

Rwanda leads Africa in plastic waste management

By [Radhia Monga](#)

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The production, use and disposal of plastics poses the biggest challenge in waste management. While individual governments have instituted legislative measures and even signed international conventions aimed at stemming the tide of the plastic waste menace, the world is yet to see an end to plastic pollution.



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Across Africa, plastic pollution remains a serious problem, devastating communities' health, the environment, and the ecosystem that millions depend on for their livelihood. But amidst this challenge, Rwanda remains at the forefront of waste management, earning its capital city, Kigali, the moniker "Africa's cleanest city". Rwanda's efforts began with a 2008 ban on non-biodegradable plastic bags, which was subsequently followed by the outlawing of single-use plastic items as one of the long-term strategies for becoming a green and climate-resilient nation.

The ban was aimed at minimising the dangers of plastic pollution to humans, farm animals, aquatic life and the environment. According to a World Bank report, Rwanda's current strong institutional and political will, legal frameworks and citizens active in eliminating plastic pollution foster socioeconomic development and environmental protection. The national motto for sustainable environmental management is: "whatever cannot be recycled or reused must not be produced".

National policies and laws that make it happen

The country also has a host of national policies and laws concerning general pollution management: Vision 2020 (2000), Rwanda Green Growth and Climate Resilience Strategy (2011), Regulations of Solid Waste Recycling (2015), and the Law on Environment (48/2018 of 13/08/2018), among others. In addition, there are specific laws or policies that focus directly on plastic waste control in Rwanda. These include Law No. 57/2008 of 10/09/2008 relating to the prohibition of the manufacturing, importation, use and sale of polythene bags in Rwanda (2008).



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Coming together in common purpose

Furthermore, as a signatory to international conventions, Rwanda has adhered to its commitments to achieve ambitious changes in the use, management and disposal of plastics in the country. For instance, as a signatory of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the country seeks to contribute to the ambitious goals of the agreement. The management of plastic pollution in Rwanda falls within a wider strategic, regulatory and policy framework, which sets the foundation for the management of waste.

In order for these commitments to really take root however, the backing of the local community is needed. In Rwanda, this has come in the form of "Umuganda", a Kinyarwanda word that means "coming together in common purpose". It's a monthly community initiative (including community cleanup) reintroduced to Rwandan life in 1998 as part of the efforts to

rebuild the country after the 1994 genocide. Today, it takes place on the last Saturday of every month from 8am and lasts for at least three hours with every able-bodied Rwandan aged 18 to 65 taking part.



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Home to innovators

Furthermore, Rwanda has also created a dedicated community of innovators in the field of plastic waste management. These include CareMeBioplastics and Toto Safi, who are both finalists in the Afri-Plastics Challenge. Small and medium enterprises like these illustrate the growing role for the private sector within the plastic value chain, particularly in the African context where government infrastructure and services are limited, even non-existent in some places.

CareMeBioplastics is involved in the collection and recycling of plastic, using a mobile app to collect the plastics from the end-users and processing the collected plastic, and turning the plastic waste into valuable items such as school desks, and both indoor and outdoor furniture.

Toto Safi's solution is a reusable cloth diaper service so that parents do not have to choose between convenience and pollution. Through this app, parents will be able to receive a fresh bundle of sterilised and affordable cloth diapers. These two innovators represent the wider activity and commitment that the Rwandan landscape is facilitating. They also demonstrate the importance of public-private partnership in plastic waste management.

Significant challenges

Despite impressive success, delivery of waste management services in Rwanda still faces significant challenges if the governments, industries and businesses do not invest and develop effective and efficient waste management systems. Another challenge is a lack of data and data management systems for waste management, which makes it difficult to understand and design policies for waste management and assess the impact of plastics policies on plastic waste recycling reduction in Rwanda.

The government could address these challenges by developing a robust data management system to gather, record and report on plastics data. Such a system is essential to facilitating policy performance measurement and improvement. It will allow the nation to better track waste accumulation, waste movements and end destinations, e.g., tonnages recycled, recovered, or disposed of, including public behavioural changes toward plastic waste management practices, and enable the government to identify and assess opportunities for future interventions.

The government also needs to step up its support to separate waste at the source and to handle separated waste during its collection and transportation with the right financial incentives. Gradually increasing landfill tipping fees, fines for illegal dumping, deposit refund schemes, and other financial incentives according to society's increasing affluence will help encourage both households and entities to separate recyclable plastics from other wastes, reduce landfill disposal and curb illegal dumping in Rwanda.



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Need for collaborative effort

The private and public sector need to stop working in silos as the problem affects both sectors. Where the public sector falls short, the private sector may be able to provide support through innovation and research as demonstrated by the above listed tech startups.

Education and awareness also play a key role in making sure these initiatives succeed. It would be prudent to incorporate within the education system, the importance of proper waste management, recycling and the overall circular economy. This encourages a holistic, systems approach to the problem which in turn ensures sustainability of the overall solutions.

Provide financial incentives

Finally, the government needs to develop effective mechanisms and provide financial incentives to support local industries – such as the construction and manufacturing sectors – to incorporate recycled materials into their manufacturing processes and products.

These are challenges that governments face across Africa and globally. There is no doubt that Rwanda is a global leader in plastic waste management and its efforts should be emulated by all governments to spur the growth of their economies, sustain a clean environment and improve the health and well-being of their citizens.

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