



## 4.11. Kenya: A game of cat and mouse

While a great deal of attention is paid to plastic pollution in high-income countries (such as those in the EU and North America), middle- or low-income countries, including many in Africa and Asia, are bearing a disproportionate share of the burden of plastic waste.<sup>1</sup> Beverage companies and FMCGs increasingly see these countries as key markets for growth; in 2019, for example, Coca-Cola's CEO, James Quincey, said Africa represents 'one of the core growth engines for the company going forward'.<sup>2</sup> When consumer-goods companies push their products into new markets, they frequently do so without ensuring country's waste infrastructure can cope with the new materials arriving by the truckload. A report by the NGO Tearfund also found that many FMCGs use a larger amount of plastic, per euro of sales, in middle- and low-income countries.<sup>3</sup>

The result is a pernicious and growing plastic pollution nightmare, creating environmental devastation and crippling the health of communities deluged in plastic trash.<sup>4</sup> Communities on the frontline of the plastics crisis are struggling to find ways to stem the tide of trash, from both imports and mismanaged domestic waste, contributing to the huge human-health and environmental ramifications of open waste burning and overflowing dump sites. According to a 2017 report by the World Bank, only about 7% of plastic waste in Kenya is ever recycled, about 24% is taken to dumpsites, where it is usually burnt, and an alarming 69% ends up in water bodies.<sup>5</sup>

Kenya, which made headlines in 2017 by successfully bringing in the world's strictest plastic-bag ban - the third attempt at passing the legislation - has been at the forefront of the 34 African nations with bag bans or taxes.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that the Kenya Association of Manufacturers (KAM) strongly opposed the ban and filed a legal challenge against it, which was ultimately unsuccessful.<sup>7</sup>

According to the National Environment Management Authority,<sup>8</sup> the bag ban resulted in 80% of the population ceasing to use single-use carrier bags. Subsequently, in 2018, the government signalled the extension of the ban to single-use plastics - including plastic bottles - in protected areas, such as national parks, from June 2020.<sup>9</sup>

In response to the plastic-bag ban, FMCGs such as Unilever and Coca-Cola have deployed a variety of tactics to ensure they can continue to sell single-use plastic products in the country. Together with KAM, they formed PETCO, an organisation (with offices in Coca-Cola's Nairobi headquarters) with the aim of 'self-regulating' the recycling of PET, avoiding mandatory measures.<sup>10,11</sup> Akin to misleading Green Dot symbols or recycling numbers in other countries, the PETCO symbol (a green circle of arrows) and tagline ('#do1thing. Recycle:') pushes the responsibility and blame for pollution onto consumers. However, the initiative has not resulted in reliable streams of clean recyclates to stimulate the recycling market in Kenya, and plastic bottles continue to litter roadsides and rubbish dumps.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the subsidy PETCO provided for collection is so low - as little as 9 cents for 14kg of plastic<sup>13</sup> - that it requires many hours of hard work to collect enough for payment. Even then, due to limited demand for recyclable

Growing plastic pollution in a dumpsite in Nairobi, Kenya  
Credit: Clean-Up Kenya



An overflowing dumpsite in Nairobi, Kenya  
Credit: Clean-Up Kenya



plastic some waste pickers report being stuck with thousands of kilos of plastic bottles, collected over months, with nowhere to go.<sup>14</sup>

As in other countries, the industry sponsors widely publicised litter-clean-up days, working with local groups, such as the clean-up days organised by Coca-Cola with the youth organisation Dandora HipHop City. For this initiative, ironically, volunteers were 'paid' in Coca-Cola beverages - in plastic bottles.

Proposals to introduce DRS for beverage containers have been met with fierce opposition, particularly from Coca-Cola, despite its commitment to collect a bottle for every bottle it sells globally and its grudging support for DRS in some European countries. Clean Up Kenya was even met with veiled threats from beverage-industry representatives when the local NGO met them to discuss a national bottle-deposit system.<sup>15</sup> Coca-Cola argues that DRS would not be appropriate for Kenya, even though KAM deemed it feasible in a 2019 report,<sup>16</sup> and despite the fact that a deposit for returnable glass bottles has long been a feature of Kenyan consumers' lives. In this regard, Coca-Co-



Plastic bottles, collected over months, with nowhere to go  
Credit: Clean-Up Kenya



Waste pickers report being stuck with thousands of kilos of plastic bottles,  
Credit: Clean-Up Kenya



**The huge human-health and environmental ramifications of open waste burning and overflowing dump sites in Kenya**

Credit: Clean-Up Kenya

la has a double incentive to stymie DRS - every refillable glass bottle that is displaced from the market is replaced by 25 single-use-plastic bottles, and, in Kenya, the advent of single-use-plastic bottles has outpaced local glass bottlers - which would also bottle beverages from local soda brands, stifling the company's competition.<sup>17</sup>

NGOs (such as Clean Up Kenya) attempts to directly engage with Coca-Cola have fallen on deaf ears. The plastic giant is accused of failing to recognise the scale of the plastic-bottle problem in Kenya and of failing in its commitment to the Kenyan people - and even of being complicit in child labour and human-rights violations, through its control of PETCO and its weak subsidy scheme, which requires waste pickers to collect as many as 320 bottles for a single US dollar.<sup>18</sup>

The case of Kenya demonstrates the hypocrisy of consumer brands pushing their products on markets not adequately equipped to manage the resultant waste, while also actively blocking measures that would equip them to do so. It demonstrates the importance of forcing companies to adopt a consistent approach to tackling plastic waste across all markets, and not continuing with its double standards. While the industry is under the watchful eye of consumers and NGOs in the EU and North America, it often escapes such scrutiny in low- and middle-income countries, where citizens are more directly and heavily impacted by plastic pollution.

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