

Plastic pollution in Nigeria: Whose job is it to clean up the mess?

January 31 2023, by Kehinde Allen-Taylor



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Take a walk or drive through the streets of most Nigerian cities, and you will see plastic waste everywhere. The country's rivers, lakes and ocean are also full of discarded plastic. Nigeria is estimated to generate about

[2.5 million tons of plastic waste annually](#). Plastic accounts for 15% of the total waste generated in Lagos State.

The situation is likely to worsen as Nigeria's population grows, from more than 220 million people now to an expected [401 million](#) by the end of 2050.

The production of plastic is growing too. [Dangote Refinery](#), the largest petrochemical refinery in Africa, is starting operations in Nigeria in the first quarter of 2023. Aside from refining fuel, the plant will also [produce plastic products](#).

Who should clean up?

The question arises as to who is responsible for cleaning up the plastic waste in the Nigerian environment.

Some argue that the onus is on government to make and enforce [policies and regulations](#). Others argue that residents ought to take responsibility in the spirit of [environmental citizenship](#).

But what about the manufacturers, who, too often, take no responsibility when the plastic they produce end up as waste in the environment?

In a [recent article](#), I explored how companies can reduce plastic waste in Nigeria if they accept all the elements of [corporate social responsibility](#). Doing so also promotes [sustainable development](#). The UN defines this as "[development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs](#)". So corporate social responsibility benefits the companies too.

Dimensions of corporate social responsibility

[Corporate social responsibility](#) is the idea that a company should play a positive role in the community and consider the environmental and social impacts of business decisions.

Since the mid-1950s, most of the world's leading business organizations have come to agree that companies have economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic or discretionary responsibilities.

Economic responsibility is a commitment to making profits, operating efficiently and being competitive. Focusing on this alone can lead to [environmental problems](#) unless it considers the long term. One way for economic responsibility and [environmental sustainability](#) to meet is by assigning an [economic value](#) to waste.

Legal responsibility means that a company must comply with government laws and regulations. These should include rules that protect the environment.

Ethical responsibility means being fair, in accordance with societal expectations. For example, it means a company doing its fair share to prevent and clean up waste.

Philanthropic responsibility is something extra a company can do to make the world a better place. Many companies get involved in volunteering, empowerment and support of innovative programs to help people. An example would be coordinating voluntary community action to clean up waste.

Long term solutions

In Nigeria, most companies focus on the philanthropic dimension of corporate social responsibility. For example, they organize voluntary cleanup campaigns in communities, and advocate for proper disposal of

waste. But this is a temporary solution. As huge amounts of plastic waste continue to be deposited in the environment.

Companies also tend to practice "[green-washing](#)"—claiming that their products are environmentally friendly or have environmental benefits.

These responses ignore the economic, ethical and legal dimensions of corporate social responsibility with regard to the environment.

I suggest that if all dimensions are practiced properly, the activities of the Nigerian plastics industry won't be a threat. Instead they will conform with some of the [UN's Sustainable Development Goals](#): combating climate change; protecting marine animals; sustainable environment; and partnerships.

Plastic value chain

Policymakers, producers, manufacturers, multinational companies and other stakeholders must work together to combat plastic pollution in Nigeria.

This begins with assigning a monetary value to plastic at each stage of its life cycle, including sorting, collection, and recycling. Disposal practices, monitoring and enforcement, as well as cost management, should not be left out.

Producers, manufacturers and [multinational companies](#) should also reduce plastic waste as part of their production processes. The regulators should hold them accountable to eliminate plastic waste in the environment. This policy is known as "extended producer responsibility".

The concept has already been implemented in some [developed countries](#),

including Germany. It has brought improvements in the reuse and recycling economy.

Nigeria adopted the [extended producer responsibility](#) policy through its National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency in 2014. But it has not yet been fully implemented in all Nigerian states. Hence, reflecting the current state of [plastic waste](#) pollution.

If companies in Nigeria's plastic and packaging industry can work together to achieve a high standard of environmental sustainability, we can rightly say they are practicing corporate social responsibility.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Plastic pollution in Nigeria: Whose job is it to clean up the mess? (2023, January 31) retrieved 19 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-01-plastic-pollution-nigeria-job-mess.html>

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