

Degradation of land, water and air resources motivated formerly unemployed residents in Kigali city to start collecting dumped old plastic and glassy containers, which they export to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi where they are recycled.

Eugene Twahirwa, 46, (popularly known as Mulokole), the Founder of the local initiative of collecting the materials from wherever they are dumped, said that the work he started with five people in 2017 today is a source of a living for over 200 inhabitants in Kicukiro and Gasabo districts that are part of the City of Kigali.

In 2008 Rwanda banned the importation of plastic bags. But, single use plastics and general old plastic containers continue to find their way into land and water resources and when they are burned release toxic pollutant into the atmosphere. The plastic containers in all sizes clog drains that carry water and sewage and eventually adulterate the entire drainage system of the city.



Twahirwa stressed that the plastic materials if not vigilantly picked they find their way into water tunnels, streams and rivers, and largely blamed for the disturbing floods. He said that after experiencing the devastation on human life, transport and crops he conceived the idea of collection of used and disposed plastic materials in the suburbs of Kigali city.

“Every year, floods in the city lead to loss of lives, make house inhabitable and destroy thousands of hectares of cultivated land resulting in unavoidable severe consequences including famine and poverty among a considerable number of farmers,” says Twahirwa.

“Besides, when these old plastic materials are buried by soils, they destroy a variety of biodiversity including living organisms that are principal ingredients and components in the formation of fertile soils and hence they impact negatively on

agriculture sector that supports many people for a living,” he added.

“After realizing that the single use plastics and other old plastic materials lead to degradation of essential resources for human survival, my wife and I mobilized unemployed youths and women to start collecting them at a small fee but that provides a living for them,” recalls the father of four.

They pick all plastics irrespective of size, state (damaged or undamaged) – dumped natural mineral water bottles, buckets and jerrycans, old paper and bring them to four collection centres around the city.

Twahirwa’s business employs four permanent staff who receive Rwf.75,000 (approximately US\$75) as salary.

Enock Havugimana, 39, one of the pioneer workers currently in charge of packing and loading onto the trucks said that the workers and suppliers look around for old plastic materials.

“Much as our main objective is to protect the environment by collecting all dumped plastic materials, we found ourselves on the supply side of raw materials for companies in DRC and Burundi that recycle the old plastics. For example, factories that import them from us make building materials like tiles from plastic bottles,” said Havugimana.

Havugimana says that some local authorities appreciate their contribution to the environment and cooperate with them.

The suppliers of the plastic materials move from village to village and from house to house asking occupants if they have unwanted old containers that are eventually delivered to the collection centres to sell them.

“We buy these plastics from residents and I’m happy our work creates a litter free environment for people to live in habitable surroundings,” said Uwamahoro Beyata, a resident of Nyabisindu village in Remera Sector.

Uwamahoro who is a single mother of four children is one of the suppliers who earn a living engaging in the trade of old plastic containers in all types and sizes. The job she has done for five years supports her family. On average, she receives Rwf50,000 (approximately \$50) per month.

However, some residents give them materials free of charge while others ask for money. Generally, they say that much as they receive little pay that cannot cope with the rising cost of living, their work helps them to meet the basics of life.

“This job helps me meet necessities of life like food, clothes, rent, school fees and health insurance for my family,” notes Uwamahoro.

Their activities according to Twahirwa have recorded growing popularity and rolled out to four sectors in two districts of Gasabo and Kicukiro. To bring services nearer to communities they operate four (4) collection centres called ‘sites’. Gasabo District hosts three (3) collection centres – two in Kimironko Sector, one in Remera Sector while the fourth is located at Uruhongore village in Kamashashi cell, Nyurugunga in Kicukiro District and they export the plastics twice a week.

Twahirwa says they are able to export a medium size lorry of the plastics and glassy wastes out of their collection centres twice a week. Some plastics like jerrycans and glassy bottles are sold locally as household items to people that cannot afford new ones from shops.

Jeannette Uwimana, 28, container cleaner at Remera collection centre says not all is exported, “some containers we collect like jerrycans and bottles are bought by local people to use them in their homes because they are much cheaper, here a 20-litre jerrycan goes for Rwf600 while a new one at shop costs Rwf1300.”



However, the amount collected depends on consumption trends, during festive seasons and high business seasons the waste will be much while it will go down during the low business seasons.

“On average we export 150,000 plastics and 12,000 glassy bottles per month that translates into annual totals of 1,800,000 and 144,000 respectively,” revealed Twahirwa.

“The waste we collect has been generally on the increase since we started operation in 2017,” he added.

Twahirwa notes that this business opportunity presented itself when dealers in plastic and glassy waste from DRC and Burundi came at their collection centre three years ago. They were interested in the collections and it helped them to expand

their market beyond Rwanda, and they work hard to maintain this market.

Due to limited capacity, they wash the glassy materials manually with water and soap but there is no need of washing the plastic bottles as they are only used as building materials.

This initiative is helping reduce on the plastic and glassy waste and nothing recycled is returned to Rwanda.

Beata Akimpaye, Division Manager at Rwanda Environment and Management Authority (REMA) says that although there are no clear records on what the country produces as regards to plastics and glassy waste, REMA with other institutions endeavors to collect any waste.

Akimpaye said such waste comes from smuggled products that entered Rwanda from neighbouring countries.

In these areas, the impact of plastic waste on land, water sources and wetlands is reducing and some local leaders have expressed appreciation for the noble services of Twahirwa and colleagues.

Nonetheless, the suppliers' experiences show that some authorities have not yet understood their contribution to the environment and still treat them as law breakers.

Uwamahoro is one of the collectors and suppliers of old plastics that have bribed local authorities and security on several times.

"Many times authorities and security officers stop us on our way to the collection centres because they are suspicious of our activities. They ask for something which I usually pay some cash before they can let us go," said Uwamahoro.

Twahirwa says operating without a business certificate of registration is a major obstacle. They have pursued the business license, but efforts hat not yielded yet. Despite of this challenge they pay taxes to the authorities.

Another challenge to this work is cleaning the containers manually which is time consuming and tedious. They lack a machine that can be used to clean the containers more effectively.

As they search in dirty places and their work is categorized as “dirty”. Some residents regard them as mad people and some suppliers suffer from stigma and continue with the work because they lack alternatives.

“During rainy seasons, collection and cleaning of the plastics is much harder because a great deal is eroded away to the low lands and/or buried by deposition (soils) and suppliers bring in very dirty bottles” said Uwimana.

“We get little money that saving is not possible nor can it meet all our needs. Only one of my two children of school-going-age is still in school. I have no school fees for the second one,” she added.