



# “Like the Chicken and the Egg”: Market Vendors and the Dilemmas of Neoliberal Urban Planning in Re-Centralised Kampala (Uganda)

*Anna Baral* | PhD, Researcher, Aarhus University

**ABSTRACT** The article explores how groups of informal workers understood the role of the city management in the demolition of Kisekka, a spare parts market in Kampala doomed to be replaced by an “ultramodern” shopping mall. The case unfolds between the push for entrepreneurialism, competition and individual initiative typical of neoliberal urban planning, and the re-centralisation trend that has characterised Kampala in the past decade. Despite narratives of self-entrepreneurship and independence, the presence of the central government in the urban workers’ lives was substantial. While decentralisation in Uganda has not necessarily guaranteed better service provision, the mushrooming of local administrative divisions has proved to be a winning card for the party in power. Kampala, however, represents an exception. Mayors have been elected from the opposition parties for two decades, prompting the government to re-centralise the city administration through the Kampala Capital City Authority Act 2010, which has returned the city to the government’s direct control. As a result, the municipality has intervened massively in projects of urban development, including the demolition and reconstruction of a number of city markets like Kisekka. The article shows the tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces in the administration of the capital and its consequences in the lives of Kisekka Market workers.

**Keywords:** Decentralisation, re-centralisation, market, Kampala, urban planning

## Introduction

In October 2018, when this article was taking shape, Ugandan media was swamped by the reactions to the announcement of resignation of Jennifer Musisi, the Executive Director of the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). Established by an Act of the Ugandan parliament in 2010, and identified with Musisi ever since, the establishment of the Authority has represented an anomaly of recentralisation in the history of Ugandan decentralisation. The reactions to Musisi’s resignation letter mirror the tensions that have underlain the governance of the Ugandan capital in the past decades.

This article shows some of these tensions from the entry point of Kisekka Market, a spare parts market in central Kampala, demolished in 2015. Located on the bottom of a polluted valley and hosting more than ten thousand workers (predominantly men, many of whom were school dropouts and sometimes prone to violence), the site had a gloomy reputation. Its demolition and the promised replacement with a shiny new mall were framed by stakeholders as an improvement for the whole city.

The article positions the reconstruction of the market at the intersection of apparently contradicting dynamics: a long history of decentralisation in the country, the recent turn of Uganda towards recentralisation and rampant neoliberal trends in urban planning, visible especially in the capital city. Under the leadership of the KCCA, the government's control on the municipality has been reinforced. At the same time, private-public partnerships and the ambition for a competitive and beautified city have burgeoned. This intersection has affected urban market vendors, used by politicians and administrators either as scapegoats for the flaws in urban development, or as a key voting bloc.

The first section provides a historical contextualisation to decentralisation and recentralisation in Uganda. The article then proceeds to introduce Kisekka Market at the intersection of these tendencies. Voices from the market and from the KCCA will explain what decentralisation, recentralisation and neoliberal urban planning have meant for those primarily affected by new forms of urban management. Torn between aspirations of development and competitiveness, on one side, and the vulnerability of informal employment<sup>1</sup> in city markets, on the other, the KCCA faces a dilemma that one officer described as one "of the chicken and the egg": what comes first – development or the people?

### **A Decentralisation Success Story and its Impact on Kampala**

Uganda is often presented as a success story of decentralisation in Africa. Local structures of power dating back to precolonial times enabled British indirect rule system, particularly in the pyramid-structured Bantu kingdoms in the centre and south of the protectorate. Where hierarchies of chiefs were absent or less relevant, like in the north and east of what would later become Uganda, local chiefs were introduced by the colonial government. At independence in 1962, a miscellaneous system of federal and semi-federal prerogatives was established in the country – a heterogeneity levelled after the abolition of all kingdoms and chiefdoms in 1967, with the creation of 18 equal districts (Green 2015: 493) under the regime of Milton Obote.

Local and capillary situated sources of power and support played an important role during the bush guerrilla war waged against the rule of Obote and Okello, officially ceased in 1986, when the National Resistance Movement/Army led by Yoweri Kaguta Museveni came to power. The bush war relied heavily on the support of local communities and villages: once in power, the National Resistance Movement acknowledged the importance of this decentralised structure by formalising a system of local government cells (Resistance Councils), which were given a "Resistance Council and Committees Status" in 1987 (Makara 1998: 33; Green 2015). The Local Governments (Resistance Councils) Statute of 1993 devolved administrative and political powers to local governments and turned districts into centres "for service provision" (Gore and Muwanga 2014: 2205; see Makara 1998). In the Constitution ratified in 1995, article 176 2 (b) enshrined the principles of the Local Governments Act 1997 thus transferring "administrative and fiscal responsibility to local council structures for the delivery of basic services" (Gore and Muwanga 2014: 2205). Local governments were ultimately accorded political, administrative, financial and legal powers (Onyach-Olaa 2003: 105).

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article I use "informal" in a very broad sense, following the concise definition of informal economy provided by Lindell (2010a: 5), as the one that "lie(s) beyond or circumvent(s) state regulation".

In Kampala, which gained the status of district (Gore and Muwanga 2014: 2207) despite its unique and incomparable challenges in terms of service delivery and administration, decentralisation was particularly encouraged by external donors. UNDP and the World Bank, among others, provided broad support, informed by the logic that decentralisation would improve development and government's accountability (Onyach-Olaa 2003: 106; see Lambright 2014; Makara 1998: 32). Donors' interventions did not tackle "national or intergovernmental problems, conflicts, or inequalities" (Gore and Muwanga 2014: 2207), and rather focused more narrowly on the local scale.

In the urban setting, the process was accompanied by a massive liberalisation that visibly affected urban planning. The World Bank supported structural adjustment programs and projects that encouraged reliance on private initiatives. The "First Urban Project" (1991), meant to fill the gaps left in planning and management by the City Council, had urban marketplaces as one of the main targets (World Bank 2000: 3). The wording of the project's assessment report indicates the spirit of the initiative: it commends the positive effects on an estimated 25,000 vendors, either through direct support (by provision of "lockup stalls, stall sheds, offloading sheds, toilet and administration blocks") or by bringing inspiration to others (as in the case of Kisekka, subject of this article) to "improve their markets on self-help basis" (ibid: 1). Self-initiative and entrepreneurship were encouraged, at the same time as urban management was decentralised and progressively delegated to private stakeholders.

Complying with the donors' requests, the centre delegated its powers to the locals, while private investors were invited to take charge of urban development and of marketplaces in particular (cf. Lindell and Appelblad 2009). In Kampala, private-public partnership became the main approach to service delivery in local governments, while the New Public Management philosophy invited different stakeholders to become protagonists of city governance, encouraging "public organisations to introduce business-based ideas into their management" (Asiimwe 2016: 23; Madinah et al. 2015; see Hansen 2004 for parallel, contemporary dynamics in Zambia). While the official discourse on decentralisation presents it as an avenue to development and good governance (Green 2015), simultaneous liberalisation trends also meant cutbacks to public expenditures.

In a domino-effect, liberalisation increased, in turn, the informalisation of the work force, a phenomenon that has been observed also in other regions of Sub-Saharan Africa (Potts 2008). Everywhere, an increased presence of informal workers pushed out of the formal economy – street vendors and hawkers in particular - has in turn encouraged rigid top-down policies to cleanse cities, and to get rid of unpleasant and undeserving citizens. Closed markets have replaced street markets in Uganda as much as in Kenya (Kinyanjui 2014; Lindell and Ihalainen 2014); shopping malls have fostered racial and social segregation, but also incarnated myths of modernity, in South Africa (Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo 2009) as much as in Zambia (Miller et al. 2008). In Kampala, like throughout the continent, this transition translated to higher unemployment rates rather than development and amelioration of services. Kampala thus represents a typical example of African neoliberal urbanism.

Places like Kisekka Market expanded in the nineties, attracting people who did not have a place in the formal labour market. In the beginning of that decade, Kisekka was little more than a gathering of scattered kiosks, selling food and second-hand spare parts in a swampy valley crossed by Nakivubo Channel. The clinic of dentist Samson Kisekka, also

Prime Minister of the country from 1986 to 1991, oversaw the valley and gave the market its name. According to the memories of the old trader Ssegujja, who was still working in Kisekka Market in 2014 at the time of my fieldwork, the City Council authorised the market workers to build semi-permanent structures in the valley around 1994. Workers recounted that in 1999, at the time that other markets were improved in the spirit of the World Bank, an association of traders signed the first tenancy agreement to lease the market's land for 12 years. They could therefore construct proper shops with bricks and metal roofs, marking the start of the official and formally recognised marketplace that would survive until 2015.<sup>2</sup> The workers in Kisekka seemed therefore to indirectly benefit from the general privatisation and development-driven policies in a decentralised Kampala. The situation however would change in the successive phase of recentralisation.

### Recentralisation and the Takeover of Kampala: The KCCA

While the public discourse on Uganda as a champion of decentralisation seemed to remain hegemonic in my daily conversations with colleagues and informants, enough evidence supports a different view of how political and administrative trends have changed in the country. While the government allowed new districts to mushroom and secured political support through the promises that the status of district brings (Perrot et al. 2014: 6), new trends have become visible, particularly in the capital city.

Since the end of the 1990s, the government has taken a number of steps to recentralise the management of districts. In 2005, the Local Government Amendment Bill returned the power to appoint districts' Chief Administrative Officers to the central government. That was also the year in which the introduction of multi-party system opened up the political competition, making the National Resistance Movement of Yoweri Museveni more fragile. Although the official rationale of the Amendment was to limit local political influence on the districts' administration, it also signaled the government's fear to lose control on its local divisions (Lambright 2014; Nabaho 2013). Meanwhile, donors' attitudes towards Uganda started to change. The *enfant prodige* of decentralisation and democratisation started displaying "worrisome political trends", with "raising corruption and shrinking space for political opposition" (Lambright 2014: S40). External support to decentralisation faltered; internally, tensions between national and local interests and the failure of ministries to actually delegate their functions to local institutions further challenged decentralisation (Onyach-Olaa 2003: 109).

The change of trend was particularly visible in Kampala. The only urban centre to be classified as "city" in Uganda, and, as said, a district in itself, the capital of Uganda suffers from faulty service delivery, high insecurity and periodic eruptions of violent street politics. Governance is made shaky by the conflicts between different authorities which contend the control of the city: the central government, Kampala politicians and administrators, the kingdom of Buganda that has its centre in Kampala, civil society, and business tycoons (Baral 2018; Goodfellow 2010; Gore and Muwanga 2006). Moreover, the city mayor "has historically played a principal role as [...] outspoken critic of the national government" and has been repeatedly elected among the opposition ranks (Gore and Muwanga 2014: 2210; Green 2015, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> I explain the inconsistencies between the workers' memories and the documents kept by the Kampala Capital City Authority in Baral 2018.

After the 2006 elections, which reconfirmed an opposition candidate but within a fragmented opposition in the new multiparty system, the government had room to strengthen its control on the capital (Gore and Muwanga 2014: 2208; see Asiiimwe 2016; Kitamirike 2016). In 2010 a Parliament Act established the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), a “national authority to oversee the administration of the city” (Gore and Muwanga 2014: 2202).

Within the KCCA, financial power lies in the hands of the Executive Director, appointed by the government with a five-year contract. The elected representatives like the mayor, deputy lord mayor and some of the councilors (the others being appointed through professional bodies: Asiiimwe 2016) can only make “recommendations that must be approved by the executive director” (Gore and Muwanga 2014: 2212) and have therefore a “de facto unfunded mandate” (ibid.). The Executive Director is also endowed with the task to “ensure proper physical planning” (Government of Uganda 2010, part III, art. 19), therefore becoming the person in charge of restructuring the city not only economically but also physically. The Act also established a Ministry for Kampala, to which the KCCA is directly accountable. There is vast agreement that the recentralisation of Kampala represented a response to the government’s incapability to negotiate power with local authorities, and to retake control otherwise on a “powerful economic and political space that had been out of its reach since coming to power in 1986” (Gore and Muwanga 2014: 2203).

While elected leaders were losing power, private actors increasingly intervened in the management of the city, to an extent that the new KCCA mandate looked more like “corporate management” than “governance” (Asiiimwe 2016). This pattern did not go unnoticed among the workers in Kisekka Market, who designated this coalescence of political and economic interests with expressions like “the system” or “the business” (of Kampala). Eliciting the political view of Kisekka Market workers in my daily attendance of the market for eight months between 2014 and 2015, I have consistently, and independently from their personal and variable political views, recorded disappointment for the way the city was governed. “They think they own Kampala”, some would say referring to the KCCA and the government; the KCCA was undeniably seen as an arm of the central government.

### **Framing the Relations between Municipal Institutions and Market Workers: Solidarity, Modernity, Morality**

In 2014, at the time of my fieldwork, Kisekka Market was about to be demolished. A company that was supposed to represent the interests of the workers, but which was suspected of connivance with the government and accused of behaving undemocratically (Baral 2018), secured the land title of the market. The KCCA had played a major role in the project by negotiating with the workers for acquisition of the land title and by being responsible for the correctness of the procedures, in conversation with market workers and construction companies. The project proposed the reconstruction of the market as a six-storeyed shopping mall, in which Kisekka Market workers would ideally have precedence to relocate. This would guarantee better working conditions, more orderliness and hygiene in this polluted part of the city, and – less officially, but well clear in the mind of my informants – the purge of those groups of poor, uneducated wheeler-dealers for which Kisekka Market was stereotypically famous and that would not have capital to invest in the rent of the new malls’ shops. Such intentions were not kept secret by politicians like Local Government

Minister Kahinda Otafire, who vowed to exclude “hawkers and petty criminals” from the project (*Daily Monitor*, 15/09/2007).

The project promised therefore to beautify, ameliorate and “develop” (a term often heard both at KCCA and among the market’s representatives) Kisekka. The meaning that the workers attributed to it, however, was profoundly informed and affected by the recentralisation trend and its implications. With the KCCA on stage, urban governance was interpreted in a Manichean way, as a struggle between the government, determined to appropriate the city, and the opposition, on the side of the city workers. The elected Mayor and the appointed Executive Director were seen more and more as antagonists rather than collaborators, and they came to stand as signifiers not only of divergent political colors but also of opposite ways to relate with “the people” - more specifically, the informal workers, street vendors and market traders in Kampala.

The current mayor Erias Lukwago (lawyer and MP for the central region, in power also during my fieldwork) was elected in 2011. He had gained celebrity status by consistently taking the vendors’ side in the conflicts around city markets. In the midst of the privatisation trend, Lukwago argued for “giving sitting tenants the first priority” (*New Vision*, 27/02/2008) and made the struggle for vendors’ rights “his hallmark” (*Daily Monitor*, 16/03/2011). “The down-trodden of the city formed the bedrock of his support” (*The Independent*, 18/03/2011), the press recorded, reporting the stories Lukwago told about his childhood in the slums. He was voted by huge sectors of the Buganda kingdom (to which he openly showed support) and informal workers, including those in Kisekka Market, where he shed tears of solidarity with the workers threatened by the demolition of the site.

Lukwago was impeached in 2013, guilty among other things of inciting violence against the KCCA among the market vendors. He would re-win his office in the February 2016 elections. When I interviewed him in the garden of his villa on the outskirts of Kampala in 2014, he accused the Executive Director of plotting against him to discredit, in turn, the whole opposition.

On the contrary, the role of the KCCA and its Executive Director was framed less through cultural and ethnic ties and rather through promises of development and competitiveness. The KCCA aims at making Kampala the business card of the country to the world. The city was presented as “the gateway to, and showcase of, Uganda” (KCCA 2012: 178), an ideal to be achieved through a “symbiotic” relation with the government: “Kampala as a city is dependent on government... with government equally dependent on the City” (KCCA 2012: 181).

However, this symbiosis – completely coherent, I argue, with the will to recentralise Kampala governance – coexists with the encouragement for private investments. In the same KCCA document we read that “To ensure appropriate development, the Government of Uganda’s dominance of the City needs to be balanced by a vibrant, independent, competitive Private Sector” (KCCA 2012: 181). The phrasing pushes the boundaries of public governance towards profit-making and what my informants called, with no intention to nuance their opinion, mere “business”.

In order to create a “vibrant, competitive, thriving” city (as written on the KCCA website), the KCCA needs to clean up the city centre and has done so by violently targeting illegal and informal workers as well (Young 2017). KCCA agents also intervened to target vendors and mechanics on the pavements around Kisekka Market. In the usual urban drama unfolding in the streets of Kampala Central Business District, plain clothes officers

would approach a hawker, followed by agents in KCCA T-shirts pulling punches on the unfortunate victim. In Kisekka Market, workers were proud of reacting to these kind of interventions with counter-aggression, to an extent that the market's spokesperson had to warn the workers that if they did not stop attacking the KCCA, they would risk losing the market's land title (Baral 2018: 155).

People in the market understood these interventions in terms of control and coercion. The replacement of marketplaces with fancy shopping malls - what a journalist aptly defined as a "mall epidemic" (*New Vision*, 01/08/2012), was for them a blunt political attempt to recapture the city and its effervescent working populations. Urban planning became a tool for power and interfered particularly with the informal workers' lives. Museveni's political fortunes depend in fact to a large extent on the predicament of informal workers in the capital (Goodfellow and Titeca 2012; Lambright 2014; Young 2017), alternately accused of spoiling the city image desired by the KCCA or capitalised upon as loyal support in the electoral campaign. Just before the 2016 vote, for example, the incumbent President released a statement inviting vendors to come and sell in town, contradicting a KCCA by-law that had instead threatened evictions and arrests among hawkers (*Daily Monitor*, 02/03/2016). On another occasion, the government heavily interfered with the KCCA accusing the Authority of illegally taxing the *boda boda* (motorbike taxi) riders - an expedient that aimed at pleasing one of the city biggest voting blocs (Gore and Mwanga 2014: 2209; Lambright 2014: S49; Goodfellow and Titeca 2012). The workers knew that the government needed their support, and they saw the recentralisation of Kampala as an increased interference of the government in their lives. Pushes and pulls in different directions, with street traders and informal urban workers exposed to the whims of power, are a common feature of African urban governance, which sees an intersection of private interests, external influences, and incongruous policies (see Hansen 2004; Lindell and Ihalainen 2014).

Such relations were framed as threats and violence. The song "Let's tell Jennifer" (*Tugambire ku Jennifer*), by the singer Bobi Wine, expresses these feelings well. The singer, elected opposition MP and violently arrested in August 2018, has successfully capitalised on his identity as a former "ghetto youth", close to the city vendors. In the song, Bobi Wine criticises the aggressiveness of the KCCA and proposes a reflection on the city governance in moral terms. Using direct and familiar language, Bobi Wine addresses the vendors attacked by the KCCA ("how can I help you, mother?";<sup>3</sup> "what about you, grandfather?"). The vendors reply with the chorus: "Let's tell Jennifer to reduce the anger, let's tell Jennifer that the city is ours!"<sup>4</sup>

Bobi Wine's message, reinforced by a video in which KCCA agents harass people in the streets of the city, resonates with how workers in Kisekka framed their grievances with the government - through kinship or moral language. The city poor were described as "family"; the President was accused to be a "father" who has forgotten his children (Baral 2018: 159). The song asks the KCCA Executive Director, Jennifer Musisi: "Why are you doing this, yet you are our sister?"<sup>5</sup> Musisi is not challenged as an administrator, but as a moral subject that

<sup>3</sup> "Nkuyambe ki, Maama?"

<sup>4</sup> "Tugambire ku Jennifer akendeze obukaambwe, tugambire ku Jennifer nti ekibuga kyaffe".

<sup>5</sup> "Nga lwaki okola otyo ng'ate oli muganda waffe", where "muganda" means not only sister, but more generally a close member of the family; the same word defines a member of the Baganda ethnic group, to which most of my informants belong.

must remember that “if a city has to develop, it has to develop with people in it”.<sup>6</sup> For the workers in Kisekka Market, the Executive Director became “Jennifer”, a stubborn “sister” who had turned the back on “her people”. Recentralisation was experienced as violent prevarication and a breakage of loyalty and solidarity, besides being a failure in development and democracy.

### Competition Around Kampala Markets

Jennifer Musisi’s vision was to improve markets in peripheral areas of Kampala and other Ugandan towns, and to leave only shopping malls in the city centre - despite obvious proofs that customers find it hard to reorient their shopping habits (Baral 2018). Her ambition to have a clean and organised city center was pictorially summarised in a sentence that I recorded in our interview: “I dream of a day when I can buy my clean tomatoes, well packaged in plastic, only in a nice shop inside a mall” (rather than in kiosks along the streets).

The image of clean tomatoes represents more than a personal caprice; it encapsulates well the intersection between the will of a stronger government’s control on the city and the utopia of modernity flaunted by the KCCA. The way the city is imagined, appropriated and governed is inspired by neoliberalism as ideology of contemporary urban planning. The privatisation and marketisation of the city space, the emphasis on individual initiative and entrepreneurship, together with gentrification, policing of citizens’ behaviors, securitisation and incentives to consume (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 2005; Lippert 2014) are, in a nutshell, what neoliberal planning does to a city. If neoliberalism engenders a “creative destruction” (as famously put by Harvey 2005: 3), implying both a rupture with the past and the creation of a new order, the demolition of a market like Kisekka and its replacement with an impressive shopping mall illustrates this thoroughly.

These transformations have a price, however; the connivance between politics and business on a national and local level has just “fuel(ed) increased competition for land and other resources in Kampala, with negative consequences for the country’s urban poor” (Lambright 2014: S41). The price of planning is in fact paid by workers like those in Kisekka Market and in the other marketplaces that have been caught in the process of “creative destruction”.

In 2007, for instance, the company Rhino Investments obtained the lease of Kisekka Market’s land. The owner of the company, Colonel J. Mugenyi, was a retired army soldier previously stationed in Eastern Congo, who had remained active in Ugandan politics and business and had financially supported Museveni’s 2006 electoral campaign (Vlassenroot et al. 2012: 12). Media accused him of recycling gold stolen in DRC through real estate projects, including the reconstruction of Kisekka Market (*New Vision*, 29/09/2007). The workers who had acquired the market land through an association of market members, reacted violently to his attempt to get the land title. An investigation by the Ministry of Local Government revealed that the government had actively supported Mugenyi; the scandal that ensued, undermined the President’s authority in a city that he was trying to recapture. Museveni therefore had to deliberately act as the traders’ “champion”, as sensed by the press, and ordered an end to the sale of city markets to private investors (*New Vision*,

<sup>6</sup> “*Ekibuga nga kinakula kirina okukula nga mulimu n’abantu*”. I thank Rehema Nakandi for helping me with the translation of the song.

16/12/2008; see Goodfellow and Titeca 2012). In the summer of 2008, the commission of enquiry nullified the partnership between Rhino Investments and the vendors' association in Kisekka (which did not appear to be legally registered) and instructed reimbursement for Mugenyi. The President at this point encouraged the workers to form a company, rather than an association, in order to be stakeholders in the project.

Similar incidents occurred with city tycoon Hassan Basajjabalaba, who bought several market lands that were later reclaimed by the government, after vendors' protests. On these occasions the media highlighted the strong connection between Museveni and the tycoon (*The Independent* 10/09/2011), and denounced "a growing practice among shrewd businessmen to win tenders, licenses, and concessions with the aim of not making substantial investments but to fail and get some compensation", with the connivance of government officials (*The Observer*, 29/08/2011).

These murky transactions triggered both violent protests and a rife sense of mistrust and insecurity among the workers. Within Kisekka, the spokesperson, the chairman and the members of the company that supposedly represented the workers were constantly accused of conniving with the government to benefit from the reconstruction deal. Musoke, a spare parts trader, very critical of the project, bitterly summarised the problem: "The management of Kisekka is an agent of the municipality".

### **Empowerment and its Failures**

It would be wrong and simplistic to depict Kampala as a play of good and bad guys, like both the KCCA and the workers tended sometimes to define each other. Several interviews at the KCCA revealed an awareness of the complexity of the situation and an appreciation of the workers' pleas. Undoubtedly, many had skeptical comments on the market's workers, denoted as rascals and troublemakers (see Baral 2018). Kisekka was mainly framed as a "problem of trade order", an expression capturing a well-organised, neat and functioning business environment in terms of infrastructure, tax collection, and competition – all factors clearly lacking in Kisekka.

The Gender and Community Services and Production office was in charge of supervising the city markets. J. Lwanga, the head of this office, agreed that Kisekka Market was a "tricky one" as far as trade order and peace were concerned. He rattled off a substantial list of reasons, main among which were "political interferences" and a dubious market's leadership, since "most markets are led by people who are not educated... Such people are easily manipulated and cannot see far". However, during the interaction Lwanga smiled, adding that Kisekka was also "an interesting place". His opinion was shared by a male officer in his early thirties, briskly moving in the office in his blue suite - a good representation of the new generation employed by the KCCA in the effort to rejuvenate and energise the city management. Hearing that I was doing research on Kisekka, he also smiled: "Incidentally, madam, I'm one of those who think that Kisekka is not such a bad place".

During my fieldwork I realised that the KCCA officers were torn between an official position – informed by the institutional mandate for recentralisation, strong management and competitiveness – and more nuanced personal views as common citizens, aware of the vulnerabilities of market vendors, and customers of Kisekka themselves. Lwanga knowingly talked of the workers' predicament, and while he was sure that the KCCA's mission had to be "to clean the city and make it habitable", he regretted the inevitable side effects on the lives

of hawkers and “illegal vendors”. City incursions by KCCA agents like the one appearing in Bobi Wine’s video mentioned above had increased unemployment without providing people with alternatives to informality or to illegal business. “It’s like the chicken and the egg”, he put it, describing how, in a city with around 8,500 street vendors in the Central Business District in 2011 (Young 2017: 716), it was impossible to realise *both* trade order *and* employment. What should come first, Lwanga asked, and what option should be left out? He did not have an answer to this dilemma.

The official position of the municipality’s headquarters on the markets demolition in Kampala was that the process allowed for the “empowerment” of the workers (Baral 2018; Goodfellow and Titeca 2012). In this way, development could be framed as not excluding, but rather incorporating, workers’ rights, hence solving the “chicken and egg” dilemma. By investing in new malls, and by renting out better stalls and shops, the workers – so the KCCA claimed – would take charge of their destiny and livelihoods. This was believed to be true particularly in Kisekka Market; while other markets had been upgraded with the participation of the KCCA (for example Wandegeya Market), in fact, the acquisition of the land title by a workers’ company left a big burden on Kisekka workers’ shoulders. As Lwanga explained, Kisekka Market had been “handed over” to the workers, thus they should “turn it into a modern market by themselves”. The process was framed as an example of successful “privatisation”, and Kisekka was talked about as “private land”. For the moment, Lwanga added, the KCCA could only “watch” the workers from a distance; for some months, Kisekka had not received the KCCA’s cleansing raids and had been exonerated from market dues, in order to avoid agitations. As he spoke of Kisekka, Lwanga pointed distractedly out the window. We both looked outside, towards the valleys, where we knew Kisekka was brimming with liveliness; our look from above and afar was a good representation of the relation between the City Authority and the market.

### **On the Ground: Entrepreneurs of Themselves?**

My fieldwork coincided with the months in which Kisekka workers progressively realised the inevitability of the market’s demolition. It took time for both me and most of those I interacted with to realise that the demolition would actually happen. By October 2014 things precipitated quickly, with the selection of the construction company and the demolition planned for December. The drawing of the future mall hung in the market’s chairman and spokesperson’s offices and portrayed a red building with fancy white and orange embellishments, surrounded by a clean and cleared pavement, new roads with sparkly white road signs, and – to make the estrangement worse – only white customers strolling around it. It was a far cry from the four acres of muddy and crowded site where I carried out my research.

The workers initially related to the promise contained in that picture by appropriating the “empowerment” narrative. Sentences like “the workers are now owners of their destiny” or “the market is ours” resonated in Kisekka corridors. This was a utopia of self-made entrepreneurs, in charge of their own market, organised in a company and thus investing in the improvements that their workplace needed. The limits to this narrative, however, were revealed quite soon.

In reality, few workers got to negotiate the terms of the land acquisition and the demolition and reconstruction plan, since the company was formed by a few dozen workers

against more than ten thousand working on the site. “The company”, as it was simply called, was seen by many as an enemy rather than an ally.

Moreover, workers found it hard to build solidarity across different economic statuses. In July 2014, a guarded meeting took place at the historical Sabrina pub, located behind the market. The market executive committee, sat on a stage behind a long table and in front of a public of hundreds, tried to explain the conditions of the development project, announcing that Kisekka would be replaced with “an ultramodern (*okulembe nnyo*) market with 2,803 shops, stalls on 3.7 acres of land, developing on 6 storeys”, “the biggest in Eastern and Central Africa”. After an initial enthusiasm, the meeting continued by listing the sums of money that those willing to have a stake in the project were expected to pay. It was soon clear that those with an unstable day-to-day income could not bear the economic burden of entering the company, nor could they ensure a right of precedence in the new mall, since thousands of workers were not registered anywhere.

Privatisation combined with recentralisation started showing its malicious effects: workers became incapable to mobilise across the market and, as it had happened elsewhere, were “made more vulnerable to the whims of both management companies and the City Council” (Lindell and Appelblad 2009: 403). The lack of fully legitimised representative bodies facilitated the intrusion of external agents in the management of city markets, while internal divisions weakened the workers and increased the economic stress on their lives.

Meanwhile, the logic of entrepreneurship backfired for workers’ solidarity. The better-off vendors tended to be more enthusiastic of the plan of “development” because they had capital to invest in it; the poorer ones tried to hinder the project (through street protests and complex interactions with the KCCA) in order to preserve their workplace and source of livelihood. My friend Kasule had no money to invest in the project and was ready to wait until “the rich guys will rent their shops [to the less wealthy workers]”, feeling that this was not yet his time. “It is nobody’s fault”, he wanted to underline: “I have no money to invest now, so I can just do my work and wait for my time to come”. Workers in his position, however, criticised with disdain the groups rioting against the project; when we came across women in the kitchen section ululating in support of one of the most popular rioters, Kasule sarcastically commented: “[the protesters] have never put a coin in the development of this market, what do they want now?”. Blame and moralistic judgments made relationships between workers shift away from solidarity and some were perceived as untrustworthy and undeserving, unable to become modern.

Finally, the presumption that workers should “develop their market by themselves”, as the officer quoted above claimed, was highly problematic. When the government gave up on Kisekka, the provision of services in the market stalled. During a general meeting in August 2014, I sat with hundreds of workers under the white plastic tents put up in the street along the market to listen to the market’s representative talking of Kisekka’s predicament. One of the topics was that the garbage situation had become unsustainable. Companies once hired through the KCCA were no longer providing that service, and the piles of rubbish reached unbearable heights, it was said. “When I went to the KCCA for assistance, they told me that Kisekka Market is now a private property, so they are no longer responsible”, a woman from the Kisekka Finance Committee said. The management had to resort to private companies, but it was made clear that this was an expensive, unsustainable arrangement. These changes seem to confirm that interference of the government in the city management

caused (more or less directly) a deterioration of service provision rather than improvements, a causal relation broadly confirmed by literature (for example: Goodfellow and Titeca 2012; Green 2015; Lambright 2014: S40).

Therefore, beyond the promise of owning the future lay precariousness and insecurity, aggravated by the privatisation of services. Workers were now in a limbo; nobody would provide for them, but they could not do much for their own advancement either. Years of decentralisation and private-public partnership have opened the way to forms of neoliberal planning and to its narratives that promised "ownership" of the city; the workers were told that they would eventually manage to influence the city management and the production of the urban space. However, as we have seen, the reality on the ground was very different.

### **The Violence of Bureaucracy**

The result of recentralisation and privatisation is also a massive production of documents (bids, insurances, budgets, contracts with legal firms and so on), which sometimes appeared in the conversations around Kisekka Market. It was also in the relation of the workers to the paperwork that their disempowerment became evident. Their malaise, I have surmised, was expressed not only in riots and street protests but also through (far from smooth) negotiations with the KCCA. Groups of workers, often in factious conflicts with other groups within Kisekka, tried to understand what was happening to their workplace by interrogating the KCCA officers in their headquarters.

Discussing bureaucracy however, was not simple, for the formal structures of meetings and the baroque language of documents that often provoked emotionally charged responses. Hull (2012) points out how documents trigger emotions both in those who administer them and in those who receive them, or who are forcefully defined by them. Bureaucracy can also hinder communications, rather than the contrary, by being opaque and impenetrable. Graeber (2012) calls it the "structural violence" of bureaucracy, which requires heavy "interpretive labour" (2012: 117) on the part of receivers in order for bureaucracy to be understood. This is an urgent need, since misunderstanding or violation of the norms contained in a document may cause violent responses.

The documents related to the demolition and reconstruction project contained the workers' future. However, workers were rarely enabled to access them, either because of language barriers, or because the documents were kept in centers of power such as offices, ministries and the KCCA with which especially the uneducated had little or no familiarity. Documents were distant and elusive, far from guaranteeing that the workers were stakeholders in the city management as promised by decades of decentralisation, New Public Management and private-public partnerships (see Asiimwe 2016).

If on one side the workers were invited and challenged, sometimes - in my view - cynically, to be owners of their own destiny, in reality they had little cultural capital to tackle the complexities of the process that affected their lives. The fatigue that came from trying to clarify things with the KCCA ultimately exceeded the results, and interlocutors indulged in ignorance, revealing something of the power dynamics between them and the municipal institutions. Documents, Graeber (2012) adds, often do not simplify chaos but rather magnify it, when bureaucracy becomes difficult to interpret.

In good and in bad ways, documents are "socially efficacious" (Graeber 2012: 108), something which became clear during an emergency meeting called at the municipality. A

faction of vendors had threatened to riot if the officers in charge of the plan did not listen to their grievances. I attended the meeting, which took place in one of the KCCA meeting rooms, full to its capacity. Two officers from the KCCA sat with the workers. I knew many of the latter by name, and I had visited one of them in prison the day he was arrested for protests. He spoke in the capacity of workers' representative, dressed in a neat blue shirt, holding a paper crammed with notes in his hand. His speech was calm but emotional and it summarised the workers' complaints. The development plan was depriving thousands of workers of an income, he complained, and the market's management had not been able to offer them any alternative solution. Only the rich workers, he underlined, could afford to invest in, and therefore, in the long term, would benefit from the development project. As his colleagues clapped and uttered sounds of approval, the officers listened quietly and took notes. When their turn came, the senior officer asked the younger to pass him a folder, which he then dropped heavily on the table. The senior silently pushed the folder forward, in the middle of the space separating him from the workers' representative. It was at least thirty centimeters thick, and the bands closing it were strained by the pressure of the papers it contained. "Everything is in the documents", the senior officer said, getting only silence as a response. He repeated how the procedure related to the implementation of the plan had been duly followed by the KCCA, the market's management and their lawyers. If the workers had any complaints, the officer suggested, they should find a lawyer and file a petition, taking the market's management (rather than the municipality) to court.

The workers mumbled and discussed amongst themselves for some minutes, stuck as they were in a reality of precariousness and anxiety that seemed to find no response in the bureaucratic language of the officer. Nobody opened the folder. The pile of documents, together with a language that created a gap between the paperwork and the "reality it purport[ed] to represent" (Hull 2012: 255), had silenced the complainants. The technical language and the formalised rituals of bureaucracy that professed to offer solutions to the workers problem, instead stymied any chance of dialogue and conflict with the theatrical gesture of the senior officer.

Foiled into assuming themselves to be entrepreneurs, in the recentralised, neoliberal Kampala, the workers had to accept that very little empowerment would come from the new situation. Kept hostage by powerful stakeholders and tycoons, left alone by the same logic by which they should have felt empowered, the market workers had to come to terms with the idea that the price to pay to have Kampala as a "showcase of Uganda" was for them to be excluded by any decisional process.

### **Conclusions: The Meaning of Decentralisation and Recentralisation for Market Workers**

This article has presented trends of decentralisation, recentralisation and neoliberal privatisation from the perspective of market workers in Kisekka Market, central Kampala. Drawing on the voices of vendors, mechanics and municipal officers, it has shown how the push for privatisation and an aesthetic and ideology of competitiveness have peculiarly intersected, causing increasing interferences of the central government in the city management.

People like the workers of Kisekka Market, already vulnerable, pay the highest price for these contradictory tendencies in administration and governance. Among the participants to my research, the takeover of Kampala triggered insecurity and the feeling of being

betrayed as citizens. Their complaints of a lack of capital, but especially of a lack of voice, contradict the promises of decentralisation (Gore, Mwanga 2014: 2204). Recentralisation, on its part, has induced a massive interference of municipal institutions, central government and businesspersons. Service provision has however shown little or no sign of amelioration. The mix of “politics and business” as informants would frame it, has ultimately affected negatively, the urban poor that do not have the power nor the capital to be competitive (Lambright 2014: S41).

An ethnography of de-centralisation and re-centralisation in Kampala from the market workers’ perspective allows us to observe how administrative and political trends are interpreted and appropriated on the ground, and how new subjectivities (like the entrepreneur and the self-standing citizen) are shaped. In another context, Igreja (2013) has observed how processes of decentralisation are not only administrative and economic in nature but go hand in hand with the construction of local identities and the formation of loyalties or antagonisms towards national leaders. In Kampala, the predicament of market workers seems to confirm that de-centralisation and re-centralisation have had profound effects of disempowerment and discouragement of urban workers.

Recentralisation has also exposed the fragility of the central government (which has become one with the National Resistance Movement, in power for more than 30 years), incapable of regaining control on its capital. The letter of resignation submitted by the Executive Director of the KCCA Jennifer Musisi, that Museveni accepted reluctantly and after a long time, represents a critical peak of tension within the Authority, affected by criticisms, scandals and accusations (especially from the working class and the opposition parties) of providing no real change in terms of service provision and life quality for the citizens.<sup>7</sup>

The “chicken and egg” dilemma posed by the KCCA officer above – who comes first, “development” or “the people”? – remains unsolved both by decentralisation and recentralisation. What should be prioritised – the citizens’ right to the city and to a voice, or the ideal of a modern, competitive capital city? One informant in Kisekka Market, commenting on the upcoming demolition that would put an end to his long career of mechanic on the site, told me that he was not against development per se; he just thought that the demolition would not really bring improvement, since it would leave hundreds unemployed. He actively engaged his colleagues with a megaphone to warn them not to be fooled by the image of a shiny new mall, when the reality was that they would be chased from the site for who knows how long. His worry was that “you cannot have development without people”, resonating vividly with the lyrics of the song by Bobi Wine quoted earlier. Eventually, Kampala will need come to terms with this dilemma: the KCCA still has to decide what comes first – the chicken or the egg – or, even better, how to make the two coexist.

## References

- Asiimwe, F. 2016. Corporate Governance Practices and Performance of Kampala Capital City Authority (Uganda) and city of Kigali (Rwanda): A Correlational Comparative Study. Doctoral Dissertation. Mbarara: Mbarara University of Science and Technology.
- Baral, A. 2018. *Bad Guys, Good Life: An Ethnography of Morality and Change in Kisekka Market (Kampala, Uganda)*. Doctoral Dissertation. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

<sup>7</sup> In October 2018, the resigning Jennifer Musisi has been replaced by an interim Executive Director, Andrew Kitaka. His contract has been extended in December 2019 for six months.

- Goodfellow, T. 2010. “‘The Bastard Child of Nobody’? Anti-Planning and the Institutional Crisis in Contemporary Kampala”. Crisis States Re-search Centre working papers series 2, 67. London School of Economics and Political Science: London.
- Goodfellow, T. and K. Titeca. 2012. Presidential Intervention and the Changing ‘Politics of Survival’ in Kampala’s Informal Economy. *Cities* 29(4): 264–270.
- Gore, C.D. and N.K. Muwanga. 2014. Decentralization is Dead, Long Live Decentralization! Capital City Reform and Political Rights in Kampala, Uganda. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38(6): 2201–2216.
- Government of Uganda 2010. Kampala Capital City Authority Act. Kampala. Accessed online, [http://www.kcca.go.ug/uploads/KCCA\\_ACT\\_2010.pdf](http://www.kcca.go.ug/uploads/KCCA_ACT_2010.pdf)
- Graeber, D. 2012. Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy, and Interpretive Labor. The 2006 Malinowski Memorial Lecture. *HAAU: journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2(2): 105–128.
- Green, E. 2015. Decentralization and Development in Contemporary Uganda, *Regional & Federal Studies*, 25(5): 491-508
- Harvey, D. 2005. *Neoliberalism: A Brief History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hansen, K.T. 2004. Who Rules the Streets? The Politics of Vending Space in Lusaka. In *Reconsidering Informality: Perspectives from Urban Africa* (eds) K.T. Hansen and M. Vaa. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.
- Houssay-Holzschuch, M. and A. Teppo. 2009. A Mall for All? Race and Public Space in Post-Apartheid Cape Town. *Cultural Geographies* 16(3): 351–379.
- Hull, M.S. 2012. Documents and Bureaucracy. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41: 251–267.
- Igreja, V. 2013. Politics of Memory, Decentralisation and Recentralisation in Mozambique. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39(2): 313-335.
- Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). 2012. Updating Kampala Structure Plan and Upgrading the Kampala GIS Unit Final Report. Accessed online <http://www.kcca.go.ug/uploads/KPDP%20Draft%20Final%20Report.pdf>
- Kitamirike, E. 2016. “The Governance of Urban Service Delivery in Kampala City.” The Situation Room Uganda Debate Briefing Papers, No 1 of 2016. IRI, UYONET, NTV, Kampala.
- Kinyanjui, M.N. 2014. *Women and the Informal Economy in Urban Africa: From the Margins to the Centre*. London: Zed Books.
- Lambright, G. 2014. Opposition politics and urban service delivery in Kampala, Uganda. *Development Policy Review* 32(1): 39–60.
- Lindell, I. and J. Appelblad. 2009. Disabling Governance: Privatization of City Markets and Implications for Vendors’ Associations in Kampala, Uganda. *Habitat International* 33(4): 397–404.
- Lindell, I. and M. Ihalainen. 2014. “The Politics of Confinement and Mobility: Informality, Relocations and Urban Re-Making from Below.” In *Civic Agency in Africa: Arts of Resistance in the 21st Century*, edited by E. Obadare and W. Willems. Woodbridge: James Currey.
- Madinah, N., A. Boerhannoeddin, B. Raja Ariffin and M. Bwengye. 2015. Recentralization of Kampala City Administration in Uganda: Implications for Top and Bottom Accountability. *SAGE Open*, 5(3).
- Makara, S. 1998. “Political and Administrative Relations in Decentralization”. In *Decentralization and civil society in Uganda. The quest for good governance*. Apolo Nsibambi (ed.). Kampala: Fountain.
- Miller, D., E. Nel and G. Hampwaye. 2008. Malls in Zambia: Racialised Retail Expansion and South African Foreign Investors in Zambia. *African Sociological Review / Revue Africaine De Sociologie* 12(1): 35-54.
- Nabaho, L. 2013. Recentralization of Local Government Chief Administrative Officers Appointments in Uganda: Implications for Downward Accountability. *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, Issue 13/14 <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/cjlg>
- Onyach-Olaa, M. 2003. The Challenges of Implementing Decentralisation: Recent Experiences in Uganda. *Public Administration and Development: The International Journal of Management Research and Practice* 23(1): 105-113.
- Potts, D. 2008. The Urban Informal Sector in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Bad to Good (and Back again?). *Development Southern Africa* 25(2): 151–167.

- Vlassenroot, K., S. Perrot and J. Cuvelier. 2012. Doing Business out of War. An Analysis of the UPDF's Presence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 6(1): 2–21.
- Young, G. 2017. From Protection to Repression: The Politics of Street Vending in Kampala. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 11(4): 714–733.
- World Bank. 2000. “Uganda: The First Urban Project: Complete Report in English.” Available online documents.[worldbank.org/curated/en/966811468317935136/Uganda-the-first-urban-project](https://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/966811468317935136/Uganda-the-first-urban-project)