

PLASTIC BAN. Making the tough choices

Rather than fight ban, transition to alternatives

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Local manufacturers of plastic bags are determined to fight tooth and nail to defeat the recent ban on their products announced by the government but they better read the mood of the times and transition to sustainable alternative products.

Last week, the manufacturers, through their powerful lobby, presented a strongly-worded petition to Parliament urging legislators to roll back or significantly dilute the ban imposed by Environment Cabinet Secretary Prof Judi Wakhungu recently. In addition, they have been actively pushing their case in the media and public fora to win support against the ban.

The plastic bag firms are banking on a win against the ban the same way they won in 2005, 2007 and 2011, when they successfully lobbied against restrictions imposed on some of their lucrative products.

Indeed, the influential lobby has already caused the East Africa Legislative Assembly to put on hold a bill meant to ban plastic bags among the 5 members of the governmental organisation.

But rather that expend substantial resources and energies to fight the ban, the manufacturers need to face the reality that the tide is irreversibly turning against plastic bags not only in Kenya but the entire region and the globe. It is time they begun looking beyond plastic bags.

It would therefore be wise for them to explore the enormous opportunities presented by the ban. For instance, it is projected that the demand for eco-friendly re-usable bags will be enormous after the ban on plastics is effected. The alternatives to plastic bags include kiondos, baskets, cloth bags, sisal bags, cardboards, paper bags from recycled paper and biodegradable bags among others.

Why don't the plastic bag manufacturers begin laying the groundwork to exploit this emerging market instead of being fixated on plastic bags? That will be a win-win for the manufacturers and the rest of Kenyans.

The manufacturers argue that plastic bags menace is mainly due to poor waste management systems from the individual Kenyans who litter them



indiscriminately to the national levels, where waste collection is weak.

But that argument is fundamentally disingenuous since plastic bags are not only non-biodegradable for centuries but also non-recyclable, making it impossible to manage such waste.

In addition, it would be unrealistic to expect the poor waste management practices at individual, household and national level in Kenya to improve in the near future to minimise the negative impacts of the plastic bags, contrary to what the manufacturers would want us to believe.

Under the circumstances, banning all production of plastic bags is the most feasible solution to the issue and helping firms manufacturing them to transition to producing other related but environmentally-friendly products.

The manufacturers also claim that investments worth at least Sh100 billion and employees numbering at least 60,000 people would be crushed if the ban is enforced. However, that claim needs independent verification before they are to be believed as the figures could be inflated to strengthen their case.

The number of countries that have outlawed plastic bags continues to grow rapidly, with the North African country of Tunisia being the latest to ban. Neighbouring Tanzania and Rwanda have already banned while

Uganda is mulling over it.

This is simply because the business model of making money from producing plastic bags is no longer sustainable as it comes with an unbearable cost to environmental, human and economic health.

The compelling case against plastic bags and its far-reaching negative impacts is no longer mysterious to an increasing number of Kenyans. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, plastic waste pollutes the land and oceans, chokes terrestrial and marine life and threatens human and economic wellbeing among many other negative impacts.

It is time the plastic bags manufacturers read the mood of Kenyans many of whom enthusiastically support the banning their products after seeing for themselves their negative impacts.

The government should remain firm in upholding the ban this time, unlike in the past when it buckled quickly from the pressure of manufacturers.

As the headquarters of the global environment agency (UNEP), it is time Kenya deals with the menace of plastic bags decisively to ensure sustainable social and economic development for its people.

Ends

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