

# “A Difficult Lady”

## *Shutting Down Pollution in Kampala, Uganda*

### *Epilogue*

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By May 26, 2012, just three days after the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) shut down the Mukwano factory, the plant’s new chimney was up and running. Judith Tukahirwa Tumusiime, still working on a contractual basis with the KCCA, had stood her ground, refusing to reopen the factory until its leaders had met this key demand. Mukwano insisted to media and politicians that it was complying with regulations and making improvements.<sup>1</sup> KCCA and NEMA highlighted the health and economic impact of delayed and deferred action: “We had our data,” said Birikadde, “stats on lung-related diseases, trends of potable water treatment costs, and how the fish stocks were declining in the lake. With this data, political leadership told them that they must comply.”<sup>2</sup>

Once the chimney was up, workers were allowed back in while Mukwano undertook other critical improvements, including repairs to the bathrooms and the construction of the wastewater treatment system. Although the KCCA did not collect data on air quality in the vicinity of the factory before and after the construction of the chimney, there was an immediate decrease in visible smog. Soot no longer coated Birikadde’s desk each morning. As importantly, Tumusiime had shown Kampala’s industrial and political insiders that the KCCA would not back down. Polluters could come into the office and make demands and threats, but at the end of the day, the table they were pounding on belonged to the KCCA. Tumusiime and KCCA Executive Director Jennifer Musisi had shown that they were not afraid to use their authority to protect vulnerable city residents, factory workers, and other Ugandans suffering the effects of air and water pollution.

### Gaining Confidence

Tumusiime had been prepared to resign but instead found that her courage under fire created positive ripple effects across the KCCA and beyond. “It gave Jennifer a lot of confidence in me, because the work we were doing in the city was not easy,” she explained.<sup>3</sup> Tumusiime felt that the success of the operation had strengthened trust between her and her team while boosting the public’s faith in the KCCA. “There was nothing negative about the closure,” she said. “The confidence that came out of it for the institution and for the individuals involved was really overwhelming.”

“The closure of the factory helped bring up some changes in attitude—most importantly in how politicians deal with the public servants,” said Birikadde. The KCCA’s show of strength also attracted investments from international agencies. “People were tired of no action,” Birikadde explained. “When

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they saw there was a new kid on the block that would make the change, these other agencies started coming to support the activities of the KCCA.”

In December 2012, to Tumusiime’s surprise, President Museveni asked her to serve as deputy executive director for the KCCA—Jennifer Musisi’s second-in-command. “I thought I would not even be considered for a promotion,” Tumusiime recalled, “because I had resisted pressure from politicians, including the president, to reopen the factory before it met substantial compliance standards.” She knew that decision did not sit well with everyone. The president appointing her to a position of formal authority was eye-opening for Tumusiime: “Sometimes when we are making hard decisions as leaders, it gives others confidence to entrust us with greater roles.”

Still, not everyone changed their tune initially. There were actors in the national government who held a grudge, including a Cabinet Minister who delayed Tumusiime’s appointment to the national water board for a year, only capitulating when his colleagues insisted that she was the most qualified expert in the city. (He later confessed to having blocked her appointment because she refused to yield to his demands during the Mukwano closure but thanked her for her courage and offered an apology, creating a foundation for future collegueship.)

The KCCA’s success in bringing politically connected industrial polluters to the table was a wake-up call to business and industry across the city. Inspectors from the KCCA felt more empowered, and businesses felt more accountable and inclined to comply with regulations. By shifting power dynamics, the action at Mukwano also strengthened partnerships between the KCCA and the national government’s environmental management and enforcement agencies. A pollution-control task force comprising representatives from the KCCA, national agencies, and industry groups began collaborating to standardize compliance monitoring and provide technical support for cleaner production across industries.<sup>4</sup> In 2015, Tumusiime delivered a keynote address at a daylong conference for “public-private wastewater dialogue” and introduced wastewater management guides for paint, battery recycling, and soft drink industries—the first three in a growing series.<sup>5</sup>

## Resignation

Tumusiime served for nearly four years as the KCCA’s deputy executive director, overseeing many programs and initiatives. “The compliance levels went up, the infrastructure improved, the cleanliness in the area improved. But they were stepping on some people’s toes,” said Birikadde. Municipal elections swept in new political opposition, and resistance to the KCCA’s reforms grew stronger.

In October 2016, Tumusiime delivered to the president a letter of resignation that struck a bittersweet note. She was grateful for the opportunity to serve and hopeful for the future of her home city and country, but ongoing political and security interference was taking an increasing toll on her and her work. “It is these challenges which have come at a cost of my health, both physically and mentally,” she wrote. “. . . Political expediency from certain quarters has taken over strategic planning.”<sup>6</sup> At an emotional public send-off, Musisi praised her friend’s “immense contribution and heart” and wished her well: “Farewell Dr. Judith . . . We love and appreciate you.”<sup>7</sup> For Birikadde, Tumusiime’s departure was understandable but disappointing. “If you are not achieving your objectives, you’re not given a conducive environment to work in, you are not given resources to undertake your activities, then you

are just there getting a salary,” he said. But he felt there was also a moral cost in leaving. Maybe the pace of change would have slowed, but if more change was still possible, it might have been worth fighting on. “You’re in a dilemma,” he said. “For me, I would rather push on until I achieve.”

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Alykhan Karmali, “Mukwano Group Has Been Proactively Working with NEMA & NEMA Appointed Agents to Improve Environmental & Safety Management,” press release, Mukwano Industries Uganda Limited, September 26, 2012, <https://mukwano.com/mukwano-group-proactively-working-with-nema/>.

<sup>2</sup> Grace Birikadde, interview with Gaylen Moore, May 14, 2025. All quotes from Birikadde from this interview unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Tukahirwa Tumusiime, interview with Gaylen Moore, March 20, 2024. All quotes from Tumusiime from this interview unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> Kampala Capital City Authority, “Kampala Pollution Control Task Force (PTF),” accessed April 1, 2024, <https://www.kcca.go.ug/pollution-control-task-force>.

<sup>5</sup> Kampala Capital City Authority, “Pollution Control Task Force Events,” accessed April 1, 2024, <https://www.kcca.go.ug/environment-pft-events>.

<sup>6</sup> “Musisi Hails Departing KCCA Chief,” *New Vision*, November 1, 2016, [https://www.newvision.co.ug/new\\_vision/news/1439071/musisi-hails-leaving-kcca-chief](https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1439071/musisi-hails-leaving-kcca-chief).

<sup>7</sup> “Musisi Hails Departing KCCA Chief,” *New Vision*.