There is increasing global outrage against the damage that plastic waste has been causing the environment, oceans and wildlife around the world. As campaigns and coverage step up in the West to call for banning, restrict or levying penalties against the use of plastic products, it is worth noting that developing countries were ahead of the curve in such action. Jennifer Clapp and Linda Swanston (2009) argue that the anti-plastic shopping bag norm emerged first in the South and then diffused to the North. In 2005, Rwanda imposed a ban on the use and import of plastic bags less than 100 microns thick. Other African countries followed their example soon after. Though Kenya and Uganda have both implemented their bans, there has been comparatively more resistance within these countries to the ban and substantial variation in the effectiveness of its implementation.

This paper examines why there has been a variation in the effectiveness and implementation of the ban. But rather than focusing on the anti-plastic bag campaign itself, it examines the challenge of ‘missed economies’. Banning plastic bags deflects the focus from possibilities associated with supporting economies in waste management. Conversely, banning plastic bags creates new opportunities in substitutes like paper bags. The comparative reaction to banning plastic bags in these three countries and their attitude towards ‘missed economies’ provide us with insights to evolving state-business relationships in these countries and these communities’ understandings of the opportunities associated with the interactions of environmental pressures on economic transformation.