



GOATS AND SODA

## The toughest plastic bag ban is failing: A tale of smugglers, dumps and dying goats

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By Scovian Lillian



grocery stores and other vendors give you to hold your purchases. The law was inspired by the toll of plastic pollution. The bags used to package food and other products were exempted.

### A ban with purpose — and teeth

It was hailed as a ground-breaking law by other countries and even the United Nations. When people toss the bags, they create all sorts of problems. They clog drainage systems. In dumps, where trash is sometimes burned, they release toxins. They end up in rivers and streams. And like all plastic detritus, they degrade into microplastics, which scientists have found in the bloodstreams of fish and humans as well. Although no definitive impacts of microplastics on animal and human health have been established, studies have raised concerns about possible harm.

The bags also pose a threat to livestock. Goats and other grazers sometimes eat the bags as they look for fodder in the semi-arid landscape, bringing on digestive blockage and even death.

The law came with stiff penalties. Violators — both businesses and consumers — could face a jail term of up to four years or a fine of \$4 million Kenyan shillings — about \$28,000.

At first, the ban worked well. People were afraid of getting caught. And those who were caught did pay a price. In 2018, for instance, 18 vendors and other businesspeople who pleaded guilty in court in the Kenyan coastal city of Mombasa were either fined \$300 or sentenced to eight months in jail for using single-use plastic bags.

But in 2023, the colorful, single-use plastic bags are piling up in the Dadach Boshe dump, which serves Marsabit County, with a population of about half a million. What's more, as strong winds send the bags flying. They catch on tree branches and land in patches of grass, where grazing animals might find them.

Since Kenya's bag manufacturers stopped producing bags due to the ban, the question looms: Where are the bags coming from?

### **Bag smugglers**

Turns out that they're smuggled into Kenya from its neighbors – and not just in Marsabit county.

"The plastic bags originate from the neighboring country of Ethiopia and other countries that have not embraced the ban on plastic use," says Naphtali Osoro, the county director at the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) in Marsabit. At the border of Kenya and Ethiopia, he says, traders smuggle single-use plastic bags into Kenya — sometimes concealing them within shipments of plastic that is used for packaging products and is exempt from the ban. And then the bags are sold for use at local markets.

Enforcers say Uganda is another source of the smuggled bags.

"That is why it is difficult to manage the ban in Kenya," says Dorothy Otieno, programs officer at Kenya's Centre for Environmental Justice and Development. "Manufacturers [of plastic bags] moved to other countries but still have connections with Kenya, so they smuggle the bags into the country" to boost their business.



Single use plastic bags — banned in 2016 by Kenya — are still a sizeable presence at the Dadaab Boshe dump and elsewhere in the country.

Scovian Lillian for NPR

Abdullahi Ismael, chief officer of Environment and Climate Change in Marsabit County, explains why the bags are able to enter the country. "There is a reluctance in enforcing that law at the border," he says. "It should be a mandate [for] security agents at the border, but we need to sensitize people about the environmental impacts of those single-use plastic bags."

He promises action. "We intend to call the county environmental management committee soon for a meeting and one of the agendas is to discuss the plastic bags issue and where we went wrong on the ban," he says.

It's not been easy to nab the bag smugglers, he adds.

"There should be a collective effort from NEMA, security agencies and the county and national government to control the entry of plastic bags."

Some shoppers now hide their plastic bags in shopping bags made of acceptable materials like cloth, says Steve Itela, CEO of Conservation Alliance in Kenya. And others feel there are just so many people now using the bags that enforcing the ban in markets is impossible.

At a local market, a vegetable vendor told me that "the bags are in circulation, but it seems that the law enforcers are relaxed to do the job of eradicating them." Goat owners are among those who bemoan the proliferation of bags.

### **Trouble for goats**

Golompo Duba, who lives about a mile and a quarter from the dump, had a flock of 150 goats. A number of the goats had suffered from bloated bellies. When he slaughtered some of them for food, he found plastic bags in their stomachs. He also says that some of his goats with swollen stomachs died, and he now believes that the reason for their condition was the inadvertent consumption of plastic bags as they searched for vegetation to consume.



Golompo Duba, who lives about a mile and a quarter from the dump, had a flock of 150 goats. He believes that 10 of them died after inadvertently ingesting plastic bags as they searched for vegetation.

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Stanley Sakimpa, a veterinarian in Nairobi, confirms that plastic bags ingestion can be fatal to goats and cows — although not as risky for donkeys. "Goats and cattle have four [compartments in their] stomachs, the rumen, reticulum, omasum and abomasum, but donkeys have one like humans, which makes it easier for them to defecate the ingested bags. In goats and cows, the bags remain in the stomach lining making it difficult for fodder or pasture to move through the four stomachs [compartments]. These plastic bags then cause blockage and eventually death," he says.

He added that animals that lack ample grazing material will eat plastic bags. He says he has seen such cases in his work.

Duba himself went to a veterinarian for advice. He was told to give the goats salty water to reduce the swelling and aid in defecation. That did not help. Between the bags and the drought, Duba lost his entire herd and now works as a low-paid gravel crusher — crushing and selling it to constructors at a very low price.

Some area residents have similar stories of losing goats to plastic bag consumption, although no one is tracking just how many have died. Fatuma Molu, a fellow gravel crusher, says many find livestock owners find it pointless to speak out about the problem because they think no action will be taken. She adds that the goat owners try as much as possible to keep them from grazing around the dump site.

### **A government promise of action**

The government is committed to enforcing the ban. In Nairobi County, Governor Johnson Sakaja took on this issue in a speech he gave on Kenya's Labour Day, May 1. He promised to crack down on single-use plastic bags (which he referred to as "plastic paper bags"): "Plastic paper bags were banned, but they have come back. In a week we are going to launch an operation to make sure that plastic paper bags are no longer in our markets because they are the ones clogging our drainage," he said.

The crackdown on smugglers who bring in bags has yet to take place. And so the bags continue to pile up at the Dadach Boshe dump. When men and boys head to the dump to collect plastic bottles and scrap metal to sell, they set fires to reduce the load of rubbish — which results in toxins in the air from the burning plastic bags.

But one group of dump visitors seem oblivious to the bag pileup. On a recent day, several baboons came looking for snacks. They ignored the bags and focused on rotting avocados.

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