



# If customers do not come, we shall return to the streets

**Challenge.** A citywide crackdown on street vendors is forcing thousands of traders into formal markets. For many, the real fight is just beginning. **P.18-23**

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BY SHABIBAH NAKIRIGYA

The last time Joanita Nalubega had a proper stall in a proper market, she sat for an entire day without a single customer. She remembers the way the hours stretched while other traders packed up around her. The gnawing feeling that she would go home empty-handed and still have to pay for transport back.

That was years ago. She left the market and went back to the street.

Now, on a Friday morning at Busega Market on the edge of Kampala, Nalubega finds herself holding an application form once again. Around her, dozens of other vendors; men and women who until recently made their living on pavements and road reserves, wait patiently for the market supervisor to process their papers. Every few minutes, someone checks their phone for news of the enforcement teams that swept through the city centre at dawn.

After weeks of warnings and public notices, the eviction of Kampala's street vendors is finally happening. At midnight on Friday, Kampala Capital City Authority officers, backed by police and other security forces, moved through the city's roads, clearing the informal stalls and carts that have long defined how Kampala looks and feels.

But for Nalubega and thousands like her, the question has never been whether to follow the law. It has always been whether following the law can still put food on the table.

Nalubega used to sell children's clothes on the main road in Busega, a busy street where mothers on their

way to work would stop to look at her goods. Where people bought things on a whim, in the few seconds between one task and the next. She has lived on both sides of this trade, the street and the market, and she knows which one keeps her family going.

"Going back to the market is not the problem," she says. "The problem is sales."

It is a lesson that stays with every trader who has tried and failed to make a market stall work. Where you sell decides how much you earn. How easy it is for customers to reach you decides if you survive. And for vendors whose profits are counted in small coins rather than notes, a bad spot is not just disappointing, it is dangerous.

## Differing perspectives

Jackline Akudi works with Shs80,000 to run her business selling mangoes near the Old Taxi Park, where thousands of people pass each day on their way to somewhere else. Her whole business depends on lots of people walking by and buying quickly. A customer does not plan to buy a mango. They see one, they want one, they hand over some coins, and the deal is done in seconds.

"I sell to people who are already walking on the streets," she says. "They are not planning to enter a market. If I move, I might spend the whole day waiting for someone to come."

This is the heart of the problem in Kampala's cleanup push. The city government sees order, cleanliness, and safety. Vendors see the difference between eating and not eating.

"You cannot tell someone with a basket of mangoes to compete inside a big market without help," Akudi argues. "The government should think about organised roadside spaces where we can keep things clean but still reach our customers."

Moses Ssewankambo, is a vendor living with a disability. He has always

worked on the streets because moving around is easier there than in the multi-storey markets that now wait for him.

"I have always worked on the streets because movement is easier," he says. "Some markets do not have proper access for people with disabilities. It becomes hard to move around every day."

For Ssewankambo, the eviction order carries a double weight. He must find a new place to sell his goods but he must also find a place he can actually get into. Where there are ramps. Where the walkways are wide enough. Where the simple act of entering the building does not need help he may not have.

He is not alone in this worry. Among the vendors now rushing to find stalls, those with disabilities, older traders, and women with small children face challenges that able-bodied vendors do not. The market may be open to everyone, but access, real access, is not the same for all.

## Relocations

At Busega Market, Adam Waiswa's office, is now flooded with people applying for stalls.

"We have registered more than 200 vendors out of the 500 available stalls, and the number is rising every day," the market supervisor says. "Many who were waiting are now rushing because they see the enforcement is real."

The process runs on a first-come, first-served basis. A system meant to avoid fights, but one that also favours those who can move fastest. Waiswa says his job is to be open and fair. "We want every genuine vendor to have a chance to operate legally," he adds.

Across the city at Usafi Market, signs of new life are also showing. Market Hadija Nante, the market supervisor reports that more than 200 vendors have already registered. They hope to slowly fill up to 3,000 spaces. Walkways that were once empty now show signs of ac-



## NUMBERS

According to KCCA figures, 2,520 stalls are available within Kampala's markets, including Nakawa, Luzira, Wandegaya, City Abattoir, New Ntinda, Usafi, Kamwokya, and Nateete. Another 1,980 spaces are available in nearby towns such as Kira, Mukono, Entebbe, Nansana, and Mpigi.

On paper, the numbers suggest there is room. On the ground, they represent choices that vendors must now make, between following the law and feeding their families, between having a fixed spot and surviving.

activity, fresh vegetables on tables, clothes hanging from racks, household items set out for display. "Each day we receive new applications," Nante says. "Some are returning vendors, others are first-timers. We arrange them by what they sell to keep order."

The renewed activity brings life to parts of the market that once stood empty. It offers a glimpse of what formal trade might look like if enough vendors come and enough customers follow.

But numbers on paper do not guarantee success in real life. And for every vendor who registers, there remains the question that Nalubega put so simply: What happens if the customers do not come?

Kenneth Kazibwe, who leads a group representing street vendors, notes that getting a stall is not the same as making a living.

"Some vendors have returned to markets, but the bigger issue is whether they can keep going," he says. "If someone spends months without sales, they will go back to the streets."

He argues that markets must be made places where people actually want to shop, not just places that exist. "Markets need good drainage, lights, security and clear signs. Without customers walking in, a stall is just an empty room."

The walk from Wandegaya to the taxi park is different now. No more jostling for space. No more stepping off the pavement to avoid a vendor's spread of second-hand shoes or a basin of tomatoes.



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"We want structured trade," Kazibwe insists. "But structure must come with a chance to earn. A trader lives on daily sales, not promises."

The city government, for its part, says the exercise is about bringing order while also protecting how people earn a living. State Minister for Kampala and Metropolitan Affairs Kabuye Kyofatogabye urges vendors to take the available spaces.

"We are not taking away livelihoods; we are organising them," he says. "Vendors should register in designated markets. Vulnerable groups such as women, youth and persons with disabilities will be given priority."

He stresses that clearing pavements makes the city cleaner, safer, and easier to move through, benefits that go beyond looks to public health and how the city works. "The streets are meant for movement, not trading. By moving vendors, we are protecting both traders and customers."

## Reactions

In the central business district, reactions to the evictions are split in predictable ways. Shop owners say it is easier for customers to move

around now that sidewalks are clear of vendor stalls and crowds. Some describe sales going up as cleaner streets attract more shoppers and cut down on theft. Videos on social media show businesspeople praising what they call a "massive facelift," making Kampala look

like a modern capital.

Resty Mugumya, a shop owner, argues that clearing vendors from walkways is important for public safety. "When paths are blocked, people are forced onto the roads, and that exposes them to danger. We must put safety first."



Kampala without vendors is almost unrecognisable. The streets stretch wide and empty, cleared of the chaos.

Sarah Namuli, who distributes bread, points to how the city works. "An organised city allows smoother movement of people and goods. It benefits everyone, including traders."

Others worry about the knock-on effects of moving people out. Some formal businesses have long relied on informal vendors as customers, selling goods in bulk that the vendors then sell on the streets. If evicted vendors move too far away, that income disappears.

Others, like Lilian Nakazibwe, mourn the loss of convenient street-side shopping. "For as long as I have lived in Kampala, I have preferred buying from vendors rather than going to the markets," she says. "It is convenient. I find their goods fresh and more affordable than what you get in shops or formal markets. For me, this is a great loss. The city just is not the same without them."

But overall, support for the clean-up is stronger than criticism among formal business owners. The benefits of order, they argue, are clear and real.

But calm does not automatically bring money. And for vendors whose whole business model depends on busy locations, the move

to market life requires more than a stall, it requires rethinking how they work from the ground up.

At Busega Market, the practical details of market life are still being worked out. According to Waiswa, stalls themselves are free, but those who use them must pay for utilities based on what they use. Suppliers who do not have stalls pay a fee that goes toward cleaning and upkeep. For security, traders work with their leaders to decide fees based on the goods they sell.

These are the small, everyday parts of formal trading, the costs and talks that add up to a different way of doing business. For vendors used to the easy flow of the informal economy, they mean both order and extra weight.

As Kampala goes through this change, the city finds itself at a familiar crossroads. The urge to organise, to clean, to look modern runs strong in city governments everywhere. Clean streets signal progress. Order suggests control. But cities are not blank pages, and the people who live in them are not pieces to be moved around without thought.

"If customers come, we will stay; if they do not, we will come back to the streets," is the only promise Nalubega can give right now.

The city has returned to its original palette; brown pavement, brown buildings, grey sky. PHOTOS/MICHEALKAKU-MIRIZI.