

To ban or not to ban plastic shopping bags? Implications and proposed solutions

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Discarded single-use plastic shopping bags (SUPBs) are a growing environmental menace. Dubbed the 'white flower' in South Africa, the negative effects of SUPBs include reducing the aesthetic value of landscapes, clogging waterways, depleting petroleum reserves through their production, and endangering marine life through entanglement and ingestion.



Source: [Pexels](#)

Global carbon emissions from the litter of SUPBs range from 100 to 300 million tons per year. An estimated 8.4 million tons of plastic bag litter contaminate oceans every year. The accumulation of plastic litter in oceans is typified by the Great Pacific garbage patch and the North Atlantic sub-tropical gyre.

The tide of opinion against plastic bags has resulted in most European Union countries imposing a plastic bag tax. In Asia, Bangladesh, India, Taiwan, and China have opted for a plastic bag ban (PBB), while by 31 December 2018, more than 25 African countries had implemented a ban.

In North America, a ban was introduced by states such as California, Hawaii and New York. In Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, and the Australian Capital Territory introduced the ban in Oceania, along with Papua New Guinea. In South America, Brazil (Sao Paulo) and Argentina (Buenos Aires) also introduced a ban. South Africa, however, opted for a plastic bag tax – but it has failed to address the problem of plastic bag litter.

Environmentalists in South Africa are proposing the implementation of a plastic bag ban (PBB) as a policy alternative. A PBB outlaws the manufacturing, importation, and selling of plastic bags that do not meet the required thickness thresholds.



Amended plastic bag regulations published for implementation

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The key questions arising from this proposal include: 1) Should South Africa take the route of banning plastic bags? and 2) What lessons could South Africa draw from other countries that have implemented the ban?

Effects of the ban

- The ban received widespread support in the Australian Capital Territory; and in Rwanda, a community-based environmental campaign called Umuganda was instrumental in the success of the ban. Kigali, Rwanda's capital city, earned the prestigious United Nations Scroll of Honour Award for being the cleanest city in Africa.
- A similar ban promoted green consumerism as the demand for environmentally friendly shopping bags increased in California in the USA, and in Italy and Rwanda. Green entrepreneurship has emerged as a promising business opportunity, although it is being tainted by the use of unsubstantiated environmental claims in most developing countries.
- Public health was enhanced in Kenya because the use of unhygienic plastic bag toilets was significantly reduced.
- The PBB is generally criticised for causing inconvenience when shopping, failing to consider the influence of shopping occasions, increasing shopping costs owing to expensive alternatives, triggering deviant behaviours such as illegal dumping, imposing an enforcement burden on national governments, and causing negative economic impacts such as job losses and disinvestment from the plastics industry.
- The objective of promoting ecological modernisation – premised on a circular economy, green growth, saving resources, and efficiency through recycling and green reverse logistics – is far from being realised in countries such as Rwanda, Kenya, South Sudan, and Somalia owing to the lack of recycling infrastructure and of incentives to industry such as subsidies.
- In Uganda, Kenya, Mali, Bhutan, California, China, and India, enforcement was weakened by the structural power of plastic bag manufacturers. Law suits delayed the implementation of the ban in California, and resistance from Californian businesses resulted in a 'banning the ban' campaign.
- China and India continue to be the largest contributors to sea plastic bag litter, despite their implementation of plastic bag bans. Internationally, the PBB was estimated to affect 62,000 companies, resulting in 1,45 million job losses and a revenue loss of \$350bn.
- Literature reviewed (Clapp and Swanston, 2009; Rivers et al., 2017) pointed to the limited success of a PBB owing to the lack of suitable alternatives, limited state capacity to monitor and enforce the ban, a thriving black market, and the structural and instrumental power of the plastics industry.
- The power of the industry is revealed by the covert practice of deflecting accountability to consumers by focusing on business-oriented solutions, including an inclination to adopt self-regulation.

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So what should be done?

- There is a need for a global treaty to address the transient nature of plastic bag litter. Such a treaty should move away from the symbolic gesture of targeting only plastic shopping bags to considering the environmental impact of all forms of plastic, such as straws, foamed plastics, and plastic bottles and caps.
- The criticism levelled against alternatives to plastic bags, such as paper bags and reusable bags, which is based on unsubstantiated environmental claims, is a major concern. To address this problem, the use of independent life cycle assessments to verify the authenticity of such claims is recommended.
- Literature reviewed suggests that the end of plastic shopping bags is not nigh because of their utilitarian benefits. The promotion of a circular economy that focuses on ecological modernisation, sustainable plastic bag manufacturing, and recovery strategies such as recycling is recommended as a long-term strategy.
- The adoption of community-driven approaches such as voluntary initiatives, rather than banning plastic bags, is recommended because they have proved to be effective in promoting environmental citizenship behaviours in countries such as Chile, Finland, Luxemburg, and France.

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