

Uganda is the weak link in regional fight against plastic bags menace

Kenya's 2017 single-use plastic carrier and flat bags ban has helped to reduce plastic pollution. But smuggling of the bags from neighbouring countries threatens to reverse the hard-won gains.

Strengthening regional collaboration is key to securing durable solutions to plastic pollution and seizing emerging opportunities.

A recent joint report by environmental conservation organisations in the region, including Kenya's Centre for Environmental Justice and Development, identified Uganda as the main source of most plastic bags smuggled into Kenya and the rest of East Africa.

Like its neighbours, Uganda has banned certain categories of single-use plastic bags but ranks poorly in enforcing the ban. As a result, the manufacture, trade and use of the outlawed plastic bags are thriving, to the detriment of the country and the region.

With nearly 50 registered producers of single-use plastic carrier bags, and an unknown number of illicit ones, Uganda is a key production hub of plastic bags. The country hosts many of the plastic manufacturers who relocated from Kenya after the 2017 ban.

Some of these companies target the lucrative market in Kenya and the region, by producing unbranded plastic bags that are smuggled across borders, worsening the plastic pollution crisis. The demand for the bags is still high, especially from small-scale food traders who are yet to find suitable and affordable alternatives.

Powerful lobbying by the large plastic manu-



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facturers could be partly responsible for Uganda's inaction against plastic bags and other single-use plastics. They are well organised under the Plastic Manufacturers and Recyclers Association. They are also members of the Uganda Manufacturers Association.

In addition, political will to address the issue is wanting. The country has repeatedly made high-profile announcements that it would act over outlawed plastic bags, but enforcement efforts often fizzle out quickly.

While enforcement capacity might be limited, the Ugandan government hasn't demonstrated the

desire to act to the best of its ability.

No doubt, enforcement alone will not eradicate plastic bags, but it can help reduce the scale of the challenge, and contribute to the success of other interventions such as public education and provision of sustainable alternative bags. A revision of Uganda's legal framework may also be necessary to make it fit-for-purpose.

Although border officials in Kenya and the region can be more effective in curbing the influx of banned plastics from Uganda, there is only so much they can do due to lengthy and porous borders. A more realistic and sustainable approach is for Uganda to limit the manufacture and sale of the bags in the first place.

If Uganda took stronger action on plastic carrier bags, the success rates of regional countries in enforcing their bans will be higher. There would be less need to arrest small-scale traders found using the bags; the problem would have been addressed at source.

Kenya and other East African countries should prevail upon Uganda, through the East African Community (EAC), to act robustly against single-use plastic bags, and to forge a collaborative and comprehensive regional approach to tackling plastic pollution.

In 2017, the EAC Legislative Assembly passed the EAC Polythene Materials Control Bill to limit plastic pollution, but member states are reportedly yet to assent it. The newly-elected EALA members should relook the issue. They can consider expanding restrictions to other types of single-use plastics.