

Tackling Climate Change: “Let’s go green, clean together”

As the world looks up to the UN’s 27th annual Conference of Parties (COP27) – staged in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt to produce binding resolutions that will compel stakeholders, the world over to rise above the occasion and tackle the challenge of climate change – staring the world to its face, Tata Elvis, a Waste Recycler in Bamenda says “though those high-level meetings can spur climate action, much can only be achieved if everyone, everywhere takes action.

“We’ve looked at issues around tackling climate change to be something which has to be done by someone else for too long. Time for action is now. If not, we sink together when our planet goes down,” says Tata

The time for climate action has never been as urgent as it is now! No doubt Antonio Guterres, United Nations (UN) Secretary General warns that the world needs urgent climate action

“We’re on a highway to climate hell with our foot [constantly] on the accelerator. Our planet is fast approaching [a] tipping point that will make climate chaos irreversible,” said Guterres while addressing leaders at COP 27.

In line with what action has to be taken, Tata says going green and clean is the way out. “I always tell people: let’s go green and clean together. Thereby making our communities sustainable,” he adds.

According to the Waste Recycler and Climate Activist, “going green” entails persevering biodiversity while “going clean” is about effectively managing waste and to a larger extent making it a resource through recycling.

Making waste a resource

My journey into recycling waste into other byproducts began right in infancy. My parents tell me today that I used to gather lots of discarded objects and tried making articles out of them, says Tata.

That passion for using waste as a resource – because I see it as a resource, not thrash, stayed alive through my secondary, high school, and even till the university – where I read waste management. Shortly after graduating from school, I founded the Cameroon Youth for Sustainable Development and Environmental Protection (CAYSDEP).

Through that organisation, Tata and co are today making their mark in tackling climate change through awareness raising about waste, waste management, and recycling.

During the interview with FairPlanet, Tata exhibited organic charcoal made from cow dung and maize cobs, fuel from plastics, liquid gold made from e-waste, Aluminum ingot from crushed waste cans, and pavement tiles from plastics.

From the byproducts presented, CAYSDEP is leaving no stone unturned in converting waste to useful products – making gold from thrash, to say the least!

Waste is a perennial problem worldwide. In 2020 the World Bank estimated the 2.24 billion tonnes of solid waste was generated that year alone - amounting to a footprint of 0.79 kilograms per person per day. [The report further highlighted](#) that with rapid population

growth and urbanisation, annual waste generation was expected to increase by 73% from the 2020 margin to about 3.88 billion tonnes in 2050.

In Cameroon, [daily generation of waste](#) stands at 16,000 tons, amounting to about 5.5 million tons yearly. Most of the waste is generated in towns across the Sub-African nation.

In Bamenda, Northwest Region where Tata resides heaps of waste disposed of, even on access roads is commonplace. “With the rise in urbanisation and population growth, waste like this will always be a disaster, if a management and recycling system is not put in place,” he says.

Bamenda is a town located in northwestern Cameroon. Situated in scenic volcanic Highlands, it is one of the towns with the highest number of English-speaking Cameroonians and serves as a trade and export centre for local agricultural products. Since 2016 till date, the town has been experiencing an armed conflict codenamed the Anglophone Crisis - a conflict between Cameroon’s government and separatist movements clamouring for a breakaway state called Ambazonia.

As FairPlanet’s team drove along the streets in Bamenda, piles of waste abandoned in dumpsites at some major road junctions, disgusted every sight and choked every breath with its awful smell. Before 2016, there used to be regular collection of waste by [Hysacam](#) - a household waste collection firm. Sadly, in the wake of armed conflict, it's activities grind to a halt due to insecurity and lack of access to dumpsites - a situation that has just exacerbated the problem of waste pollution in the one-time 'cleanest town'

This smell and the blockade of access to some areas by this waste might be just the visible effects you can immediately make out for now, but there are latent impacts this has on health and the environment, says Tata.

There are a lot of changes to the world’s climate that come from waste; even infrastructure suffers from waste problems. Plastics and other wastes in local water sources will clog drains and contaminate drinking water. Areas of land pollution are breeding grounds for pests, like rats, which flourish in dirty [environments](#), says [Environmental Group, Inc.](#)

Like Tata, many other Cameroonians are venturing into the recycling of waste. Penn Sylvanus Muluh, 24, Photographer says his trade in waste management began when he covered a sensitisation campaign on plastic pollution. “Waste management wasn’t my area of interest but when I got to the field, the amount of plastics I saw got me thinking. Immediately after that day, I did research on how to transform plastic into bricks,” he says.

Today, I’m able to make pavement bricks and flower jars of all sizes from plastics - this goes a long way to save our planet and help me generate income.

Despite the gains made by those trying their luck in recycling waste at the start in Cameroon, no sooner than later, they get overwhelmed with the amount of waste generated daily - minimising their efforts - because most of them rely on artisanal methods of waste management and recycling.

Cameroon produces approximately [600,000 tons of plastics](#) daily and only about 20,000 tons end up being recycled by the few ventures involved in the collection, recycling and

transformation of plastics. By simple arithmetic a whopping 40,000 tons are deposited into the environment.

Penn says with such an amount of plastics disposed of in the environment, machines are required to effectively transform all of them into other valuable products. Unfortunately start-ups like Tata and Penn cannot afford heavy duty equipment - reasons why most waste management and recycling projects go unsuccessful.

Awareness-raising the way to go

Despite being a major problem, Tata says awareness-raising around waste is key in tackling the problem of improper waste disposal in our towns. “We need to teach the population how to sort and segregate waste, identify who and where to dispose of it, as well as encourage all to recycle – even if, it’s just about recycling biodegradable waste into byproducts like manure for soil enrichment”

The impacts of proper waste management are far-reaching. Firstoff, it decreases greenhouse gas emissions and saves energy on our planet. Secondly, waste management helps cities become more resilient to extreme climate occurrences. Hence, if encouraged, especially solid waste management [in particular], it will lead to the achievement of the sustainable development goal, says the [World Bank](#).

It’s worthy of note that “the past eight years were the eight hottest ever recorded” says [a new UN report](#) – indicating that the world is now deep into the climate crisis, with greenhouse gases largely to blame.

The UN’s World Meteorological Organization (WMO) further explains that high greenhouse gases in the atmosphere drive sea levels and ice melting to new heights. WMO estimates that in 2022 alone, average temperatures were about 1.51c far above the pre-industrial average.

With such a global rise in temperatures, Tata says his organisation has moved from just focusing on recycling waste to effectively educating people on the impacts of global warming on our planet – which as of now is only getting worse.

Solidarity in fighting climate change?

By the fact Africa – where Tata hails, emits just 4 percent of greenhouse gases from waste as compared to the rich countries responsible for 80 percent, he would have folded his arms to wait for them to tackle the issue and save his continent. However, he says a problem affecting “our planet anywhere, affects everyone”.

That’s why far off in Cameroon’s Northwest Region, Tata has taken the bull by the horn in combating climate change. “We have just one planet. Saving it, be it from Mile 5, Nkwen-Bamenda we’re today or somewhere else in Asia, should be the ultimate goal,” and that’s my prime motivation Tata tells FairPlanet.

Besides, I’ve chosen to be of service to our planet that’s why no matter the odds I keep pushing on. “I want to bequeath a safe and fair planet to succeeding generations,” says Tata

Saving our planet through proper waste management and recycling is a cause that requires the contribution of all. Solidarity is and should be the watchword, he added.

Setbacks

Tata regrets that unlike other socioeconomic ventures, where financing is readily available, most climate change and waste management actions attract little or no finance – a move that’s hampering his activities. Since 2016 when we began our activities, we’ve operated on self-funds [sponsorship]. Most financial institutions see climate change actions as not being urgent and often ask us to wait like forever with no response, he said.

[According to the UN](#), “financial and sound investment in climate [related] actions is a necessity,” – they will go a long way to “reduce emissions, promote adaptations to the impacts already occurring and build resistance.”

“The benefits that flow from these investments, however, dramatically outweigh any upfront costs,” stressed the UN.

Tata says investments will enable him to move from artisanal to mechanised or industrial recycling of waste. For example, it takes us close to a month to mould 1000 pavement tiles from plastic waste. Just imagine how many tiles we will produce in one hour if we have a mechanised mould – many right, quizzed Tata with a broad smile.

In addition, though costly, investments in waste management projects will spur citizen engagement, bring about behaviour change and increase public participation in existing functional waste systems, promote environmentally sound waste disposal - reducing waste disposal in waterways, addressing debris management, and safeguarding infrastructure against flooding, [says the World Bank](#).

By and large, one thing stands, our planet is changing for the worse, and responding to the crisis requires collective action from all “countries, cities, financial actors, businesses, and private citizens.”

Take the challenge and pose one fair act today for our planet – for you can!