

How to fix Kampala's transport nightmare

In April 2024, I spent one hour and 30 agonising minutes stuck in traffic between Namanve and Seeta. A single car heading to Kampala had veered onto the wrong side of the road, creating a complete blockage.

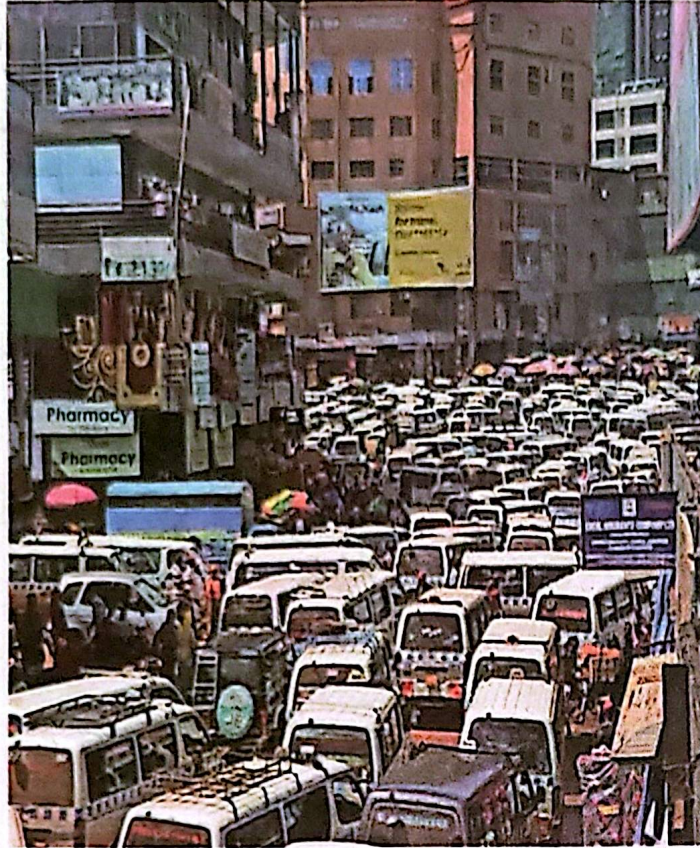
Even the usually nimble boda bodas could not squeeze through. What should have been a routine journey turned into a frustrating ordeal of honking horns, rising tempers and wasted time.

That experience is not unique. Millions of Kampala residents endure similar nightmares daily. The Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area, home to a daytime population of nearly seven million, is choking on congestion. Minibus (taxis) stop arbitrarily, boda bodas weave dangerously, and private cars add to the chaos on narrow, poorly planned roads.

The economic cost is staggering, lost productivity, wasted fuel, and hours of human potential drained away every single day.

It is high time Uganda, and particularly Kampala, embraced a modern, reliable and affordable public bus system modelled on successful examples like Norway's. Norway has shown that well-planned, integrated public transport can transform urban mobility, reduce congestion and improve quality of life even in a country with challenging geography.

In cities such as Oslo and Kristiansand, commuters enjoy clean, punctual buses and trams operating on dedicated lanes where possible. A key feature is the affordable periodic ticketing system. Passengers buy a 30-day ticket that allows unlimited travel within designated zones.



Prices are structured to encourage regular use, with discounts for students, youth, seniors and frequent travellers. In Oslo's central zone, for instance, monthly passes have been made more accessible through subsidies and zone-based pricing, making public transport a genuine first choice rather than a last resort.

Imagine a similar system in Kampala. A cheap monthly "Kampala Metro Pass" say, at a flat, affordable fee equivalent to what many currently spend weekly on erratic taxi and boda fares would allow residents to hop on and off modern buses across the metropolitan area without worrying about individual ticket costs every trip. Routes could link key hubs: from Seeta and Mukono in the east, to Entebbe in the south,

Wakiso and beyond. Dedicated bus lanes on major arteries, priority signalling at junctions, and real-time tracking via a simple mobile app would ensure reliability.

The benefits would be enormous. First, reduced congestion. Fewer taxis stopping haphazardly and fewer private cars on the road during peak hours would free up space. Boda bodas could still serve last-mile connectivity in areas buses cannot easily reach, but they would no longer be the default for long commutes.

Second, improved safety. Modern buses with trained drivers, proper maintenance and strict adherence to traffic rules would cut the horrific accident rates associated with the current chaotic mix of vehicles.

Third, environmental gains. Cleaner, possibly electric or low-emission buses would help ease Kampala's notorious air pollution.

Critics may argue that Uganda cannot afford such a system or that Norwegians enjoy higher incomes. Yet Norway's success is not only about money; it is about political will, proper planning and making public transport a public good. Uganda has already invested in roads and infrastructure projects.

Redirecting part of that effort, with support from development partners if needed, towards a dedicated bus rapid transit (BRT) network or even a basic high-quality bus system makes sound economic sense. The daily losses from traffic jams run into billions of shillings. Investing in buses would pay for itself through increased productivity, reduced fuel imports and fewer road accidents burdening our health system.

Moreover, an affordable monthly pass system would be pro-poor. Many low-income workers currently walk long distances or spend a large chunk of their earnings on unpredictable transport. A flat monthly fee would bring predictability and savings, allowing families to budget better and freeing up money for food, education or small businesses.

Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) and the Ministry of Works and Transport have talked about urban mobility plans for years. The time for studies and pilot projects is over. We need decisive action to roll out a phased bus system starting with high-demand corridors. Private operators could be brought in under strict regulation, with government ensuring standards, subsidies for the monthly pass and integration of routes.

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