

Africa's rural communities will be the hardest hit by plastic pollution

By [Joshua Amponsem](#)

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Plastic waste in Africa is not just an urban issue, but also a rural one. Rural communities are almost always heavily dependent on natural resources, such as water and arable land, to make a living. These resources are being irrevocably contaminated with plastic waste, the impact of which is often underestimated.



Joshua Amponsem, founder of the Green Africa Youth Organisation and Afri-Plastics Challenge judge. | Source: Supplied

Sub-Saharan Africa produces over 17 million tonnes of waste annually, with only 12% of plastic waste being recycled. The rest finds its way into landfills, streets and waterways. In rural areas, much of the plastic waste is burnt, largely because most rural areas have no rubbish collection or recycling facilities available.

Plastic disposed of in this way releases toxins into the environment, killing life on land and in water, and contaminating previously fertile land. Most governments in Africa do not have the resources to police this behaviour but do acknowledge the issue and are often very willing to collaborate to find relevant solutions.

The biggest challenge facing Africa is the fact that for millions, putting food on the table for their families is their single biggest concern. This has been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic with many people losing their source of

income. We need to work together to demonstrate the extent of the risk, as it will have an impact on the livelihoods of farmers and other informal workers – as well as the overall value chain keeping economies alive.

With the population growing and the middle class expanding, plastic waste will soon become Africa's biggest risk, coupled with the overall climate change crisis facing the continent.



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As the waste volumes increase, individuals have seen opportunities to collect waste and sell it to recyclers. While this may make a dent in the waste problem, it raises questions around dignity, health and safety. Many of these waste pickers are women and young girls, who venture into unsafe areas and pick through waste without protective clothing.

Africans have started to take up the challenge to clean up their communities. In rural Ghana, communities have long reused discarded plastic containers; for example, reusing them as packaging for cleaning supplies for sale, storage of oil and other non-consumable products.

In Rwanda, the government has mandated a monthly clean up called Umuganda – a national holiday acknowledged on the last Saturday of every month. This has received global praise for the incredible impact it has made, and instilled a real sense of 'community'. However, the reality is that this initiative is not the norm.

Addressing the plastic pollution issue

To address a rural plastic waste crisis before it drives communities into poverty and urbanisation, we need innovators, influencers and industry to educate and enable people to embrace the 'reduce, reuse and recycle' mindset.

Across Africa, innovators are focusing their efforts on addressing the plastic waste crisis. The Afri-Plastics Challenge, which is currently underway, has identified numerous initiatives working to combat waste in new ways.

For example, the Recycling Scheme for Women and Youth Empowerment (RESWAYE) in Lagos State, Nigeria, is a buy-back initiative that aims to empower women and the youth through collection and recycling of plastic waste. In the West African nation of Togo, Green Industry Plast collects, sorts and recycles plastic waste into building materials, tables, benches and plastic objects.

These organised efforts take plastic waste and reuse a great deal further, but ultimately recycling is not enough. We need a two-fold approach, looking at both how to reduce waste, and what to do with existing waste. It is crucial that the plastic

deluge is addressed at its source.

These efforts could not have come at a better time. United Nations negotiators meeting at UNEA 5.2 have agreed on a roadmap for a global plastic treaty that would address plastic production and design, according to a draft resolution, which is a major step to agreeing an ambitious deal. A draft resolution, entitled "End plastic pollution: Towards an internationally legally binding instrument", states that the treaty should address "the full life cycle of plastic", meaning production and design, as well as waste.

Most efforts across Africa are still in the plastic waste management phase because waste is highly visible. Too few are focusing on how to reduce the amount of plastic in use before the waste problem emerges.



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This means influencing consumer demand and consumption as well as product package innovations is the crucial next step to being successful in tackling plastic waste. It is up to community leaders, African influencers and the captains of industry to promote a 'reduce, reuse and recycle' mindset.

Industry need not wait for changing consumer demand to step up: manufacturers must proactively develop environmentally friendly alternatives to single-use plastic. The issue arises about job losses, and this highlights the need for the public and private sectors to find innovative solutions while retaining jobs and fuelling growth with new opportunities.

In Ghana, water is typically sold in plastic sachets in the streets. People prefer to carry reusable water bottles, but there are seldom taps available where they can refill their bottles. As such, they must resort to buying the sachets. There is a simple solution: portable water tanks can be installed across key locations so that people can refill their own reusable water bottles.

It is about changing perceptions and implementing easy-to-use solutions that are practical for individual markets.

Africa has a young and vibrant population made up of innovators capable of overcoming the plastic waste issue and broader climate change challenges. Initiatives such as the Afri-Plastics Challenge is critical to constantly reminding people about the negative impact plastic waste is having on their cities and rural communities.

We need to focus beyond waste management and start changing consumer attitudes and put pressure on both the public and private sectors to play their part.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joshua Amponsem is the founder of the Green Africa Youth Organisation and Afri-Plastics Challenge judge.

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