



**Joint Press Statement**

**12th March 2021**

## **WORLD CONSUMER RIGHTS DAY 2021- TACKLING PLASTIC POLLUTION**

**Every year on March 15<sup>th</sup> consumer rights organisations around the world commemorate World Consumer Rights Day (WCRD) under a selected theme. This year the Competition and Consumer Authority (CCA) in collaboration with the Department of Waste Management and Pollution Control (DWMPC) commemorate Consumer Rights Day held under the theme “Tackling Plastic Pollution.”**

Consumers have become closely associated with plastics, particularly the use of the plastic shopping bags. Every time plastics are mentioned, the picture that comes to our minds is that of a consumer with outstretched arms carrying bulging plastic bags after a shopping trip. Over the years, the plastic industry has grown and plastic bags of different sizes, quality and shapes are produced. The huge demand for plastics is made easy by the fact that plastics are easy to shape, cost less to make and they are generally endowed with mechanical resistance to the elements. As a consequence, plastics are found everywhere.

Although convenient, plastics could also be very harmful. The chemical additives in the production of plastics are not only harmful to the environment but are harmful to wildlife and human life. Environmentalists estimate that by the year 2050, there will be more plastic in the oceans than fish. An estimated eight million tons of plastic enters the oceans every year. Studies further suggest that plastics can cause cancers, birthing defects and impaired immunity and problems. In Agriculture, plastics could potentially affect the growth of crops and even disrupt the process of photosynthesis in agricultural fields. Animals die from choking when they eat plastic bags. Their digestive processes causing bloating and ultimately death of the animal.

Plastic is not biodegradable hence once deposited in the soil it stays in the environment for a long period. In some instances, it is only broken down by processes such as solar radiation, abrasion by wind and water waves into much smaller particles (micro plastics) becoming more attractive to birds and fish species. Due to its impervious and persistence nature, plastics hold water and thus creating a conducive environment for mosquitoes, which cause

malaria. Plastics reduce the aesthetic value of the environment as they hang on trees and other structures hence affecting the tourism industry.

The reason plastics are causing such an environmental mayhem is primarily due to human negligence; plastics end up clogging up rivers, seas and oceans because of the on-going indiscriminate disposal of plastics into landfills and some are carried along by wind and rivers until they end up affecting all of us including marine life. It is the single-use plastic bags that seem to be causing more harm to the environment. Botswana is a relatively small country with six (6) main plastic manufactures that produce well over 30.5 million plastics annually for export, and 204.5 million annually for local use. In addition, the country also imports about 1 512 528 million plastics annually.

The effects of plastic pollution have been with us for time immemorial and it is an indictment on our commitment as humanity. It is important that we resolutely deal with this problem before it suffocates us. There are a number of interventions that we could bring to bear and all these would require a collaborative approach.

Business, particularly manufacturers and governments, have a critical role to play in addressing this menace. The plastic industry should be responsive to the environmental hazards that their products have on our localities and surroundings. Governments around the world would have to come up with effective legislations that protect environment while at the same guarding responsible production of commodities that conserve the surroundings.

Undoubtedly, the long-term solution to this long drawn-out plastic problem can never materialise without the input of the users of the harmful plastic products, i.e, consumers. Industry or business is generally motivated by profit and with very little regard for the environment; consumers on the other hand have an obligation to support conservation efforts as their communities are daily subjected to the anger of Mother Nature such as flooding, receding of the oceans and excessive droughts. Consumers have a moral duty to tackle plastic pollution to protect children, families, communities and nations who bear the brunt of pollution.

Consumers can make a number of telling choices which commence with reducing the use of plastic products. Reduction in plastic use, particularly the single-use plastics, could lead to a huge environmental relief. The other shift in consumer pattern could be re-use of plastic bags and other products, this will automatically cut on the volume of plastic products that are strewn all over our surroundings. Perhaps the strategy that is sensitive to the growth of business while simultaneously promoting environmental conservation is using only plastics that can be re-cycled. Plastic pollution can still be stymied but the major battle would only be won when consumers are empowered to know that they can make important demands on industry and that their (deliberate) choices can make the environment safer.

The CCA and the DWMPC urge consumers to do something about plastic pollution. The three Rs are paramount; Re-use, Reduce, Recycle anchored on education can take us far.

In Botswana, we are particularly heartened that the government of Botswana upon realising the persistent problem of plastic pollution took a resolute decision to address the problem. In 2006, the government, in partnership with industry, civil society and academia, developed a mandatory plastic Carrier and Flat Bag Standard which prohibited production, distribution, importation and use of plastic carrier bags and flat bags with thickness of less than 24 microns.

The main objective was to introduce plastic with thicker thickness, which could be reused and therefore reduce its proliferation in the environment. Quite evidently this measure did not achieve the desired objectives as plastic continued to be a nuisance in the environment.

In 2020, through a Cabinet Presidential Directive dated 17th December, 2020, the Government of Botswana approved the Introduction of a Plastic Levy which will be effected on the 1st April, 2021. We believe this action will go a long way in the management of plastic pollution as funds acquired from this exercise could be used to promote recycling of plastic waste.