

Eviction of vendors, a national challenge

Friday's eviction of street vendors in Kampala has sparked outrage, sympathy and heated debate across Uganda. While city authorities argue that the clean-up is necessary to restore order, traffic flow and public hygiene, the reality on the ground tells a story that is far more complex than a simple urban planning exercise.

Street vending is more than a nuisance; it is a lifeline for tens of thousands of Ugandans. Street markets sustain families, pay school fees and put food on tables. The people affected are not faceless "informal traders" they are mothers, fathers and youth who, in the absence of formal employment opportunities, have carved out a means of survival. To evict them without alternative solutions is not just a Kampala problem; it is a national governance issue.

Kampala, as the capital, naturally sets a precedent. But the lesson extends beyond city boundaries. Cities such as Jinja, Gulu, Mbale and Mbarara face similar tensions between urban order and informal livelihoods. The way Kampala handles this crisis will shape national attitudes toward urban policy and the delicate balance between regulation and human dignity.

The issue:

Urban planning.

Our view:

Ugandans deserve cities that are safe, clean and modern but they also deserve livelihoods, dignity and hope. Evictions without solutions leave none of these.

It is undeniable that urban spaces require order. Streets blocked by hawkers disrupt traffic, limit access for emergency vehicles and can compromise safety. But heavy-handed evictions, often carried out with minimal notice and force, fail to acknowledge the broader socio-economic context. The vendors' predicament is symptomatic of a deeper national challenge: high youth unemployment, limited formal sector opportunities and the growing pressures of urbanisation.

A government that seeks to modernise its cities must also modernise its approach to governance. Policies must be inclusive, participatory and humane. Eviction should be a last resort, preceded by dialogue, relocation options and support programmes. For instance, vendors could be allocated designated stalls, introduced to co-operative frameworks, or offered training to transition into formal marketplaces.

Furthermore, this issue highlights the importance of national coordination. The Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) cannot act in isolation. Ministries of Trade, Finance, Labour and Local Government must collaborate to ensure that urban regulation does not become urban marginalisation. A patchwork approach that punishes the most vulnerable while allowing larger, more powerful informal actors to continue unchecked will only exacerbate inequality and fuel resentment.

Our cities are growing, our population is expanding and economic opportunities remain limited. The eviction of vendors is a reflection of national priorities. Are we committed to inclusive growth that protects livelihoods while improving public spaces, or are we content with policies that prioritise aesthetics over human dignity? The answer will shape the social contract between citizens and the State for years to come.

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