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WOULD A BAN ON PLASTIC BAGS WORK IN GHANA?

By: Aseda Mensah

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... everyone matters

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Introduction

The global plastics industry presents a hydra-headed environmental challenge that has remained staunchly established despite insistent appeals from environmentalist and environmentally-concerned organizations over decades. Long accepted as a necessary evil, more plastic has been produced in just the past ten years than was produced during the whole of the last century (Plastic Oceans, 2016), and because 50% of plastic products are not reused and are discarded immediately after use, it is no surprise that the industry contributes to over 10% of the total waste generated by humanity (Ecowatch, 2014).

One of the most popular products originating from the sector is the plastic bag. It has been estimated that the world consumes one million plastic bags *per minute* (Inspiration Green, 2016). In Ghana, they are easily recognizable and completely ubiquitous. Used for all sorts of purposes by all sorts of people in all sorts of circumstances, these range from soft and thin white bags, to the different sizes of the more popular and slightly thicker black bags. From those selling food to vendors of plantain chips, footwear, electronics, and whatever possible item you may name, there is one distinctive thing in common: plastic bags.

Effects of plastic bags

It has therefore been easy to equate their popularity with harmlessness, but this is a mistake that has grave consequences, not only for the environment and the earth, but also for us as individuals, and our posterity as humankind. If there was anything perceived to be innocent about them, it disappears after a few hours of research. These polythene bags are normally composed of chemicals that are toxic to human beings, especially when they are used to store hot food or are burned, resulting in severe effects like cancer, blindness, endocrine disruptions, indigestion, or the disruption of normal physiological levels of sex hormones (Ecology Centre, 2016). When burned, these dangerous chemicals are emitted into the atmosphere, and wreak havoc on the stratosphere. But their effects are also on the ground. Each of these plastic bags takes about 1000 years to degrade (Love Your Earth, 2016); till then, they remain on the surface of the land, easily blown about by the wind because of their lightness. Due in part to the poor waste management habits of most Ghanaians, plastic bags end up thickly compressed by generations or lying in the middle of the street, a blight on the landscape. The ones that are unweighted by decaying refuse are picked up by gusts of air and distributed around cities, choking drains, floating in water bodies, trapping wildlife, and killing animals.

Global Action against the use of plastic bags

When Bangladesh outlawed the manufacture, sale and usage of plastic bags as far back as 2002 (Onyanga-Omara, 2013), it was with good reason, and several other countries followed its example. As the consequences become more and more serious, countries have been deliberating on how to handle the issue of plastic bags. Some countries start the fight by legislating re-usage

of the bags, but, coupled with unbroken habits of single usage by consumers, most such bags are simply not durable enough to withstand this treatment, and the governments end up in exactly the place they were trying to avoid (Mushi, 2015). Government reactions have therefore progressively grown more severe, ranging from lighter measures like charging customers for the bags, and taxing stores that sell them, to banning manufacture and sale outright. African countries have generally been slower than others to successfully implement a decision to clamp down on plastic bags completely. Eritrea blazed the trail in 2005, followed by Rwanda, Tanzania, and recently, Mauritania. Of the countries in Africa that have attempted to deal with the issue, these are the only ones that seem to have made notable headway, and it begs the question: Could Ghana join them?

Would a ban work in Ghana?

Is it possible that such a ban could ever work in Ghana? Our leaders are well aware of the disastrous effects discussed. Indeed, the Minister of Environment, Innovation, Science and Technology, Mahama Ayariga, came out strongly in 2015 that from November 1st, there would be a nationwide ban on plastic bags thinner than 20 microns (News Ghana, 2015), and President John Mahama threatened to "go the Rwanda way" (a blanket ban) if poor plastic management continued (Asare Boadu, 2015). However, there has been no noticeable change in the number and popularity of these plastic bags. In fact, I doubt that most citizens are even aware that there has been such an injunction. This is not as uncommon or unexpected as one would have wished. Several other countries in Africa and elsewhere have experienced the same challenges, and even Tanzania which has been often lauded for its implementation has struggled to completely enforce its laws in some areas of the country, with the legislation banning the use of plastic bags being called "toothless" (Ross, 2015).

So what are the reasons that could account for this difficulty in ending the menace of polythene bags on our streets? First of all, few citizens are even aware of the dangers associated with the use of plastic bags. Secondly, of those who are, most have few or no alternatives, and so they do almost nothing about it. Thirdly, because of the unsatisfactory enforcement by MMDAs and health inspectors, acknowledged even by the President (Appiah, 2015), there is no effective reprimand for lawbreakers, encouraging the flagrant disregard of the prohibition by companies, stores and individuals. Finally, the immense influence of plastic manufacturers cannot be taken for granted (Appiah, 2015). By lobbying aggressively and muddying the waters (excuse the pun) with political-speak about "talking with stakeholders" and "making proposals", they have made it difficult for governments to emphatically clamp down on the usage of plastic bags.

With this current situation, it seems to me, therefore, almost impossible for Ghana to totally ban the manufacture, sale and usage of these plastic bags. Even if the government minister of the sector specifies 30 microns as the weight limit, who is measuring? And who can tell? Would they dispatch workers into every store in every community in every city in the country to confirm that, truly, every plastic bag by every salesperson or on every shelf is heavier than the prescribed weight? As in Tanzania, there will always be people who skirt their way around the legislation by hiding behind technicalities and the fine print of the law.

Some recommendations for consideration

However, there is no denying that the issue must be dealt with, and thus, the onus rests on our leadership to come up with ways of ensuring that Ghanaians do not contravene the polythene laws, for their own immediate benefit as well as that of their children. I recommend the following as courses of action that the government could consider:

1. Social marketing efforts must be geared towards educating the populace on how dangerous the usage of these plastic bags are to health and the environment. Even though considerable focus has been placed on education about using mosquito nets and refraining from littering, government institutions should aim to let people know that these plastic bags are killing them. This will cause an attitude change that does not necessarily stem from a decree issued from a faceless authority.
2. Secondly, if the Ministry of Environment, Innovation Science and Technology is serious about ridding the country of polythene bags, it is insufficient for them to ban its manufacture, sale and usage. They must propose and provide practicable alternatives that citizens and organizations will be able to comply with. In Rwanda, for example, paper bags have been introduced. In South Africa, the bags are required to be biodegradable. Ghana must consider existing alternatives or develop new ones which can eventually phase out the plastic bags. This is actually an exciting and potentially creative economic opportunity. Imagine challenging our youth to come up with something and then backing it to make it a reality.
3. Thirdly, officers of the law must be empowered to enforce the law and mete out sanctions to offenders without fear or prejudice. Structures and well-publicised penalties must be put in place so that those who insist on being a danger to themselves and others are penalized, much like the laws on the advertisement and packaging practices of cigarette companies have been rigorously enforced.
4. Finally, our government must apply wisdom and a long-term view in dealing with the plastics industry. We cannot deny the role that they play in everyday life, and in society; however, they must not be allowed unbridled power to dictate to the very people they seek to serve. Lobbying efforts from the plastics side must be handled by politicians with discretion and a desire for the ultimate good of the environment not only of the present population, considering future citizens, as well as the planet as a whole.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ghana may not yet be ready for a total ban on the manufacture, sale and usage of plastic bags as Tanzania has ordered. But that does not mean that polythene bags are any less harmful to our people and the world. All groups of people, including citizens, advocacy groups, environmentalists, and the government, must come together to put lasting systems and structures in place in order to introduce healthier alternatives to the menace as soon as practically possible.

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