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Thinking Policy Together

Embracing Plastic Circularity as an Alternative Policy to the Ban on Single use of Plastics

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Introduction

Plastic products are by nature universal, light, cheap, and prone to indiscriminate disposal after use. The single use of plastics and improper disposal mechanisms lead to increased plastics pollution, which is a challenge to waste management. Plastics take longer to degrade and decompose and that means they keep accumulating in the environment. Other plastics that contain chemicals leak into the soil, thus degrading its value.

Countries around the world are shifting from the traditional disposal of solid waste in landfill to a more sustainable waste management model. This sustainable solution involves the paradigm shift from taking the raw materials from the environment, making the product, using, and final disposal to a more closed-loop circularity model where a product is used repeatedly. Kenya banned the use of plastics (polythene) in 2017 and, subsequently, this was extended to other plastic products (polyethylene terephthalate) bottles in 2019 vide Gazette Notice 4858 in Karura forest, the National reserves, and Game parks to protect the environment and conserve nature. The ban was supposed to solve this problem and at the same time ensure adherence to the constitutional requirement of providing a clean and safe environment to Kenyans as obligated by Article 69.

The challenge is that most of Kenya's neighbouring countries have not banned the use of single-use plastics (SUPs), and plastics are likely to find their way to the Kenyan markets through unscrupulous traders. Importation of plastics continues through product packaging and Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET) here in Kenya, which means the ban on single-use of plastics has not fully cured the problem.

Status of Plastic Circularity

Plastics are important to our daily lives, and the ban may not solve the problem of environmental pollution. Therefore, there is need to think of how to produce plastics sustainably to ensure that they do not continue having a negative effect on the environment. We should think of investing in a circular economy for plastics. The design of plastics should be made in such a way that products are reusable and recyclable. The adoption of plastic circularity in Kenya has the potential for economic gains and wealth creation while ensuring environmental sustainability and public health. Increasing plastic circularity improves revenue generation and employment creation. For example, it was estimated that the global recycling market value chain equaled US$ 31 billion in 2015 and is expected to reach US$ 57 billion worldwide by 2024 (TMR, 2017)[1]. Demand for virgin raw materials is expected to reduce because recycled plastics are used in industries to substitute for virgin materials, thus reducing environmental degradation through resource depletion.

Kenya has made some progress in the shift towards a circular economy, mainly spearheaded by the private sector, such as the Kenya Association of Manufacturers (KAM), and Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA) with a focus on plastic waste management in a closed-loop. Recent National Sustainable Waste Management Policy 2021 calls for zero waste principle and a more sustainable, circular, and green economy. Also, the Plastic Action Plan of 2019 sets forward a clear roadmap on plastic circularity from 9% in 2020 to at least 30% by 2030. In addition, many start-up industries have already set up mechanisms and technologies for recycling plastics and producing valuable products such as household basins, kitchen trays, egg trays, cabros for road

pavement, plastic poles, and carpets, among others. An example of such companies is Takataka Solutions waste company that deals in waste collection, sorting, recycling, and composting. Mr Green Africa, which is one of the recycling companies in Africa, has leveraged mobile-app technology in its collection process by integrating informal waste collectors, consumers, and entrepreneurs into the value chain. They create profiles of their informal collectors and update the amount of recyclable plastic they deliver and make payments online. Integrating circularity means rethinking the way products are currently produced and advocating for new business models that support recycling and redesigning products.

Policy Gaps in Plastic Circularity

The shift from the concentration on the ban on single use of plastics to the transition towards a circular economy is not a smooth one. The policy and legal environment are supposed to support and give guidelines on how the implementation should be carried out. Assessment of the policy and legal environment shows that the available policies do not address the whole value chain of plastics, which includes design, production, use, disposal, collection, segregation, and recycling. The policies do not give a clear roadmap on how it is supposed to be implemented. In addition, waste management policies seem to be fragmented in these documents, and no specific policy on the circular economy would help in accelerating the transition.

The application of technology in plastic waste management is more mechanical in nature. To accelerate the transition, the application of technology is necessary along the whole value chain. Previous studies show that Kenya is yet to fully embrace technology along the plastic value chain as most technologies are applicable in the collection and recycling stages. Although there are firms in Kenya using technologies such as mobile-enabled apps, there is still more to be done.

Policy Recommendation

The following recommendations are made to help embrace plastic circularity, which will solve the problem of plastics.

(i) The relevant government agencies implementing the ban of single-use plastic bags to promote plastic circularity in a circular economy will have the long-lasting solution. In line with this, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry in collaboration with NEMA and the County Governments may consider fast-tracking the development of the Plastic Circular Economy Policy and Bill.

(ii) Most of the policies and legislations do not address plastic waste management along the value chain, therefore, there is need for relevant government entities to collaborate to harmonize waste management legislations and policies that address plastic circularity along the value chain.

(iii) Re-introduce incentives for plastic recycling such as zero tax on imported technologies, including machinery and equipment for recycling, and material recovery infrastructure for companies and businesses involved in plastic circularity along the value chain. This would encourage new investment in the plastic circular economy in the country, create more jobs and reduce the impact of waste on environmental health in line with the Sustainable Development Goal No. 12.

(iv) Transitioning to a circular economy needs the application of technologies that support the whole plastic value chain. Therefore, all actors in plastic waste management need to invest in technologies that start from design to the recycling level.

Endnote

1. TMR, (2017), Plastic recycling market estimated to reach US$ 56.7 billion by 2024. Ban on plastics in developed resins wider scope: Transparency Market Research.

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KIPPRA Policy Briefs are aimed at a wide dissemination of the Institute's policy research findings. The findings are expected to stimulate discussion and also build capacity in the public policy making process in Kenya.

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