

THE HISTORY OF SINGLE-USE PLASTIC · GHANA FOCUS

# Pure Water. Dirty Truth.

*Ghana's Single-Use Plastic Crisis —  
How It Started, Who It Hurts, What Must Change.*

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A Youth Ova Plastic Campaign · GYEM & Pulitzer Center · Research Delegate



# Before Single-Use Plastic — Ghana's Own Systems

## Zero-Waste Before It Had a Name

For generations before plastic arrived, Ghanaians had solved the packaging problem sustainably. Water was sold by the cup from clay pots and communal tanks at lorry stations and markets. Food was wrapped in plantain leaves, banana leaves, and dried corn husks. Kenkey — a staple fermented dumpling — came wrapped in the husks from its own ingredients. Roasted plantain vendors used newspaper sheets. These were not inferior systems. They were zero-waste, biodegradable, locally sourced, and community-owned.

The women who ran these water-selling operations, called "waterwomen," provided dignified livelihoods and safe access across Accra's neighbourhoods. Their displacement by the sachet industry was total, rapid, and uncompensated.

## What Was Lost When Plastic Arrived

The traditional packaging systems of Ghana were not primitive — they were precision-engineered for the local environment. Plantain leaves are naturally antimicrobial. Corn husks are biodegradable within weeks. Clay pots keep water cool without electricity.

When plastic arrived, it did not improve on these systems environmentally. It improved on them financially — for manufacturers, distributors, and importers. The cost of the transition — filling rivers with plastic, destroying fisheries, flooding streets — was paid entirely by communities. It was never factored into the price of a sachet.

# How Single-Use Plastic Arrived in Ghana — A Timeline

1980s

## Structural Adjustment Destroys Water Infrastructure

IMF-imposed Structural Adjustment Programmes force Ghana to privatise and scale back the Ghana Water and Sewerage Corporation. Piped water becomes unreliable or absent in entire urban districts. Millions lose access to safe tap water.

1994

## Cholera Outbreak Creates Demand for 'Sealed' Water

A major cholera outbreak in Accra kills hundreds. Fear of communal water containers and open vessels drives public demand for sealed, hygienic packaging. The stage is set for single-use plastic to be positioned as a public health solution.

Late 1990s

## Heat-Seal Machines Arrive — The Sachet Industry Is Born

Compact heat-seal machines arrived in Ghana for under \$500 each. Entrepreneurs begin filling small polyethylene bags with water and selling them for 1–5 pesewas. Within years, over 5,000 producers are registered. The sachet water industry is born — and with it, Ghana's single-use plastic crisis.

2000s

## Plastic Floods Every Market Alongside Sachet Water

As sachet water scales nationally, plastic bags, styrofoam takeaway containers, single-use cutlery and cups follow the same distribution networks into every market, school, and lorry station. No infrastructure for collection or recycling is built. The waste piles up in drains, rivers, and open lots.

# The Sachet Economy — Scale, Dependency, and the Price of a Pesewa

**840K**

tonnes of plastic waste generated annually in Ghana

**9.5%**

of all plastic waste in Ghana is ever recycled

**600M+**

sachets discarded every single day across the country

**190%**

projected increase in plastic leakage into waterways by 2040

# Consequences — Health, Environment, Economy, and Community

## Korle Lagoon

Once Accra's ecological heart, the Korle Lagoon now holds 1,400–6,000 microplastic particles per cubic metre. Plastic comprises 32% of total catch by quantity for lagoon fishers. The communities who lived from the lagoon did not cause this — they are paying the price for it.

## Health

Open burning of plastic waste near the Korle Lagoon and in informal settlements releases dioxins, furans, and carcinogenic particulates. Microplastics have been detected in Ghanaian fish tissue and drinking water — including sachet water itself.

## Flooding

Single-use plastic sachets and bags block Ghana's storm drains every rainy season, causing catastrophic urban flooding. The 2019 Accra floods, which killed 12 people, were attributed in part to plastic-clogged drainage infrastructure.

## Economy

Ghana's fishing sector, employing over 2 million people, is threatened by plastic contamination. Ghana's textile industry collapsed from 25,000 jobs in 1975 to under 5,000 today — in part due to the flood of imported fast-fashion plastic waste.

# Kantamanto Market — Where Fashion Waste and Plastic Waste Collide

## "Obromi Wawu" — Dead White Man's Clothes

Kantamanto Market in Accra is the largest secondhand clothing market in the world. Every week, 15 million garments arrive in bales shipped from the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Europe — each bale wrapped in plastic strapping, packed inside plastic sheeting, tied with plastic cording. An estimated 40% of each shipment is immediately discarded as unresellable — too worn, damaged, or low-quality to sell. This waste flows directly into the Korle Lagoon and surrounding drains, or is burned in open fires.

In January 2025, a fire destroyed large sections of Kantamanto Market, devastating over 30,000 traders who had built their livelihoods there. The fire moved through synthetic plastic-wrapped bales rapidly. The traders — predominantly women — received no compensation.

**15M**

garments per week

**40%**

immediate waste

**30,000+**

traders affected, Jan 2025 fire

**5,000**

textile jobs left in Ghana (from 25K in 1975)

GHEM

# GYEM's Five Demands — A Phased Ban on Single-Use Plastic

1

## **Ban plastic bags**

*Replace with locally produced cloth, paper, and natural fiber alternatives*

2

## **Ban plastic straws and stirrers**

*Bamboo, paper, and stainless alternatives available and cheaper at scale*

3

## **Ban styrofoam containers**

*Replace with pressed sugarcane (bagasse), banana leaf, and bamboo alternatives*

4

## **Ban single-use plastic cutlery**

*Reusable and compostable alternatives to be made available in all food service*

5

## **Ban single-use plastic cups**

*Phased transition beginning 2025, full ban enacted by 2027*

PULLQUOTES FOR LAYOUT USE

*Drop into zine pages, posters, or handouts.*

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*"Before plastic, Ghanaian women sold clean water from clay pots in every neighbourhood. Their displacement was total, rapid, and uncompensated."*

Research Delegate · Week 1

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*"Fishers at Accra's Korle Lagoon are more likely to catch clothing in their nets than fish."*

Greenpeace Africa · Ghana Research

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*"840,000 tonnes of plastic waste a year. 9.5% recycled. 190% more in our waterways by 2040."*

Ghana NPAP · WEF Plastics Report

“

*"Each bale of obroni wawu arrives wrapped in plastic. The fashion waste crisis and the plastic waste crisis are the same crisis."*

Research Delegate · Kantamanto, Week 1

GYEM'S ACTIVE CAMPAIGN · NOW ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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