

# A city cannot be truly green if it is built on the ruins of its people's livelihoods

Uganda's efforts to develop "green cities" and climate-resilient urban areas are, on paper, both timely and necessary. Rapid urbanisation, flooding, and environmental damage require decisive policy measures. However, the current approach, marked by demolishing makeshift structures and evicting street vendors, exposes a troubling paradox: Environmental sustainability is pursued at the expense of social and economic well-being.

Recent enforcement actions by Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), including the relocation of vendors to designated markets, highlight this ongoing tension. Authorities report the creation of over 4,500 stalls to accommodate displaced traders. However, this technocratic solution conceals a deeper structural issue; the informal economy is not a marginal sector; it is the economy for the majority.

Street vending in Uganda is a vital livelihood strategy, especially in a context where formal job creation falls far short of labour market demand.

Research shows that evicting street vendors causes higher unemployment, lower household incomes, increased poverty, and a rise in crime. Income declines caused by displacement worsen poverty, creating major shocks to livelihoods that are already delicate.

Street vendors do not operate in isolation from the formal economy; they actively support it. Vendors attract foot traffic to established shops, serve as last-mile distributors of goods, and generate demand spillovers that benefit registered businesses. Their removal disrupts the entire urban value chain. Formal businesses, especially small and medium retailers, face reduced sales, slower inventory turnover, and lower profits. This decline has fiscal significance: as business activity drops, so does tax revenue, VAT, and local levies. Evicting vendors risks

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decreasing the very revenue base that urban authorities and national planners aim to expand, undermining already ambitious domestic revenue goals.

The reasoning behind these policies, urban order, sanitation, and climate resilience, is valid. Informal trading can lead to congestion and environmental damage. However, the policy response shows a deeper ideological bias; a preference for formalisation as the only legitimate way to achieve urban citizenship. This "formalise or perish" mindset is not neutral; it reflects a broader neoliberal policy framework often found in externally funded urban development programmes.

Across Africa, green city initiatives are increasingly linked to international financing frameworks from the World Bank's urban resilience programmes to climate funds tied to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These frameworks often carry implicit conditions; improved urban governance, better revenue collection, and spatial reorganisation. While not always openly coercive, they motivate governments to focus

on order, beauty, and taxability rather than on people's livelihoods.

In Uganda, the situation is complicated by the weak capacity of formal markets to absorb new participants. Relocation sites often lack enough foot traffic, infrastructure, or affordability, making them economically unviable for small-scale traders. As a result, many vendors either return to the streets, risking arrest and the confiscation of their goods, or exit the urban economy entirely, often moving back to rural areas or falling into dependency.

This is where the climate argument becomes especially problematic. Climate resilience, in its true sense, is not just about green spaces and less congested roads; it is about a society's ability to absorb shocks without falling apart. By undermining the livelihoods of the urban poor, current policies paradoxically decrease resilience rather than strengthen it.

Furthermore, the political aspect cannot be overlooked. The management of street vending in Kampala has increasingly shifted toward enforcement-focused methods, restricting vendors' ability to negotiate or defend their rights.

The way forward isn't to abandon urban reform but to rethink its foundations. Inclusive urbanism involves integrating, not eliminating, the informal sector. This means co-creating solutions with vendors, investing in mixed-use trading spaces that maintain foot traffic, and recognising informal work as a valid part of the urban economy.

Uganda faces a pivotal choice. It can adopt a green urban development model that displaces its most vulnerable residents, or it can lead an inclusive approach that balances environmental sustainability with economic justice.

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