

I knew we would miss street vendors, but not this much

When Jose Chameleone sang *Basima Ogenze*, he probably was not thinking about urban planning. Yet, somewhere within that melody, there is a resonance with what city dwellers are experiencing today. Much like a bad breakup, we are only starting to comprehend what we have lost.

A few weeks ago, it was all jokes and celebration after the Kampala Capital City Authority achieved what once seemed improbable; in a single day, street vendors disappeared from Kampala's streets as if they had never existed. There were no heaped displays of tomatoes spilling onto the pavement, no precarious towers of second-hand shoes threatening to topple over, and no shouted negotiations happening inches from your ear while you were simply trying to buy onions.

Suddenly, the streets looked cleaner, wider, almost European; if you squinted hard enough and ignored the potholes. You could walk without being hassled, without someone tugging at your elbow to show you belts you never wanted. If you grew tired or had to wait for someone (which, in Kampala, is always), you could rest



your aching back on the concrete benches now dotting the street islands. Civilisation, it seemed, had finally arrived.

And yet, we Kampalans are a skeptical bunch. We have witnessed too many reforms that arrived with great fanfare, only to quietly fade away. So, when we observed the clean streets, the vanished vendors, and the sudden order, we did what we do best; we

waited for the punchline.

Even now, you will find a vendor crouched at the entrance of a building on Luwum Street, a bag of tomatoes tucked discreetly beside them, eyes scanning for the familiar blue uniforms.

One cannot help but wonder why it took City Hall so long. The reasons are as layered as a well-made Rolex. Poor pay turned enforcement officers into philoso-

phers, pondering whether chasing vendors was worth the effort. There were also the bribes, let us call them what they are, that transformed what should have been a cleanup into a daily transaction.

And then there is us, the consumers and enablers.

Let us be honest; we loved the convenience of stepping off a taxi and buying three tomatoes, two

avocados, and a bunch of matooke without having to navigate the chaos of Nakasero Market. We appreciated their lower prices compared to anywhere else. So here we are, walking on cleaner streets, resting on new benches, and secretly mourning the woman who knew exactly how ripe their avocados needed to be.

We miss the chaos and convenience, the haggling and the humour. We miss the woman who always saved the best watermelons for us. We miss the characters who gave Kampala its pulse, its personality, its unique brand of or-

ganised chaos.

However, we must also acknowledge that order has its virtues. Being able to walk without being grabbed is nice, and having space to breathe is pleasant. If we are honest, the vendors deserve better than a life spent dodging enforcement officers, packing up their wares in the rain, and facing uncertainty about whether tomorrow will bring the same patch of pavement.

Perhaps it is time for a new model, not a return to the old chaos but a step toward something better. The vendors are already entrepreneurs; they understand supply and demand, customer loyalty, and the art of pricing. What if they traded online? What if they delivered? What if they built businesses that did not rely on occupying a sidewalk and keeping a constant watch over their shoulders?

In the meantime, we will walk our cleaner streets, rest on our new benches, and try not to gaze too longingly at the entrances of buildings on Luwum Street. We will reluctantly admit that a city without vendors is easier to navigate, and we will also admit, equally reluctantly, that we miss them more than we ever expected.

Chameleone understood this. Sometimes, the things we let go of are the things we cannot stop thinking about. They may be gone, but they have not been forgotten. If this city is fortunate, they will not simply return in their past form, but rather, as an evolved type of vendor.

They may be gone, but they have not been forgotten. If this city is fortunate, they will not simply return in their past form, but rather, as an evolved type of vendor



Sylvia Mwesigye
Another
Perspective