

Rwanda as a role model: the plastic bag ban



Photo taken from: <https://plasticoceans.org/rwanda-plastic-bag-ban/> (<https://plasticoceans.org/rwanda-plastic-bag-ban/>)

When you read the title of this blogpost up until the colon, you might think I have lost my mind. Rwanda as a country still has as a bad connotation due to the genocide that took place in 1994. In the 24 years after this genocide, a lot has changed in this small East African country that made this scattered community become tight and surprisingly, fairly environmentally conscious. This consciousness is reflected in **its mentions in tops of environmentally friendly countries [1].** (<https://www.ecowatch.com/top-10-greenest-countries-in-the-world-1881962985.html>) Rwanda is most known for being one of the few countries that has established a ban on plastic bags. I think that countries as well as individuals can learn something from the massive change that Rwanda underwent, both from an environmental as well as from a societal perspective.

On the 6th of April, 1994, both the president of Rwanda and Burundi died in a plane crash that was caused by a rocket attack. This event sparked the fights that took almost 1 million lives in a little over three months in one of the worst massacres this world has ever seen. By the 4th of July, 1994, most of the

killing had stopped and the opposition party Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took control [2]

(<http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/education/rwandagenocide.shtml>). From July 1994 onwards, the traumatized community of Rwanda started to rebuild their destroyed homeland in a fascinating way. I will give you the highlights.

By the year 2000, the Rwandan government released a **VISION 2020 document** [3] (<https://www.sida.se/globalassets/global/countries-and-regions/africa/rwanda/d402331a.pdf>) that stated the goals the country wants to achieve by the year 2020 when it comes to healthcare, poverty, a safe community and sustainability. The environmental part of this paper is not extensive, but it has been supported by a *Rwanda – State of the Environment and Outlook Report* [4] (https://www.nmbu.no/sites/default/files/pdfattachments/state_of_environment_and_outlook_report_2015.pdf), which elaborates on the environmental state at that moment and the way forward from that current situation. It was in 2003 that the government through its environmental agency, the REMA, supported the National University of Rwanda in its research on the plastic bag situation in Rwanda [5] (<http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1067480/FULLTEXT01.pdf>). The study sketched the situation that was created by the use of plastic in Rwandan society. The bags were often thrown away after being used only one time and they frequently ended up on the streets, in bodies of water or other parts of the environment. Draining systems became clogged with plastic bags, which costed lives and money. The people that did not litter their plastic bags, got rid of them by burning the bags, releasing toxic compounds into the air. Through this study, the seriousness of the matter at hand became apparent to the Rwandan government. Since Rwanda did not have the capability to establish a solid recycling system of polythene bags, the Rwandan government only had one way of dealing with this problem: a nation-wide ban.

In 2004, the Rwandan government publicized their plan to ban plastic bags through TV channels and the monthly community work day *Umuganda*. *Umuganda* takes place on every last Saturday of the month and every household needs to send in one member over 18 years old to help the community [6] (<http://perilofafrica.com/umuganda-rwandas-day-community-cleaning/>). This help can be in the form of cleaning, helping someone to repair his roof or working on the infrastructure of the village. After the physical work, everyone gets together for the community meeting, through which news is spread, like tips on how to avoid malaria. Also, community issues are sorted out, like disagreements between inhabitants. Through these community meetings, the government reached out to the Rwandan people to inform them about the harmful effects of the plastic bags. The government also made the clearing away of plastic bags in the community environment a priority during the *Umuganda*. Initially, the plastic bag manufacturers in Rwanda were unpleasantly surprised with the ideas of banning their product, but the government helped them switch their factories from producing to recycling plastic that was still going around Rwanda. By 2008, Rwanda enforced their “Law relating to the prohibition of manufacturing, importation, use and sale of non-biodegradable polythene bags”. This ban includes strict border control and fines for anyone who makes use of plastic bags. Furthermore, the black market on plastic bags that emerged as a reaction to this ban, has been closely monitored wherever possible. Finally, research into plastic bag alternatives has been supported by the REMA [5] (<http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1067480/FULLTEXT01.pdf>). Lately, the economical aspect of the ban emerged, as the country is much cleaner than neighbouring countries, **resulting in an increase of tourism in Rwanda** [7] (<http://eng.imirasire.com/news/economy/article/rwanda-tourism-fetches-305-million>).

The most important factor in the quick implementation of the ban on polythene bags in Rwanda compared to the Western world is the authoritarian regime compared to the Western democracies. Rwandan people who were interviewed in the light of this ban, noted that when new legislation was put into place from higher up, the community would take it very serious [8] (<http://lup.lub.lu.se/lup/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=5385857&fileId=5472517>). This is a massive

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difference with the democratic Western countries, where the implementation of a tax on plastic bags already took a long time. What we learn from this case study is that even though the law has been established by the government in a top-down manner, there is still a grassroots approach from Umuganda where the whole community helps to make this law a successful one. Hopefully, the case that Rwanda makes inspires other countries to act in a similar way.

Want to know more?

If you are interested, [this critical article \(https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/103056244.2012.710836?src=recsys&journalCode=crea20\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/103056244.2012.710836?src=recsys&journalCode=crea20) on the general development of Rwanda is a good read. Additionally, [this short documentary \(http://www.france24.com/en/20130411-down-to-earth-rwanda-plastic-bag-free-utopia-ban-pollution-environment-ecosystem-contraband-trafficking/\)](http://www.france24.com/en/20130411-down-to-earth-rwanda-plastic-bag-free-utopia-ban-pollution-environment-ecosystem-contraband-trafficking/) on the plastic bag ban in Rwanda gives an interesting insight on the matter.

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