

Kenya

Towards the Just City in Africa

*Urban Life and Informal
Transport in Nakuru*

Imprint

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Background

Nakuru City, officially chartered on 1st December 2021, is the capital of Nakuru County in Kenya's Great Rift Valley. With a population of approximately 400,000, it is the country's fourth largest city after Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu. Its strategic location along the Great Rift Valley corridor makes it a vital hub for trade, agriculture, and transport, linking western and central Kenya. As one of Kenya's newest cities, Nakuru is undergoing rapid urbanization, which has brought both opportunities and challenges in shaping its future.

Since 2020, Nakuru has partnered with the **Just City Working Group (JCWG)** and the **Socially Just Public Transport Working Group (SJPTWG)**, facilitated by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Kenya office. These collaborations have focused on advancing socially just urban development through research, public dialogues, catalytic projects, and policy formulation. The city has become a focal point for testing innovative approaches to urban governance, particularly in the transport sector, where issues of equity, accessibility, and sustainability are most visible.

Public transport in Nakuru, like in

many Kenyan cities, is largely dependent on private operators such as motorcycles and bicycles (bodabodas), minibuses (matatus), taxis, and tuk-tuks. According to the Nakuru County Statistical Abstract (2022), bodabodas dominate the sector, with over 16,800 operators compared to 7,299 matatus, 1,308 taxis, and 1,960 tuk-tuks. Despite this, public investment has historically prioritized cars, with resources directed toward road expansion and parking facilities, while infrastructure for non-motorized transport (NMT) such as cycling lanes and pedestrian walkways remains minimal. This imbalance has created systemic injustices in mobility, disproportionately affecting pedestrians, cyclists, and low-income commuters.

Recognizing these inequities, Nakuru has embraced the **Just City approach**, guided by principles of dignity, equity, diversity, rights, and democracy. Through its partnership with JCWG and SJPTWG, the city is working to reframe urban growth in transport as an opportunity to build inclusive, sustainable, and citizen-centered mobility systems. This shift positions Nakuru not only as a growing urban center but also as a model for socially just urbanization in Kenya.

1. Challenges and Conflict

The urban growth in Nakuru's public transport sector has led to serious injustices and structural imbalances as listed below:

→ **Dependence on private operators:**

Public transport is heavily reliant on **private operators**, with motorcycles (bodabodas), minibuses (matatus), taxis, and tuk-tuks forming the backbone of mobility. Bodabodas alone account for the majority of transport providers, highlighting their critical role in everyday commuting. Yet, despite their dominance, they remain largely unsupported by public investment, operating in a fragmented and often unsafe environment.

→ **Neglect of non-motorized transport (NMT):** Despite the large number of bodabodas and pedestrians, public investments have focused on expanding road networks and parking spaces for car, while cycling lanes and pedestrian facilities remain minimal. This approach not only sidelines low-income commuters but also undermines sustainability and safety in the city's transport system.

→ **Political resistance:** Efforts to de-

congest the city and promote NMT, such as the 2020 ban on matatus in the Central Business District, sparked protests and backlash from transport operators. Taxi and matatu stakeholders opposed interventions that threatened their business models, creating a political fallout that stalled reforms. These conflicts underscore the entrenched interests and power dynamics within Nakuru's transport sector.

→ **Top-down planning:** The Nakuru City Board's approach was expert-driven and business-centered, with limited consultation of transport stakeholders and citizens. This exclusion of diverse voices from decision-making reinforces existing inequities, leaving many residents without safe, accessible, and sustainable mobility options.

Together, these challenges reveal a transport system that is fragmented, inequitable, and politically contested. They highlight the urgent need for a shift toward citizen-centered planning that recognizes the diversity of urban mobility needs and prioritizes inclusivity, sustainability, and justice.

2. Solutions and Approach

To address these challenges in Nakuru's transport sector, the city adopted the **Transformative Change Making (TCM)** approach, firmly anchored in the principles of the Just City. This strategy emphasizes inclusivity, dialogue, and practical demonstration, ensuring that urban mobility reforms are not only visionary but also grounded in the realities of everyday commuters.

- **Dialogue and visioning:** The process began with dialogue, where the Nakuru City Board, supported by the Just City Working Group (JCWG) and the Socially Just Public Transport Working Group (SJPTWG), convened multiple stakeholder forums. These dialogues created space for diverse voices ranging from policymakers to transport operators and citizens to co-create an alternative vision for a just urban future. Urban mobility was a central theme, with participants agreeing on the need for research and design of non-motorized transport (NMT) systems to address the imbalance in investment priorities.
- **Building alliances:** A convincing narrative for NMT was developed

through research and dialogue. A socially just approach to NMT, presented by Dr. Njeri Mburu of the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), was adopted by stakeholders marking a significant step toward inclusive mobility planning.

- **Catalytic projects:** The NMT design was implemented in Nakuru's Central Business District, funded by the World Bank's Kenya Urban Support Programme. This project demonstrated the practicality and scalability of inclusive urban mobility initiatives.
- **Institutional adoption:** Finally, Nakuru ensured institutional endorsement of these principles. The City Board integrated the Just City framework into its long-term Vision **2050**, embedding equity, inclusivity, and sustainability into its development agenda. This institutionalization signals a shift from short-term interventions to a sustained commitment to building a city where transport systems reflect the needs of all residents, not just a privileged few.

3. Next Steps

To embed the Just City approach within Nakuru’s public transport sector, a series of coordinated actions are required that combine political commitment, inclusive governance, innovation, and sustainability.

- **Political goodwill:** Endorsement and support from governing authorities are essential to ensure continuity and legitimacy of reforms. The current Nakuru leadership under Governor Susan Kihika has already signaled strong commitment by embedding Just City pillars into Nakuru’s Vision 2050 framework, which emphasizes inclusivity, equity, and sustainability. This political backing provides the foundation for long-term transformation.
- **Inclusive planning:** Urban development must shift from being business-centered to citizen-centered, ensuring that diverse voices such as commuters, transport operators, women, youth, and marginalized groups are actively consulted. This participatory approach will create policies and projects that reflect the lived realities of residents, fostering trust and ownership of urban reforms.
- **Scaling innovation:** The TCM approach unlocks innovation by fostering win-win solutions. Building on the success of the first NMT project, Nakuru County has redesigned three major roads (Mburu Gichua Road, Kenyatta Avenue, and West Side Mall Road) to include cycling lanes and pedestrian walkways.
- Finally, **sustainability** must be embedded into institutional frameworks. By integrating NMT and socially just transport policies into the **County Integrated Development Plan (2023–2027)**, Nakuru ensures that equity and resilience are not short-term goals but long-term commitments. This institutionalization guarantees that future urban growth aligns with the principles of justice, inclusivity, and sustainability, making Nakuru a model for socially just urban mobility in Kenya and beyond.

Towards the Just City in Africa Urban Life and Informal Transport in Nakuru

The Just City Project showcases compelling stories of urban transformation across African cities, illustrating how communities, local governments, and civil society are working together to build more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable urban spaces. Through case studies from Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, the project captures diverse urban realities and innovative responses emerging from rapidly changing city contexts.

Each case study follows a clear journey from challenge to change, examining the forces shaping each city, the key urban issues and affected communities, and the strategies used to address them. By highlighting outcomes, lessons learned, and links to wider regional and global agendas, the collection offers practical insights and inspiration for advancing just urban development across Africa and beyond.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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