

The filthy state of Ugandan towns and villages

Dear Tingasiga:

Uganda is in a state of profound environmental crisis. From the sprawling suburbs of Kampala to the regional hubs, district towns, hamlets, and villages, the physical landscape of Uganda tells a disheartening story of neglect, mismanagement, and institutional failure. Overflowing garbage containers, garbage heaps in human neighbourhoods, open drains choked with plastic waste, potholed roads doubling as dumping grounds, and waterways running black with effluent supporting numerous plastic bottles and *buveera*—these are not exceptional sights but the ordinary backdrop of daily life for millions of urban and rural Ugandans. The filth that especially defines urban spaces is not merely an aesthetic problem; it is a public health emergency, an economic liability, and a reflection of deep-seated failures in governance, civic culture, and urban planning.

Kampala, where I have spent two weeks reacquainting myself with the city of my youth, epitomises the scale of the urban sanitation crisis. With a population that swells to nearly four million during the day, the city generates an estimated 2,000 tonnes of solid waste every day. Yet according to estimates by the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), less than half of this waste is formally collected and disposed of. The remainder accumulates in open spaces, along roadsides, in markets, and in drainage channels. Rubbish piles stand next to homes and commercial buildings, creating habitats for disease-carrying insects and animals like mosquitoes, rats, and flies.

Secondary cities and towns fare no better. Mbarara, for example, despite being one of Uganda's fastest-growing cities, struggles with open defecation in peri-urban areas, and markets remain chronically unsanitary. Jinja, once the industrial heartbeat of East Africa, now contends with industrial effluent flowing unchecked into the Nile, compounding the environmental degradation of a once-celebrated waterway. Kabaale (Kabale), beautiful and nearly spotlessly clean during my childhood, is now a filthy and chaotic mess that is only saved by its stunning natural landscape.

The causes of this crisis are not hard to see. Rap-

id and largely unplanned urbanisation sits at the root. Uganda's urban population growth, which is among the highest rates in Africa, has far outpaced infrastructure development, particularly in waste management, water supply, and sewerage. Institutional weakness, underfunding, and corruption compound the problem. Garbage collection contracts are awarded through patronage networks rather than merit, resulting in irregular, unreliable service. In many neighbourhoods, residents report that waste collection vehicles have not appeared in months, yet contractual payments continue to be disbursed. Enforcement of public health ordinances against illegal dumping is inconsistent at best and absent at worst. Inspectors lack transport, fuel, and in some cases the institutional will to act against violators, particularly powerful market operators and business owners.

Much of Uganda's urban growth occurs in informal settlements where no sanitation infrastructure was ever designed or built. Open channels serve simultaneously as drainage systems and waste disposal sites. Narrow unpaved lanes make it physically impossible for waste collection vehicles to access homes, even in cities and towns where such vehicles operate. Without tenure security, residents in informal settlements have little incentive to invest in sanitation infrastructure for their properties. The result is a structural trap: informal settlements are dirty in part because they are informal, and the informality persists in part because addressing it requires the kind of sustained, coordinated governance that has eluded Ugandan towns and cities.

However, littering and pervasive filth in Uganda is not simply a matter of insufficient bins or poor municipal planning. It is deeply rooted in cultural attitudes and learned behaviours that have normalised the disposal of waste in public spaces in recent decades. A central cultural factor is the historical relationship between Ugandans and their environment. In rural and pre-urban settings, most waste was organic—food scraps, banana leaves, maize husks—and decomposed naturally when discarded outdoors. This practice was ecologically harmless and culturally unremarkable.

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Muniini K. Mulera
Letter to a Kampala Friend



As urbanisation introduced plastics, polythene bags, and non-biodegradable packaging, the disposal habits remained, but the materials did not break down. The behaviour outlived its environmental logic.

Social normalisation also plays a powerful role. When littering is ubiquitous, it becomes invisible. Individuals feel neither shame nor social pressure to behave differently when everyone around them discards waste without consequence. This herd behaviour is self-reinforcing: dirty environments invite more littering, as people perceive that cleanliness is neither expected nor maintained. My comments about the filth around us usually yield passive or dismissive responses.

Furthermore, a weak sense of shared civic ownership over public space encourages indifference. Many Ugandans distinguish sharply between private space—often kept clean—and public space, which is treated as nobody's responsibility. Until civic education, enforcement, and strong local leadership shift this ingrained culture, littering will remain a default rather than an exception.

The public health consequences of this filth are severe and measurable. Preventable intestinal infections are common. Malaria transmission is intensified by stagnant water pooling in solid waste and blocked drains. Children playing near refuse heaps face heightened exposure to faecal disease-causing germs, heavy metals, and toxic chemicals from improperly discarded batteries,

electronics, and industrial waste. The burden of these preventable diseases falls disproportionately on the urban poor, entrenching cycles of poverty and diminishing productivity across the workforce.

Water contamination is a particularly grave dimension of the crisis. Nalukolongo and Lubigi channels in Kampala, which drain directly into Nalubaale (Lake Victoria), carry enormous loads of untreated sewage, agricultural runoff, and industrial effluent. Nalubaale itself—source of drinking water for millions of Ugandans—is under severe stress from nutrient pollution and water hyacinth proliferation, both linked in part to the waste management failures of lakeside urban centres. Uganda, a country blessed with extraordinary freshwater resources, is manufacturing its own water scarcity through mismanagement.

Reversing the filth crisis in Uganda is not impossible, but it requires political will, sustained investment, and urgent transformation in both governance and civic culture. The most important intervention will be civic education. Littering and illegal dumping are in part habits of convenience, reinforced by the absence of alternatives. Educating the public, starting with preschool children is key to behaviour change. Garbage bins and waste disposal systems in well planned communities are only useful where citizens understand and embrace the culture of cleanliness in both private and public spaces.

The filthy state of Uganda's urban centres is a crisis hiding in plain sight. The consequences—in lives lost to preventable disease, in economic opportunity squandered, in the dignity of urban life diminished—are real and compounding. Uganda's drive to become a middle-income country and a choice destination for tourists is fundamentally incompatible with cities, towns and rural communities that cannot manage their own waste. A cleaner country is not a luxury. It is a prerequisite for the future that Uganda says it wants. The question is whether the political will exists to match the rhetoric with action.

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