

Unresolved land disputes delay Equator site uplift

Unresolved wrangles have denied Uganda and Kayabwe community a chance to earn better revenue from the tourism site.

BY SADAT MBOGO

Persistent land ownership challenges continue to block ambitious plans to revamp the Equator Monument at Kayabwe, Mpigi District.

These unresolved wrangles have denied Uganda a chance to transform one of its most visited equator monuments into a world-class tourism attraction.

The site which sits on private Mailo land on the Kampala-Masaka highway, draws dozens of foreign and local tourists daily.

Many pause to take photos while standing in the imaginary line dividing the northern and southern hemispheres. Others watch Coriolis Effect demonstrations with draining water, balance eggs on nails, and shop for crafts at informal wooden stalls.

Yet despite its status as a national symbol, dating back to colonial-era markers in the 1950s, the area remains underdeveloped with poor drainage and garbage collection, limited security, and basic facilities that fail to retain visitors for longer stays or encourage higher spending.

Mr Hassan Ssebunya, the chairperson of the Equator Workers' Association representing about 100 vendors, lamented the site's current state.

"The Equator has great potential, but poor infrastructure and appearance limit tourist numbers to around 50 foreigners daily," Mr Ssebunya said.

He added: "With proper development like five star hotels, cultural parks



Tourists at the Kayabwe Equator Monument on last month. Despite its status as a national symbol, the area remains underdeveloped with poor drainage and garbage collection, limited security, among others. PHOTO/SADAT MBOGO

representing Uganda's cultures, supermarkets, forex bureaus, and better amenities, we could attract 250 or more visitors daily and keep them longer instead of quick photos and craft purchases."

Land disputes

Pioneers from the 1990s, including the late Twahab Mukasa, Fred Bagonza, one Kakooza, Rose Nambi, and Dorothy Birungi, kick-started the site's vibrancy with craft shops, simple restaurants, and demonstrations.

Private efforts like the construction of the Wavah complex by businessman, Gordon Wavamunno have added modern touches to the site but broader coordinated development remains stalled.

Stakeholders point to private Mailo land as the primary obstacle for the development of the Equator site at Kayabwe. The core pieces of land belong to; Ms Mariam Mukasa, Julie Solberg, and Mr Wavamunno.

According to Mr Ssebunya, the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities officials engaged the land owners last year to explore a redevelopment programme, where the government purchased the land.

"While the landlords showed willingness to sell off the land with agreeable terms, unresolved disputes have delayed acquisition and subsequently any major investment," he said.

Some positive signals such as squatters, particularly along the Equator line, relocating have given vendors hope of

did not comment on the issue, insisting that she was busy.

"I am busy now, I will call you when I am free," she said before hanging up on the phone. However, she had not called back by press time.

Mpigi District Commercial Officer, Mr Ronald Kazibwe expressed cautious optimism, noting past discussions on potential land buys in upcoming financial years, possibly tied to wider tourism enhancements in the district including sites like Kibuuka Omumbaale.

"Our hopes to get land are pegged to the next financial year as discussions over the matter are ongoing with the ministry, district, landlords, and other stakeholders," he said.

Mr Michael Lutalo, the principal township officer for Kayabwe Town Council, emphasised jurisdictional limits.

"The Equator is a national symbol under the Ministry of Tourism. The land is private Mailo, not public, so our council's mandate for intervention is restricted," he said.

Alternative activities

He noted that local authorities focus on events like Equinox Day sensitisation to promote awareness, but comprehensive upgrades require higher-level resolution.

Mr Hannington Kalungi, a tour guide at the Equator, said: "We want a good face for the place with nice hotels, businesses, and proper facilities. The current appearance attracts far fewer tourists than this key landmark deserves."

Additionally, dedicated tourism police was withdrawn from the site. Today, they rely on informal arrangements. That comprises of men with spears and two reserve force personnel funded by vendors' Shs15,000 monthly contributions per shop, and this was.

However, vendors worry about future affordability if redevelopment proceeds, fearing high rents could displace small businesses.

Ms Hellen Nakate, a vendor said, "Despite their discussions, they should allow us to work from the site with our little money for rent because we are peasants."

Until land disputes are resolved through purchase, negotiation, or other mechanisms, the Kayabwe Equator site remains a missed economic opportunity for job creation, increased visitor dwell time, and stronger local revenue in Mpigi District.

EQUATOR MONUMENT

Kayabwe Equator Monument located on the Kampala-Masaka Highway, is perhaps the most famous equator crossing in Uganda. It has long been a favorite stop for tourists who want to take photos and buy souvenirs from local vendors. Kayabwe Point has some attractions and facilities for visitors.

owners' intent to transfer land to the government. However, no final deals have materialised, leaving the site in limbo.

When contacted on Friday, Ms Mukasa