

Uganda

Towards the Just City in Africa

*Informal Transport and
Urban Life in Kampala*

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Background

Kampala's transport system is shaped by informality and private interests rather than public service provision. Mobility in the city is largely commodified, with private operators controlling access and shaping the daily rhythms of urban life. The most visible actors are boda-bodas, motorcycle taxis and 14-seater minibuses, which dominate the streets and provide the bulk of everyday travel. Their rise has been dramatic: the number of motorcycles in Uganda grew from fewer than 16,000 in 2007 to over 400,000 by 2014, with an estimated 30,000 boda-boda riders operating in Kampala alone.

The sector's informality also shapes the lived experience of mobility. Safety concerns are ever-present, with boda-bodas and minibuses often disregarding traffic rules and exposing riders and passengers to risk. Vulnerable groups such as women, the elderly, and people with disabilities are disproportionately affected. For women in particular, the system does not align with their mobility needs, which often involve multiple trips across neighborhoods while carrying children or heavy loads.

Additionally, Kampala's transport sector is a contested space, marked by recurrent conflicts between national and local governments, politicians, and operators. These struggles over jurisdiction, revenue, and control reflect the broader fragmentation of urban governance in the city. As Kampala grows rapidly outward, these tensions intensify, with transport becoming both a lifeline for residents and a battleground for political and economic interests.

In essence, Kampala's transport background is one of informality, fragmentation, and inequity. The system benefits private operators and political elites, while the urban poor, women, and other vulnerable groups bear the burden of transport injustice.

1. Challenges and Conflict

Kampala's transport sector is confronted with overlapping challenges and conflicts as explained below.

- **Conflicts between commuters and operators:** At the commuter level, daily tensions arise between passengers and operators. With fares unregulated, costs fluctuate sharply especially during peak hours or rainy seasons leaving commuters vulnerable to exploitation. This unpredictability undermines trust and makes mobility a constant negotiation.
- **Political tension:** The sector is a politically contested arena. National and local governments clash over revenue collection, infrastructure ownership, and jurisdiction. These disputes reflect deeper struggles over urban governance, where transport becomes both a service and a source of political leverage.
- **Disjointed Transport system:** The transport ecosystem in Kampala is fragmented. Apparently, operators, unions, and politicians exploit intra-sector rivalries to maintain influence and preventing the emer-

gence of unified voices that could push for reform. This fragmentation keeps the system unstable and resistant to regulation.

- **Policy gaps:** There is the mismatch between planning and realities on the ground in Kampala's transport ecosystem. The National Transport Master Plan (NTMP) notably excludes boda-bodas, despite their central role in everyday mobility across the city. This omission creates a disconnect between official planning frameworks and the lived realities of commuters. By sidelining such a dominant mode of transport, the NTMP reinforces informality, leaving a significant portion of the city's transport needs unaddressed.
- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Limited infrastructure for non-motorized transport (NMT) in Kampala is a critical issue. An estimated 70% of residents rely primarily on walking as their main mode of travel, yet the city provides very little in the way of safe and dedicated pedestrian facilities. Sidewalks are scarce and poorly maintained, this creates a dangerous and hostile environ-

ment, where walking is not only inconvenient but also unsafe.

Together, these conflicts and challenges illustrate how Kampala's transport system is not just about moving people, but about power, exclusion, and survival. It is a sector where every day struggles intersect with political battles, producing a transport environment that is fragmented, inequitable, and deeply contested.

2. Solutions and Approach

Kampala's transport sector requires a shift from fragmented, reactive management toward a more inclusive and visionary approach. Facilitated by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's (FES) Uganda office, a consultative platform was launched in 2019 to bring together paratransit operators and public authorities in Greater Kampala.

The initiative sought to overcome long-standing challenges such as fragmented urban transport planning, exclusion of informal services from formal structures, inter-agency conflicts, and strained relations between workers and regulators.

This effort gave rise to the **Paratransit Consultative Forum** a multi-sectoral space for dialogue and coordination among government ministries, local agencies, informal transport representatives, and civil society. The Forum adopted a participatory approach that emphasized:

- **Regulatory reforms and future mobility planning** to integrate informal operators into formal systems.
- Organizing and leadership training to strengthen workers' representa-

tion and build capacity for advocacy and negotiation.

- **Business improvements** to enhance the sustainability and professionalism of paratransit services.

Over the past three years, Kampala's transport sector has undergone a meaningful transformation, producing both institutional shifts and tangible outputs:

- **Inclusive decision-making:** Informal operators, once excluded, now sit alongside policymakers in shaping urban mobility. This represents a shift from top-down planning toward co-governance, where diverse voices influence priorities and strategies.
- **Institutionalization:** Efforts are underway to formalize leadership structures into an apex body, harmonize regulations, and designate terminals/stages. This process not only strengthens organizational coherence but also creates pathways for informal actors to be recognized as legitimate stakeholders in urban governance.

- **Collective power:** Associations such as the Uganda Taxi Operators Federation and Kampala's boda-boda leadership are building the capacity to advocate for workers' rights, safety, recognition, and meaningful participation in transport planning, transforming fragmented voices into organized power.

- **Gender-responsive planning:** Female operators have been integrated into leadership structures and formed the Kampala Central Female Boda-boda Operators' Cooperative, ensuring women's mobility needs are reflected in transport design and policy.

3. Next Steps

- **Strengthening collective voices in public transport:** Building strong, representative trade unions and transport associations that are free from political interference will give voice to drivers, conductors, and passengers alike. These organizations can champion fair working conditions and ensure that reforms reflect the realities of those who keep the city moving.
- **Equity in Transport Governance:** Establish clear mandates and coordination mechanisms among ministries and agencies will reduce duplication and competition, replacing fragmented efforts with unified action. Anchoring these reforms in Just City Principles equity, inclusion, and recognition of diverse mobility needs ensures that the transformation is not only efficient but also just.
- **Integrated urban transport framework:** Kampala needs a concerted vision that integrates both informal and formal modes of transport. The boda-boda rider, the matatu driver, and the bus operator are all part of the same ecosystem. A future transport plan must recognize this diversity, weaving together these modes into a system that is coherent, efficient, and inclusive.
- **Aligning External Support with Local Priorities:** Finally, development partners such as the World Bank, ADB, and AFD must be engaged not merely as financiers but as allies in justice. Their support should emphasize fairness and accessibility, not just efficiency and speed. By aligning external resources with local priorities, Kampala can build a transport system that serves all its citizens.
- **Mobility Justice to Pedestrians:** The city must prioritize non-motorized transport infrastructure. Safe sidewalks, cycling lanes, and pedestrian crossings are not luxuries, they are lifelines. By investing in these, Kampala acknowledges the dignity of those who rely on their own feet to navigate the city.

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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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