerful interests from the lucrative multi-billion shilling industry that manufactures and distributes the plastic bags are standing in the way of decisive action that is urgently needed to address this problem.

For instance, in 2007, efforts by the government to eliminate plastic bags less than 30 microns were dropped at the last minute due to unrelenting pressure and threats from the industry.

Again, late last year, there were plans by the Nairobi County Assembly to eliminate the use of plastic bags in the city, through legislation, but efforts appear to have been quietly dropped, possibly due to the strong influence of industry players who had protested the move.

Manufacturers and retailers of plastic bags who profit from the business have claimed alarmingly that doing away with their products would result in 'massive job losses' and 'grave consequences for the economy'. This argument has cowed many of our

spineless politicians into silence.

They have also insisted that a total ban on the bags is unnecessary and instead called for awareness campaigns to influence Kenyans to responsibly dispose off plastic bags to minimise their damage to human and environmental health.

Apart from the pressure from the manufacturers, the government is failing to act just out of sheer inertia and negligence despite all evidence of an unfolding crisis caused by the plastic bags.

It is time that Kenyans are no longer held to ransom by certain vested interests and government negligence to address this vital issue that is fast becoming an existential threat to the country if not addressed urgently.

Currently, there appears to be no initiative or plans by the government to address this issue comprehensively, leaving the damage to proceed rapidly apace.

Frequent talks by some officials of the Environment Ministry in the current and previous governments to address the issue have been just that; talk and no tangible action.

The current situation of inaction is no longer tenable. Waiting will increase the magnitude of the problem exponentially and cause irreversible damage to the human

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and environmental wellbeing in Kenya.

As we speak, the toxic plastic bags are being dished out by their millions in every shop and supermarkets across the country to wrap everything including small household commodities before they are quickly disposed off indiscriminately.

Such plastic bags are not only an eye sore in our towns and cities they also block drainage and sewer systems and poison livestock and marine life.

They also produce toxic fumes when they are burned in our landfills, thereby endangering the lives and health of many Kenyans.

Efforts are needed to transition the manufacturers of such plastic bags into other equally lucrative and sustainable ventures such as producing safer and biodegradable alternatives that do not harm humans, animals and the environment.

Other countries, including Rwanda and Mauritania have taken this issue head-on by banning the use of plastic bags and enticed the manufacturers to transition into other related economic activities.

The success stories in addressing this issue are therefore readily available in the region and across the world. They offer ready and

valuable lessons on how Kenya can move beyond plastic bags without looking back.

It is obvious that relying on consumers in Kenya to make smart choices in avoiding the use of plastic bags and disposing them off responsibly as industry players suggest, will not work for now.

Attempts by major supermarkets to sell more environmentally-friendly shopping bags to their customers in order to replace the toxic plastic bags have failed. The manufactures of such plastic bags should be made to contribute funds for the long term clean-up of the mess they have created in order to undo the terrible damage.

The same principle of the 'polluter pays for the clean-up' is being applied in efforts to combat climate change.

We need inexpensive replacements for the plastic bags which can easily be taken up by the consumers. They should preferably be biodegradable.

The time to address this growing crisis is now and further paralysis and inaction is unsustainable if we are to avoid a disaster in the near future.

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