
POLLUTION

New Environment CS should widen ban on single-use plastics

The new Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Forestry Aden Duale can score some quick and decisive wins within a hundred days in office. Among them is expanding the ban on single-use plastics (SUPs) to beat the plastic pollution crisis.

In 2017, Kenya won global acclaim after outlawing single-use plastic carrier and flat bags for commercial and household packaging. In 2020, the country banned all SUPs from nature parks and beaches. This year, the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) prohibited the use of plastic bags or bin liners in handling organic waste.

The above steps are welcome in reducing plastic pollution's devastating health, environmental and economic impacts. But they don't go far enough. The next logical action is to widen the ban to cover other unnecessary and harmful SUPs. These include drinking straws, cups, forks, and food and product packaging and related items. Eliminating them would not disrupt the lives of Kenyans significantly. Sustainable and affordable alternatives are available.

For SUPs like PET plastic bottles for packaging water and beverages, a ban may not be realistic in Kenya yet. However, the state should strengthen the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes, in which manufacturers cover the costs of collecting and managing the waste. Some experts have also proposed borrowing the German model of making the bottles returnable to shops through incentives such as fees. This option can be explored.

Many SUPs don't have a place in the circular economy approach to waste management that Kenya has adopted. They are not recyclable and



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have to end up in landfills eventually. While innovative ways of reusing SUPs have emerged such as in building and construction, they are inadequate to absorb the volumes of SUP waste being generated.

Opponents of SUP bans argue that the measure is drastic and ineffective. They claim Kenya's ban on plastic carrier bags has not eliminated the items from the market. However, official data indicates usage of plastic carrier bags has dropped by at least 95 per cent. This is laudable, considering achieving 100 per cent compliance is not feasible. Additionally, enforcing the ban is a heavy lift due to smuggling from neighbouring Uganda where the bags are widely used.

Another common argument against SUP bans emphasises economic and job losses. This position is often taken by the private sector, who call for a gradual approach to achieve a soft landing for SUP manufacturers, importers and traders. However, drawing from the experience of the 2017 ban, it can help the sector transition successfully to producing eco-friendly alternatives.

It's encouraging to see individual and collective efforts by the private sector in Kenya to reduce SUPs. But given the scale of plastic pollution, their well-intentioned endeavours are unlikely to make a difference. For instance, one initiative bringing together corporates pledged to eliminate unnecessary SUPs by 2030. This target is unambitious and may not be achieved since the programme is voluntary. Government action is necessary.

To achieve a meaningful impact against SUP pollution, the new CS should also push for a regional approach, involving the East Africa Community (EAC) countries. This will minimise cross-border leakages as is the case with plastic carrier bags.

Since waste management is a devolved government function, the Ministry of Environment will need to consult widely with county governments and other players in the waste sector before imposing and implementing the suggested ban on SUPs.

As the global headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme, Kenya should be a leader in combating plastic pollution and other threats to human and environmental health. It is noteworthy that Kenya is at the forefront of ongoing efforts to craft a legally binding international treaty to curb plastic pollution.