

IMPROVING PLASTIC WASTE MANAGEMENT IN UGANDA: CRITICAL ACTIONS NEEDED



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PROFILE Edna Kanyesigye is a dedicated Programs Officer at Faraja Africa Foundation with over seven years of experience in youth empowerment, advocacy, and policy engagement, including expertise in climate justice projects. She coordinates impactful initiatives, such as the Youth-Led Advocacy in Legislation project, mobilizing youth leaders across Uganda to engage in policy dialogues and legislative processes. Edna holds a Bachelor's degree in Environmental Science Technology and Management from Kyambogo University and a Level One Certificate in Project Planning and Management from Ms-TCDC in Tanzania. Her expertise spans project management, stakeholder engagement, and climate justice, with a focus on gender inclusivity and empowering marginalized groups. Committed to sustainable development, Edna aims to bridge the gap between youth and decision-makers, ensuring young voices shape Uganda's policy landscape.

Executive Summary

Uganda has some of the strongest plastic management laws in the region, including the National Environment Act of 2019 (NEA) and the 2020 Waste Management Regulations, which restrict thin plastic bags and embed Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). Yet, enforcement is weak, fragmented, and underfunded. The result is an inconsistency of tough rules coexisting with clogged drains, plastic-choked wetlands, and microplastics in Lake Victoria. Uganda generates about 600 metric tons of plastic waste daily, with less than half collected. In Kampala alone, 136,000 tons are generated annually, much of it uncollected or leaking into waterways. This brief examines the enforcement gaps and proposes reforms, including implementing EPR in practice, introducing a deposit-return system for PET, strengthening surveillance, aligning fiscal incentives with recycling, and professionalizing municipal waste collection.

Introduction

Uganda has established a strong legal foundation for managing plastic waste (Muheirwe et al., 2023). The National Environment Act (2019) and the Waste Management Regulations (2020) ban thin plastic carrier bags (below 30 microns) and embed Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks to hold producers accountable for plastic waste (Lubogo, 2024). These laws were intended to promote sustainable waste management and protect ecosystems, human health, and water resources. Yet, despite express

legal mandates, enforcement has remained weak and inconsistent. The ban on plastic carrier bags has frequently been undermined by poor implementation, court injunctions, and limited monitoring at the local level (NEMA, 2022).

In Kampala alone, plastic waste management remains chaotic, contributing to clogged drainage systems, breeding sites for disease vectors, flooding, and pollution of urban wetlands (Mensah, 2024). Estimates suggest Uganda generates around 600 metric tons of plastic waste every day, but less than half of this waste is properly collected and processed (New Vision, 2025). This implementation gap has resulted in a paradox where Uganda's plastic policy is progressive on paper but regressive in practice. Despite some awareness campaigns and periodic enforcement operations, the widespread leakage of plastic waste into the environment persists (Vanapalli et al., 2021). The plastic pollution crisis reflects deeper institutional failures, unclear mandates, and chronic underinvestment in waste infrastructure (Vandenberg, 2024). This situation is a major obstacle to advancing Uganda's transition toward a circular economy and poses risks of long-term environmental degradation, making it imperative to close the gap between policy and practice through stronger compliance, adequate resource allocation, and robust accountability mechanisms (Kaur et al., 2024).

Policy options

- The National Environment Act (2019) formally banned thin plastic carrier bags, introduced EPR provisions for plastic producers, and empowered the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) and the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) to enforce plastic standards (Ainebyoona, 2024).
- NEMA has implemented awareness campaigns, policy dialogues, and enforcement operations, including widespread seizures and destruction of banned plastic bags (NEMA, 2022).
- Civil society organizations have partnered in campaigns aimed at litter reduction and public sensitization, while Nairobi-based activists, including Leah Namugerwa, have mobilized youth movements to push for enforcement of the ban (Dauvergne, 2023).
- However, these efforts have not translated into systemic progress. Inconsistent enforcement remains a major barrier, as courts have issued temporary injunctions halting the plastic carrier bag ban, and enforcement often targets downstream actors such as vendors rather than upstream producers.
- Monitoring and border controls are weak, allowing non-compliant and imported plastics to bypass regulatory scrutiny (New Vision, 2025). The EPR mandates remain largely theoretical, as few manufacturers have established functional recycling or take-back systems.
- Data on plastic collection and recycling is fragmented, but one industry estimate suggests that only around 6% of the plastic waste generated in the country is collected and recycled (Ainebyoona, 2024), leaving the vast majority unaccounted for.
- Initiatives such as community-based PET collection projects have shown promise; for example, the CEPCOM Women's PET recycling project collects and bales around 60,000 kilograms of PET monthly and provides livelihood opportunities for local women (CEPCOM, 2024). Nonetheless, such projects remain limited in scale and lack integration with national systems. Despite legal and policy frameworks, Uganda's plastic pollution response remains reactive, localized, and under-resourced, without a robust system for reducing plastic leakage at scale.

Actions needed at the national (systems) level

1. Operationalize extended producer responsibility (EPR)
 - (a) The National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) should create a mandatory producer registry and require annual reporting on plastic recovery.
 - (b) Producers and importers should meet phased recovery targets through accredited Producer Responsibility Organizations (PROs).
 - (c) Compliance should be monitored by both NEMA and the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS), with penalties for non-compliance.
2. Introduce a phased deposit–return system for PET bottles
 - (a) The Ministry of Trade and Industry, in collaboration with beverage companies, should launch a pilot in Kampala and progressively expand to regional municipalities.
 - (b) A refund mechanism should be established to encourage consumers to return bottles, targeting an 80% collection rate within three years.
 - (c) Private waste collection firms should be integrated into the system to enhance efficiency and inclusivity.

Actions needed at the local government level

3. Strengthen Municipal Waste Management Systems
 - (a) Local governments should sign performance-based contracts with private operators to improve collection, sorting, and recycling of plastics.
 - (b) The Ministry of Finance should allocate a ring-fenced budget line for urban solid waste management, ensuring predictable financing.
 - (c) Partnerships with community organizations and informal waste pickers should be formalized to improve service delivery and livelihoods.

Actions needed at the regulatory and fiscal level

4. Align policies and incentives with circular economy goals

(a) Uganda Revenue Authority and UNBS should strengthen customs and border inspections to block banned and substandard plastics.

(b) Eco-modulated fees should be introduced to discourage non-recyclable plastics, while levies on virgin plastics should encourage recycled alternatives.

(c) The Ministry of Education and NEMA should lead nationwide awareness and school-based programs to promote behavioural change on plastic use and disposal.

Conclusion

Uganda's plastic management framework is already in place, but weak enforcement continues to undermine its effectiveness. In order to reduce plastic leakage, protect ecosystems, and create green jobs, the country must commit to fully implementing Extended Producer Responsibility, adopting a deposit-return system, aligning fiscal incentives with recycling, and strengthening municipal delivery. With such reforms, Uganda can transform its current paradox into a model of effective environmental governance and circular economy leadership.

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