



What remains of a once-functioning taxi stage shelter in Kampala. Metal railings have been uprooted, signage stripped, and shelter removed, likely sold as scrap. Commuters now wait in open roadside conditions. PHOTO/GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

A coordinated network of vandals and scrap dealers is dismantling Kampala's public transport infrastructure piece by piece. Despite more than 15 arrests, taxi stages keep disappearing and commuters are paying the price.

BY GEOFFREY O OKWERA

On a rainy morning in Kampala, commuters gather under what used to be a structured taxi stage, only to find broken railings, faded signage, and no shelter. Some stand in puddles by the roadside, while others wave down taxis that barely slow down before disappearing into traffic.

"I have to be at work by 8am, but now I stand in the rain guessing where the taxi will stop," says Grace Matovu, a regular commuter at the Namirembe Road stage.

"The shelter was pulled down months ago. Nobody has come to fix it."

Once introduced to bring order to the city's public transport system, these designated pick-up points now stand damaged or barely recognisable. What was designed to bring order has increasingly come to reflect Kampala's struggle with decay and neglect.

Fourteen years after the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) embarked on re-establishing designated passenger pick-up points across the city, the vision of an organised transport system is under strain.

A vision of order now fading

When modern taxi and bus stages were introduced, the objective was clear;

Kampala's taxi stage shelters stolen for scrap

streamline public transport, reduce roadside congestion, and improve safety. Strategically placed shelters, signposts, and metal structures were installed to guide public transport operators.

For a time, the system offered promise. Today that order is increasingly difficult to recognise.

A field assessment across several parts of Kampala reveals a worrying pattern. Metal railings have been uprooted, signage removed, and shelters damaged beyond use. In some locations, the stages have almost disappeared entirely.

Yet paradoxically, these broken points continue to function as informal pick-up zones. Taxis still stop where stages once stood, but without the infrastructure that guided passengers or offered safety. The result is a return to familiar disorder. Passengers crowd along road edges, exposed to moving traffic, dust, and rain, while congestion builds at points that were once regulated.

For drivers such as Musa Ssemwanga, who has operated a taxi on the Entebbe Road route for 12 years, the destruction is personal.

"I have seen men cutting the rails at night with hacksaws," he says.

"They come after midnight, sometimes in groups of three or four. By morning, another section is gone. We report it, but the response is slow."

His frustration is shared by stage

managers.

"We used to have a system," says Mr Siraje Bbosa, a stage warden on Jinja Road.

"The signs told drivers where to stop. Passengers knew where to wait. Now, every day is chaos."

The cost of vandalism

KCCA has repeatedly attributed the destruction to vandalism and theft of public infrastructure.

Daniel Nuwabiine, KCCA spokesperson, says the destruction of road furniture is part of a wider pattern.

"I call upon all Ugandans to exhibit a spirit of patriotism and guard against actions that bring chaos to the city," he says.

The problem has become serious enough to prompt police action. In January 2024, Kampala Metropolitan Police arrested multiple suspects in connection with vandalism on the Northern Bypass. One suspect was allegedly caught red-handed with metals allegedly cut from a bridge. His arrest led investigators to scrap dealers in Nansana Katooke and Kisenyi, where stolen metals were being sold.

In total, more than 15 suspects were taken into custody, including scrap shop owners, who are said to have purchased stolen public infrastructure knowingly. The operation uncovered a coordinated

network: vandals strike at night, strip metal components, and sell them to unscrupulous dealers before dawn.

Despite these arrests, the destruction continues.

The Uganda Police Force Annual Crime Report 2024 noted that out of 14,681 reported cases of thefts from motor vehicles nationwide, more than 60 percent occurred in Kampala and Wakiso districts.

While this figure primarily concerns vehicle vandalism, it points to a broader breakdown in urban safety. The report indicated that 2,947 suspects were arrested in 2024 for vandalism and theft, yet repeat offenders remain a persistent challenge.

For commuters, the impact is immediate. "We report when we see people tampering with the stages, but nothing changes," says Matovu. "Last month, I called KCCA three times about

THE BIGGER QUESTION

As Kampala expands, the fate of its taxi and bus stages raises a deeper question: Is infrastructure enough without protection, discipline, and public ownership?

Police have demonstrated that arrests are possible. Scrap dealers have been identified as a choke point in the vandalism supply chain. And commuters have made clear what they need: functional, protected stages that offer shelter and order.

For now, the city continues to balance between ambition and decay, between modern transport plans and the fragile reality on the ground.

our missing shelter. They said they would send someone. I am still waiting."

A system with deep roots

Kampala's organised public transport system is not new. Structured bus services date back to the 1960s and 1970s under the Uganda Transport Company. More recent attempts to restore order began between 2011 and 2012 with the introduction of the Pioneer Easy Bus system.

While those reforms introduced some level of structure, sustaining them has proven difficult.

The economic cost of congestion

The breakdown of organised stages contributes directly to Kampala's notorious traffic congestion. According to the First African Bicycle Information Organisation (FABIO), traffic congestion costs the Ugandan economy more than Shs50m daily. The city now harbours more than 16,000 taxis, many operating with limited adherence to designated stages.

The cycle of destruction

Despite widespread damage, some stages remain intact, particularly those maintained by private organisations. However, the broader pattern remains one of loss and neglect.

Civil engineer Gob Blick Obita notes that much of the destruction happens at night, when surveillance is limited. He calls for increased security presence around transport infrastructure, particularly during night hours.

Without such measures, he warns, newly constructed stages risk suffering the same fate. He also highlights the economic waste involved, noting that repeated repairs drain public resources.

Scrap, survival, and weak enforcement

James Kato, an engineer with KCCA, says the vandalism is often driven by the theft and resale of metal components as scrap.

"These vandals are destroying some of these stages and selling the materials as scrap," he says. "This now calls for heightened security and the arrest of those responsible."

The January 2024 arrests proved that scrap dealers are integral to the vandalism economy. Yet no public record exists of prosecutions or convictions, raising questions about whether the crackdown has translated into lasting deterrence.

A glimpse of the future

Amid the challenges, new transport initiatives are emerging. Government, through Kiira Motors Corporation, recently launched pilot operations of electric buses under the E-Bus service.

Eng Ian Kavuma, managing director of E-Bus Xpress, says supporting infrastructure such as dedicated bus lanes and improved stages will be essential for the system to succeed. The five-year deployment plan, valued at \$315 million, aims to roll out 1,500 electric buses across 14 cities in Uganda. According to projections, the initiative is expected to transport millions of passengers daily by 2031.

Gen Edward Katumba Wamala, former Minister of Works and Transport, has urged the public to embrace the shift towards organised, low-emission transport systems. But for commuters such as Matovu, the electric bus future feels distant.

"They talk about new buses and new technology," she says, pulling her jacket tighter against the morning drizzle. "But I just want a roof over my head while I wait. Is that too much to ask?"