

**NIGERIA'S PLASTIC CRISIS: EMPOWERING THE
NEXT GENERATION OF PLASTIC ADVOCATES AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF BENIN.**

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is one of the biggest producers of plastic pollution in Africa. According to recent data from 2024 it was found that Nigeria recycles less than 15 percent of the 2.5 million tonnes of plastic waste generated annually, ranking 9th globally on plastic waste generation, according to a new report by the Nigeria Climate Innovation Center (NCIC).

Plastic pollution is a serious problem and has devastating effects on both the environment and human health. Plastic pollution in the environment poses a serious threat to marine life, as animals can swallow plastic, get stuck in it, or even suffocate and when consumed by humans it can in turn cause serious health issues such as damage to the immune system, reproductive system, or even brain function. Aside from this, plastic waste blocks drainage systems which can lead to flooding.

This essay aims to show the devastating effects of plastic pollution in Nigeria and the need to empower youths on campus to become plastic advocates.

Nigeria's Plastic Problem: What Data Shows

Nigeria discharges over 200,000 tonnes of plastic waste into the Atlantic Ocean annually, making it one of the top contributors to marine plastic pollution worldwide. This figure is supported by multiple sources, including reports from the World Economic Forum and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

Environmental advocate and lawyer, Mr. Jude Nnamdi Nwakanma, has also confirmed this, adding that Nigeria generates about 2.5 million tonnes of plastic waste annually. Unfortunately, the country recycles less than 15 percent of this, leaving over 88 percent of plastic waste unprocessed.

The main causes of this pollution include poor waste management, lack of recycling infrastructure, and low public awareness. In many parts of Nigeria, plastic waste is dumped in open spaces, drainage systems, and rivers. On university campuses like the University of Benin, students often dispose of plastic bottles and sachet water waste carelessly around lecture halls, hostels, and gutters.

The consequences of this pollution is serious. Plastics take hundreds of years to break down, and during that time, they harm both wildlife and marine animals. When plastic enters the ocean, fish and birds may eat it by mistake and die. Plastics also contain harmful additives like BPA (Bisphenol A).

This growing plastic crisis in Nigeria threatens not just the environment but also public health and the economy. Immediate action is needed, especially from young people, to tackle this problem before it becomes worse.

Plastic Pollution Effects on Children and Youths

According to Children's Environmental Health Collaborative Today's children are surrounded by more plastic than ever before. Even though this is true, we still don't fully understand how being around so much plastic might affect their health now and in the future. Plastic pollution is found in places where children live, go to school, and play. Many of the plastic products they use every day also contain harmful chemicals.

The hidden danger is how these chemicals can affect their health for the rest of their lives. Children take in more harmful substances than adults because their bodies are smaller, and they can't get rid of these substances as easily. Also, since their organs are still growing, they are more likely to be harmed. Children also have many years ahead of them, meaning these health problems could stay with them or even appear later in life. Since children also have many more years to live, the effects of plastic exposure like asthma, hormone problems, and even learning difficulties can last their whole lives.

In addition to health effects, plastic waste worsens flooding by blocking drains, especially in poor neighbourhoods. This leads to dirty water, mosquito breeding, and the spread of diseases like cholera and malaria. But young people also have the power to change this. By learning about plastic pollution and speaking out, students can become leaders in their schools and communities. They can help others understand the problem and take action to reduce plastic use and waste.

What Nigeria is Doing About Plastic Pollution

Nigeria has taken new steps to reduce plastic pollution. In 2024, the Federal

Government officially banned single-use plastics in all government offices and agencies. This includes items like plastic cups, straws, cutlery, and water sachets (Federal Ministry of Environment [FME], 2024). A nationwide ban on single-use plastics is expected to take full effect by January 2025, as announced by the Minister of Environment, Mr. Balarabe Abbas Lawal (Vanguard, 2024).

Some states, including Lagos, Rivers, and the FCT, have also started plastic clean-up programs, recycling partnerships, and community awareness campaigns to support the national effort (UNDP Nigeria, 2024). Private groups like Wecyclers and RecyclePoints are helping people recycle plastics through incentives and mobile collection services (Nigeria Climate Innovation Center [NCIC], 2024).

However, the challenge remains large. Public awareness is still low in many areas, especially rural and low-income communities. Many Nigerians are not yet aware of how dangerous plastic can be to health and the environment. Also, enforcement of the plastic ban is still weak in some states, with poor monitoring and limited penalties for violators (UNIDO, 2024).

How Students Across Nigeria Are Taking Action on Plastic Pollution

Young people across Nigeria are already stepping up to fight plastic pollution. One major example is the PlasticWize Fellowship, launched in partnership with the Nigeria Climate Innovation Center (NCIC). This program trains university students on plastic waste education, leadership, and advocacy. Through the fellowship, students learn how to carry out clean-ups, run recycling campaigns, and educate others in their communities (NCIC, 2024).

Another inspiring initiative is the U-Recycle Initiative Africa, a youth-led organization that has reached over 20,000 students across Nigeria through sustainability workshops and campaigns. They also introduced “talking bins”—interactive bins that speak when you drop in recyclables—to promote better waste sorting in schools and public places (U-Recycle Initiative, 2024).

In collaboration with UNICEF and the Waste Pickers Association of Nigeria (WAPAN), over 700 young waste pickers were trained in 2024 on plastic recovery and safety. During a single event, these youths successfully collected more than 14,000

kilograms of plastic waste within three days (UNICEF Nigeria, 2024).

These efforts show that students are not just part of the future they are leading the way toward a cleaner, plastic-wise Nigeria.

The Role of University of Benin (UNIBEN) Students

Students at the University of Benin (UNIBEN) are already playing a part in the fight against plastic pollution. The university is a proud participant in the Sustainable Waste Recycling and Management (SWARM) project an initiative funded by the European Union that focuses on improving plastic recycling and sustainable waste management in Nigerian universities (SWARM, 2024). This international collaboration connects UNIBEN with other institutions across Africa and Europe to promote waste innovation and environmental education.

In February 2024, as part of the Green Campus Project, the university installed colour-coded bins across key points on campus to collect plastic bottles separately from general waste. These special bins can now be found near lecture theatres, student hostels, and faculty buildings, encouraging better waste sorting and collection (UNIBEN Green Campus Project, 2024).

Many students are already responding positively. They are beginning to sort their waste properly, join campus clean-up events, and participate in eco-friendly activities. As a student of UNIBEN, I contribute by advocating for plastic pollution awareness on my social media platforms. I use my voice to share facts, engage my peers, and promote behavioural change among fellow students.

However, more can still be done. Making waste sorting part of everyday campus life, including through classroom awareness and community-based campaigns, can go a long way in building a plastic-conscious student body that leads by example.

How to Empower More Plastic Advocates at UNIBEN

To truly tackle plastic pollution on campus, the University of Benin (UNIBEN) must do more to empower students as plastic advocates. One of the first steps is to bring plastic education into the lecture halls. By adding topics like recycling, climate

change, and environmental sustainability to general studies or faculty-specific courses, students across all disciplines can understand the importance of reducing plastic waste and their role in the solution.

In addition, UNIBEN can launch a **Plastic Advocate Team** a group of trained student ambassadors who can organise events, visit hostels, and speak at gatherings to educate others. These ambassadors will not only raise awareness but also inspire action through peer influence.

Infrastructure is also key. More **plastic-only recycling points** should be installed in every hostel, faculty building, and common area on campus. This will make it easier for students to properly dispose of their waste.

To keep the movement alive, UNIBEN should organise **plastic-awareness events**, such as “No Plastic Weeks,” upcycled art exhibitions, and inter-departmental competitions on sustainable practices. Such as plastic awareness debates such events can create excitement and long-lasting behavioural change.

Finally, the university can create a dedicated **environmental club or fellowship**, to train and support young leaders. These students will continue spreading the message and championing the cause even after graduation, helping to build a strong culture of sustainability at UNIBEN and beyond.

By empowering more students this way, UNIBEN can become a true leader in youth-driven climate action.

Conclusion

Plastic pollution in Nigeria is a growing crisis that threatens our environment, health, and future generations. With over 2.5 million tonnes of plastic waste generated annually and less than 15% recycled, the need for urgent action is clear. However, there is hope students at the University of Benin (UNIBEN) and across Nigeria can become powerful leaders in the fight against plastic pollution.

With the right tools, knowledge, and support, young people can drive real change. They can educate others, influence behaviour on campus and in their communities,

and even help create green jobs through recycling efforts. Already, many are stepping up through fellowships, clean-up campaigns, and environmental clubs.

But more must be done. By including plastic awareness in education, training student ambassadors, installing more recycling bins, and partnering with recycling firms, UNIBEN can set the pace for other institutions nationwide.

Let us act now. Let us turn UNIBEN into a model of plastic advocacy a campus where youth rise to protect their future, one bottle at a time. The fight against plastic pollution needs leaders, and those leaders are already among us. It's time to support them.

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