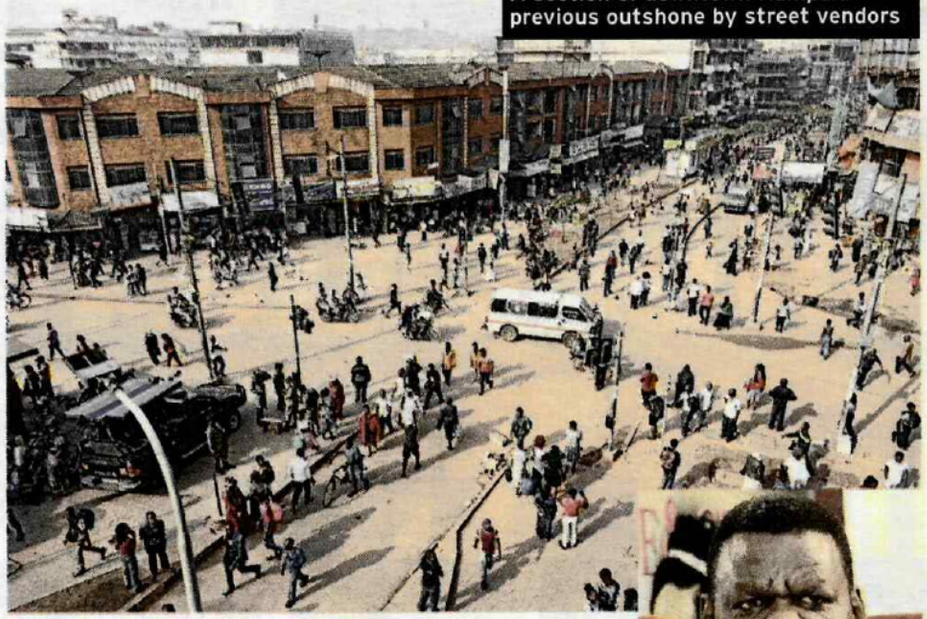
KAMPALA FINDS ITS FOOTPATHS AGAIN

There was a time when walking through downtown Kampala required sharp elbows, quick reflexes and a firmer grip on impulses to spend. Today, the streets heave a sigh of relief from suffocation by multitudes of vendors, writes **Joseph Batte.**



A section of downtown Kampala previous outshone by street vendors



KACITA chairperson Issa Ssekito

» THE SIMPLE ACT OF WALKING IN A STRAIGHT LINE HAS SUDDENLY BECOME A LUXURIOUS VICTORY.

GENESIS OF STREET VENDING

In early 1900s, colonial planners had imagined Kampala as a well-organised town with space, order and fresh air. A hygiene expert named W.J. Simpson visited in 1915 and raised concerns about diseases like malaria and plague. His solution was the idea of "green belts" – wide open spaces, some up to 300 yards, meant to separate communities and allow air to circulate freely. Urban plans in 1919 and 1930 continued this ideology, and later designs in the 1950s and 1960s even proposed green corridors stretching from Luwum Street through Kikuubo, all the way towards Rubaga Road.

The expulsion of Asians in 1972 under Idi Amin reshaped the commercial structure of Kampala city, especially in trading hubs like Kikuubo. Over time, businesses changed hands and informal trade began to grow more aggressively. By the 1980s and 1990s, economic hardship pushed many young Ugandans into street vending as a means of survival. Formal jobs were scarce, but the streets offered opportunity. The planned green corridors slowly turned into prime business locations where there was no need for rent or electricity; only a stock of goods, courage and a loud voice. Pickpockets thrived in the tight crowds and accidents became more common as pedestrians were forced onto the road. By early 2026, with Kampala's population swelling into the millions and complaints about congestion, sanitation and noise increasing, the authorities decided to act. The Kampala Capital City Authority issued a firm ultimatum: Street vendors had to relocate to designated markets.

A few days ago in Kampala city, if you survived Ben Kiwanuka Street at midday without buying socks you didn't need, a phone charger you didn't trust and a Rolex you didn't plan for, you considered yourself an urban champion.

Currently, the sun slips through the clouds and gently highlights the pavements, there are no piles of second-hand clothes or vegetables to trip over, and no sudden bumps from the crowd pushing past. For the first time in a long while, one can even hear birds chirping from a distance.

Traffic is moving more smoothly – not perfectly, because this is still Kampala – but at least vehicles are no longer stuck in a human maze. It feels strangely luxurious, like the simple act of walking in a straight line has suddenly become a small, unexpected victory.

NORMALISED CHAOS

Earlier photos of Kampala city show vibrant colours, crowds and clutter packed into every available space. An aerial view of the old taxi park area told the whole story: The city looked like a moving carpet of people, flowing in every direction at once. Motorcycles squeezed through impossibly tight gaps as they navigated between pedestrians and parked vehicles, and the taxis' parking lot itself had quietly transformed into a busy marketplace .

All around, buildings stood tall, their walls plastered with bright billboards advertising drinks, events, gadgets and sometimes even miraclous healers. Below them, blue and white tarpaulins stretched from one stall to another, shading goods and restlessly loud traders from the heat or rain. It was messy. It was loud. It was chaotic. But it was also deeply alive, pulsing with that stubborn hustler spirit of Ugandans.

A CATALYST TO SALES

Noise itself was not just constant, it was needed for sales. Taxi touts shouted destinations, bodabodas blasted horns, and street preachers delivered fiery sermons. Mosques equally called city dwellers to prayer, and vendors added their own tune into the mix, each one trying to outshout and outsale the other.

Health experts warn that noise above 85 decibels can slowly damage hearing and in down town Kampala, the noise levels regularly crossed into an unhealthy territory.

TRADERS SPEAK OUT

Issa Ssekitto, the Kampala City Traders Association (KACITA) chairperson, welcomed government's move to drive hawkers off the streets, citing financial losses due to disorderly traders.

"You can't tell the losses we had incurred due to trade disorder amidst all the taxes including trade licences, income tax, electricity, presumptive tax and paying rent in dollars," he said. Many arcade owners, market structures and kiosks did not realise any profits in the months of November, December 2025 and January 2026," Ssekitto added.

Ssekilanda Kizito, the chairperson of Busega Market Garment Traders, said: "There has to be order in Kampala as Uganda's capital city. Now vendors are free to come and they get spaces in our market for them to start earning a living. But, priority will be given to previously registered traders and vulnerable groups, including women, youth and persons with disabilities."

Kenneth Kazibwe, the chairperson of street vendors in Kampala city resisted the move arg[illegible] that Government has never fulfilled its promise to establish at least two markets in each of the five divisions of Kampala city.

"There are still inadequate spaces in the public markets, especially Nakawa market, and there are concerns over lack of customers in designated markets they are pushing these vendors to occupy," he insisted.

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