

Jim Mugunga, communications specialist

KCCA, Abiriga and 'toilets' matter in the City

One fine day, the Member of Parliament representing Arua Municipality and a Colonel at that, needed to ease himself really fast otherwise the unfortunate would have happened to his honourable self, and yellow suit!

The MP chose the Ministry of Finance headquarters' perimeter wall as a convenient place to do the needful.

Incidentally, many drivers for the dignitaries who frequent Statistics House and the Prime Minister's offices had been cited using the "privacy" of the same perimeter wall to answer nature's call. But they did not make as much news, perhaps due to their inconspicuous attire?

But I digress - as we now know, the Abiriga incident went viral and city authorities swung into action. The evidence was overwhelming, it was not contested and the accused did not waste court's valuable time.

For being 'a public nuisance' he was ordered to either pay sh40,000 (approximately \$10) or go to jail for two months. He made the cash settlement and left us with an additional colloquial term to add to our vocabulary: *Abirigate*.

Fast forward, however, it is important that we do not miss the lessons that the *abirigate* incident presented to the city and the nation.

Whereas we were all quick to laugh at, condemn and prosecute Abiriga, the fact is that there is no known place of public convenience around this high-value quadrangle of the city.

This is not withstanding the fact that the location houses probably

the single largest most sensitive nerve centres for the Government: the Legislature, city council administration, financial and banking institutions, embassies and high-end hotels and businesses.

Modern cities, a class to which Kampala aspires to belong, plan for and avail public toilets to residents and visitors alike.

The reasons vary from ordinary excellence at service delivery, to more critical issues of health and sanitation.

Some people need to use washrooms frequently for various health reasons such as pregnancy, menstruation, Crohn's disease and those temporarily afflicted with food-borne illnesses. An upset stomach may, without doubt, necessitate proximity and timeliness of toilet use, lest those afflicted suffer a lot of embarrassment.

Older men, the likes of whom operate around the Ministry of Finance, KCCA, Foreign Affairs and Parliament Buildings, can develop prostate problems due to prolonged and inadequate access to a restroom.

Various medical journals further indicate that the inability to satisfy essential physiological needs because no toilet is available, contributes to health issues such as urinary tract infections, kidney infections and digestive problems which can later develop into more severe health problems.

Research has shown that public toilets play a role in community health and individual well-being. It has even been asserted that mental well-being is enhanced when people are out with families and friends and know a place "to go" is available.



Would it be improper for KCCA to incentivise restaurants and hotel owners to open up their already existing toilet amenities to the public in exchange for some token benefits such as a refund or waiver?

On the flip side, lack of public toilets tends to spoil the party and hence perimeter walls, street corners,

tree trunks and green hedges have been turned into open air toilets with attendant negative effects for all concerned.

In short, a functional toilet is not a favour but a right, without which people cannot participate in their communities with dignity and confidence.

How then can KCCA tap into *Abirigate* beyond a mere penalty, publicity and awareness stint?

The Authority has capacity to triple the availability of public toilets by the use of Public Private Partnerships (PPP). I know that KCCA can meet this obligation without deep pockets, but innovation.

For example, what stops KCCA from passing a decree that necessitates each new building plan in the Central Business District (CBD) to include a publicly accessible place of convenience before it is approved for construction?

How about a bidding requirement for public space developers or renewals of leases to locations such as Sheraton gardens, City Square, Centenary Park, Nakivubo Stadium and the like to commit to own and maintain a public facility as a condition to successful tender award?

Would it be improper for KCCA to incentivise restaurants and hotel owners to open up their already existing toilet amenities to the public in exchange for some token benefits such as a refund or waiver of certain tax or endorsement and or a higher rating and public recognition and certification as CSR practitioner?

Many restaurants and hotels are already delivering well in this area and all they may need from KCCA is recognition of their efforts to offset

resultant maintenance, water and lighting costs that may accrue.

It is within KCCA reach, to allocate the private sector land and allow them to design, finance, build and operate a public toilet to prescribed standards in exchange for advertisement space over a longer period, or additional vertical space use. By transferring the toilet delivery role to the private sector, KCCA will have reassigned a lot more risk out including design and finance hence allowing innovation and completion to thrive in the toilet business.

When KCCA and all other municipalities allow the PPP approach to thrive in the toilet business, I foresee standards evolve from the current all wet, dirty and overflowing, hidden, corner houses - where they still exist - to airy, well-lit and clean facilities.

Well-run, clean, washrooms in the city shall complement other Government and KCCA programmes such as the necessity to wash hands and mitigate many communicable diseases - currently a missing link.

These facilities would even rightly substitute shop windows by providing mirrors for grooming! They will also provide safe drinking water (refill points); secure, convenience places to meet hygiene needs, and waste bins.

When this is done, KCCA will have demonstrated that it is not all about policing toilet manners but delivering vital amenities to the city dwellers like Abiriga.

The writer is a communications expert and spokesperson of the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development