

Container-based sanitation is becoming a practical solution for Kampala's informal settlements, where pit latrines frequently overflow.

BY JACINTA MARIA KANNYANGE

For years, public toilets in Kampala's densely populated settlements have been a source of illness, indignity and exclusion for persons with disabilities (PWDs). But in the narrow lanes of Kisenyi Village in Kamwokya, a simple innovation, a container lined with sawdust, is restoring dignity, health and independence to some of the city's most vulnerable residents.

For most people, answering nature's call is a minor inconvenience. For someone living with a severe physical disability, it can be a matter of health, survival and basic humanity. Public toilets, often filthy, inaccessible or unaffordable, have long left people like 45-year-old George Oketch with no option but to crawl across contaminated floors to reach pit latrines—exposing him to fungal and bacterial infections and, in his case, even gonorrhoea, which he believes was contracted through unsanitary surfaces.

"I had to crawl to the dirty pit-latrine and squat on it. That alone brought me infections," Oketch recalls.

Born with a physical disability and a father of eight, Oketch survives on odd jobs and begging. He says he spent up to Shs80,000 every two weeks on treatment, money he rarely had. At times,

Container-based toilets restoring PWDs health

he skipped meals altogether to avoid using public toilets. The infections spread to his hands—his primary means of movement, feeding and carrying his belongings—making daily survival even more difficult.

For 54-year-old Josephine Apio, public toilets became the source of persistent candida infections, marked by swelling, discomfort and a foul smell. With no safe alternative, she resorted to using a bucket at home, relying on her daughter to dispose of the waste in drainage channels. The practice was unsafe, undignified and costly; she spent more than Shs200,000 each month on treatment.

A simple solution arrives

Relief came in 2019 when Give Love Organisation, a non-profit-making organisation, introduced container-based toilets to PWDs in Kamwokya. The system is straightforward: a clean container, lined with sawdust instead of water, which users can operate privately at home. The toilets were distributed free of charge, alongside training on proper use and maintenance.

For Oketch, Apio and nearly 50 other PWDs, the innovation marked the end of years of humiliation, illness and mounting medical bills.

"Each time I use it, I clean it afterwards. You wouldn't even know it's a toilet. It has brought me comfort," Oketch says.

Ms Alisa Keesey Puga, the Give Love's Executive Director, says container-based sanitation (CBS) is a practical solution for Kampala's informal settlements, where pit latrines frequently overflow and water tables are high. However, she notes that the organisation is overstretched, spending about \$45,000 (Shs160 million) each month on staff wages, toilet construction, office rent and waste management.

"Small organisations like ours cannot cover all communities that desperately need this intervention," Ms Puga says, urging Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) to adopt CBS on a citywide scale.

Waste turned into life-giving compost

Give Love's approach extends beyond sanitation. Under the guidance of the

SHs160M

Cost. Give Love Organisation, a non-profit-making organisation that is implementing the sanitation projects says they are overstretched, spending about \$45,000 (Shs160 million) each month on staff wages, toilet construction, office rent and waste management.

project director, Mr Dickens Bileni, the organisation trains young people to collect full containers, transport them safely and convert the waste into nutrient-rich compost.

At the composting site, waste is emptied into large bins and covered with dry grass—forming what Mr Bileni describes as a "biological roof"—to control odour, flies and moisture. Black water and food scraps are added to speed up decomposition, while temperatures are maintained at between 35°C and 40°C, occasionally exceeding 65°C—levels high enough to destroy harmful pathogens.

"We build cages to prevent groundwater and surface pollution," Mr Bileni explains, adding: "We allow at least six months for full curing so the compost is safe before distribution."

The end product is humus-like manure suitable for agriculture, creating a circular system that addresses sanitation and waste management while generating employment.

A life-changing intervention

The 2024 National Housing and Population Census estimates that Uganda has about 1.3 million persons living with disabilities, many of whom lack access to safe sanitation and affordable rehabilitation services.

Road crashes, chronic illnesses such as diabetes and congenital conditions continue to increase the number of people

requiring mobility support and specialised care. Yet public healthcare remains underfunded, leaving families unable to meet rehabilitation costs that range from Shs400,000 to Shs3 million.

Against this backdrop, even a basic toilet can be transformative.

Residents say container-based toilets have restored their confidence and sense of safety. They no longer crawl through filth, fear infections or restrict food and water intake to avoid using unsafe facilities.

A step towards dignity

Uganda's disability prevalence rate stands at 3.4 percent, about 1.29 million people, with northern and eastern regions recording the highest numbers. For many, safe sanitation remains a distant dream.

But in Kamwokya, what began as a bucket lined with sawdust has become a powerful symbol of dignity, resilience and independence.

For Oketch, Apio and many others, container-based toilets are more than a sanitation solution, they represent a second chance at life. They can now live, work and move without the constant fear of disease.

Most importantly, they can relieve themselves safely and with dignity, something every human being deserves.