

# MEET UNSUNG HEROES OF CLIMATE ACTION

BY GEORGE BITA

In the bustling streets of most urban centres, a quiet army of plastic waste collectors works tirelessly, picking up trash and turning the tide against climate change. Often overlooked and underappreciated, these individuals are the frontline warriors in the fight against plastic pollution, and their efforts are having a profound impact on our planet.

For a small fee, they collect plastic waste, keeping it out of landfills and oceans and giving it a new life through recycling. But their role goes far beyond just collecting trash – they are the guardians of our environment, protecting ecosystems, and helping to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

According to the National Environment Management Authority's (NEMA) strategy for

**>> HE ARGUES THAT PLASTIC WASTE POLLUTION COULD BE BEHIND THE INCREASED CANCER CASES.**

plastic circularity 2023-2028, most people are unaware of challenges linked to improper usage and dumping of plastics.

## PLASTIC PROBLEM

Richard Waibi, a plastic collector in Iganga municipality, says he gets involved both as an environmentalist and a trader.

"I started off as a concerned citizen eight years ago. However, when the heaps got bigger,



Plastic waste collected from Iganga's streets. Ugandans are urged to use the Three-Rs approach: Reuse, recycle and reorient to deal with the mounting plastic waste

companies recycling plastics approached me with deals to supply the trash for cash," Waibi says.

He adds that plastic waste and climate change are interconnected. From making plastics, greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane, are produced.

"I collect them because some people opt to burn or dump them on bare ground. Both acts release more greenhouse gases," Waibi says.

Bamu Lulenzi, the Iganga municipality mayor, says plastics, if not collected, can block drainage channels leading to flooding of residential areas.

"It covers huge areas and is a menace to the people who stay in the vicinity," he laments.

## MINISTER'S MESSAGE

Sam Cheptoris, the water and environment minister, observes that the world generates an

estimated 450 metric tonnes of plastics on a yearly basis, out of which two-thirds are subsequently dumped as trash.

"From research, plastics could emit 19% of global greenhouse gas emissions. These are responsible for catastrophic scenarios like floods, extremely high temperatures and so on," Cheptoris says.

He argues that plastic waste pollution could be behind the increased unexplained cancer cases, poor water quality, decreased soil fertility, siltation of water bodies and the death of livestock and fish.

## SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Francis Kamyuka, the Luuka district education officer, believes change starts with young people, saying learners must be trained to shun plastic use at an early age.

"Already, there are school environments that do not tolerate

plastic bag use or *kaveera*. Such bans should be upheld so that we rid our communities of this offensive material," Kamyuka says.

Lulenzi observes that there is a need for effective enforcement over dumping of plastics in public spaces, whereby those errant persons arrested should be fined.

Cheptoris says the time to act against plastic waste is now to save the Earth from destruction.

"We need to embrace the three-R approach. This means reuse, recycle and reorient the plastic material," he says.

Cheptoris says single-use plastics should be discarded in favour of reusable ones or reused when possible, which could cut down waste by an additional 20% by 2040.

"Reorientation refers to aiming for sustainable alternatives like paper. These could reduce plastic pollution drastically in the coming years," he says.