Garbage piles put new Mbale leaders to test

Residents say restoring cleanliness in Mbale will require more than promises from the new administration.

BY FRED WAMBEDE & PHOEBE MASONGOLE

Residents of Mbale City have challenged the newly-elected city leadership to prioritise waste management and restore the area's reputation as one of the cleanest urban centres in East and Central Africa.

At the centre of public attention is the incoming city mayor, Ms Joyce Kidulu Matuka, 56, a teacher by profession, who is expected to be sworn in tomorrow. Ms Kidulu, who contested as an Independent candidate, succeeds Mr Cassimu Namugali of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC).

For many residents, however, celebrations over the new leadership are overshadowed by mounting concerns over rubbish accumulation, poor waste collection, and worsening sanitation in the city. At Doko dumping site, one of Mbale's main waste disposal areas, the scale of the problem is immediately visible. The dumping facility is now overwhelmed by heaps of uncollected garbage spilling beyond the designated area.

The smell of decay hangs heavily in the air as marabou storks circle overhead while waste pickers sort through the garbage with bare hands.

"We live with this smell every day, and flies are everywhere. When it rains, dirty water from the dumping site flows into our gardens and onto the road," Mr Peter Wanzala, a resident, says.

His concerns reflect a broader crisis unfolding across Mbale City, where rapid urbanisation is outpacing the city's ability to manage solid waste.

Growing city, growing waste

According to the city's environmental office, Mbale currently generates an estimated 6,000 tonnes of waste daily, but only about 40 percent is collected and properly disposed of.

Under the city's waste management system, Mbale is divided into 10 collection zones served by six private garbage collection companies. Households and businesses are required to pay fees depending on the amount of waste generated. However, residents say the system has failed to provide reliable services.

In areas such as Market Street, Town Street, Namakwekwe, Nkoma, and Namatala, piles of uncollected garbage have become a common sight.



People sort garbage at Nabuyonga river in order to get recyclable plastics for sale. PHOTO/FRED WAMBEDE

Ms Joanita Buteme, a vendor at Kikindu Market, said waste accumulation has become part of daily life.

"You clean your place in the morning, but the garbage can stay there for days. Sometimes the trucks come, sometimes they don't, yet we are still expected to pay. The new leadership should address this challenge," she said.

Mr Joseph Wanika, a trader at Mbale Central Market, said irregular garbage collection is forcing some residents to dump waste illegally.

"We pay about Shs10,000 every month, expecting four collections, but sometimes they only come twice. Because of that inconsistency, some people end up dumping garbage in drainage channels and bushes at night," he said. The City Environment Officer, Ms Rodah Nyaribi, acknowledges the challenges facing the city.

"Solid waste management remains a major challenge not only in Mbale, but across Uganda and globally. We cannot manage it alone. We need community support," she says.

Despite the existing waste management framework, enforcement remains weak and service delivery inconsistent.

Mr Muhammad Tumwa, a former city worker familiar with waste operations, attributes part of the crisis to inadequate equipment.

"Sometimes only one or two garbage trucks are operational. When they break down, waste can remain uncollected for days," he says.

City records indicate that Mbale has three garbage trucks, but only one is currently functional.

Poor waste disposal is also worsening flooding in low-lying areas such as Namatala and Doko.

Mr Isma Were, a boda boda rider operating at Paradise stage, says blocked drainage channels have become a major problem during rainy seasons.

Residents' pain.
We need an integrated system involving waste reduction, sorting, recycling, and enforcement. Collection alone is not enough.
– Steven Masiga, a researcher

"When it rains, trenches overflow because they are filled with garbage. We end up riding through dirty water," he says.

Health experts warn that the consequences of poor waste management extend beyond environmental degradation.

Dr Ernest Kutoi, formerly working at Mbale Regional Referral Hospital, said uncollected waste creates breeding grounds for disease-causing organisms.

"When waste is left exposed, it attracts flies and bacteria. Communities become vulnerable to diarrhoeal diseases, skin infections, and other sanitation-related illnesses," he said.

He added: "It is dangerous when even food vending areas are surrounded by garbage."

City authorities say plans are underway to improve waste management infrastructure, including acquiring land for a new waste collection and sorting facility.

Daily Monitor has also learnt that some progress has been registered through recycling initiatives. According to city officials, a local recycling company collects and transports nearly 1,000 kilogrammes of plastic waste every month.

Mr Samuel Wetaka, a plastic waste collector, said recycling efforts have helped reduce visible plastic waste in some parts of the city.

"We move around collecting plastic waste and it has reduced in some areas. But the challenge remains, especially with polythene bags and other non-degradable materials," he said.

Several proposals to convert waste into biogas and organic manure have previously been raised, but many projects have failed to take off because of funding constraints.

Mr Kasim Wabonga, the assistant city town clerk, said community attitudes towards waste disposal must change.

"The people making the city dirty are the same people living in it," he said.

KEY FACTS ON WASTE

- Mbale generates an estimated 6,000 tonnes of waste daily
- Only about 40 percent of the garbage is collected
- The city is divided into 10 waste collection zones
- Six private companies are contracted to collect garbage
- Mbale has three garbage trucks, but only one is operational
- Low-lying areas are affected by flooding linked to blocked drainage channels

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