

The “Garbage Lady” Cleans Up Kampala

Turning Quick Wins into Lasting Change

Epilogue

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In 2011, at the newly formed Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), Judith Tumusiime, an impassioned technocrat who prided herself on operating outside of politics, was charged with transforming a “filthy city” into a clean, habitable, and healthy one. Early in her tenure, she was able to vastly improve Kampala’s solid waste management (SWM) system by creating efficiencies, increasing accountability, and bringing her technical know-how to a team that held little expertise. By 2015, however, after several years of strong momentum, Tumusiime felt that her progress was stalled, and she faced political challenges in creating a sustainable SWM system. More specifically, her team was grossly overextended and needed to assign some of its SWM responsibilities to private contractors through an innovative public-private partnership (PPP). To ensure the PPP’s viability, Tumusiime strongly felt that all residents, no matter their income, needed to pay garbage collection fees.


However, the federal and local elections were approaching in February 2016, and politicians told their constituents that they would not allow garbage collection fees, leaving Tumusiime little support for her long-term vision. She was faced with a difficult choice: to dive into a political world that she never wanted anything to do with to see if she could achieve radical change, or to continue to make tweaks that might achieve short-term, small improvements at a slow—and even halting—pace.

What Happened Next

In February 2016, although President Museveni won Uganda’s national election, he lost the popular vote in Kampala. In his victory speech, he blamed the KCCA and its head, Jennifer Musisi, for costing him votes, saying her and her team’s methods for improving city systems were too harsh.¹

As the president’s support for the KCCA deteriorated, so did the KCCA’s budget, along with its morale. In November 2016, Tumusiime resigned, “citing a myriad of challenges (political, economic, and social)” that “curtailed our efforts which need to be redressed as soon as possible, for KCCA to achieve the intended objectives.”² *New Vision* reported that she “lamented that what KCCA has achieved in the four years is being eroded by . . . ‘political expediency from certain quarters [that] has taken over strategic planning . . .’”³

Soon after, Musisi left the KCCA as well. After several attempts to resign from her position, the president finally accepted her resignation in 2018.

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As of 2019, garbage collection capacity and SWM sustainability in Kampala was still in question. In April of 2019, Beti Kamywa Turwomwe, the Minister for Kampala Capital City and Metropolitan Affairs, said, “Garbage management is a serious controversy in the city today. I urge all city dwellers to play a role in complementing KCCA duty.”⁴

Regarding charging garbage collection fees, at the end of May of 2019, Kamywa announced, “KCCA will continue with a duo policy of collecting garbage from low income localities for free. While the rest shall pay for garbage collection services at a fee determined by KCCA.”⁵ The fees would be paid to private garbage collectors who had agreements with the KCCA.

A KCCA engineer told *New Vision* that the city needed approximately sixty-five trucks to achieve the collection capacity needed for the informal settlements and public spaces for which they were responsible. The KCCA only had fourteen.⁶

Reflections

During case interviews in 2019, Tumusiime reflected on her decision to leave her position. “I had read about politics in the news but had never experienced what political interference meant,” she said.⁷ “For people like Jennifer and me who are really passionate, who have integrity, I didn’t want to stay in a position where I was being paid a salary and not able to perform my job.”

Tumusiime elaborated, “When I talk about the politics, I think for me, it’s the politics at the highest level—at the presidency—because when we were doing all this work, initially, even arresting illegal dumpers, he was supporting us. . . .When we had his support, we did a lot. Because even though these other politicians, like, the mayors and so on, were a problem, they did not really impact our activities. We still went ahead and did the work. But I think the biggest challenge is when you lose the support of the person that appoints you. . . . We had formed so many good plans, but we needed them to be implemented. We had progressed so well up until the 2016 elections.”

Tumusiime also said she understood the other side and that politicians had competing priorities: “How does a politician continue to support a team [like the KCCA], which is doing a good job, but a team that is also impacting voter support? They have to keep a balance—do you continue supporting that team? Or do you now consider the electorates first and protect your votes? I think in the president’s eyes, he had to choose the short term. He felt, ‘I need to protect my votes, because I need to come back into office. Yes, these guys are doing a good job, but I think we can do this great stuff later.’ And for me . . . there was this whole conflict and tradeoff between my values and principles. I was like, ‘Do I trade them off?’ And the answer for me was no. I could not trade off my values and principles. I could not look on as the city got worse.”

Tumusiime reflected on if she could have done anything differently. “At times, I believe we could have navigated, even despite the president’s interference, I think we could still clean the city. But then I think how Jennifer was too angry to continue. And so, when your boss is saying, ‘He doesn’t appreciate us,’ and you’re the deputy, it’s really a very difficult position.”

She continued, “For me, I think what I like about what we started in solid waste management is that everything that I initiated and innovated around is still in place, and I see them already making progress. There has been interference, but because we did put in place really good systems, those systems still exist and even the teams that come after us are able to continue. So, there’s that continuity and also improving and building upon what we started. For me, that is my greatest satisfaction. That despite whatever comments the president made and the interference the politics had, they did not stop these good initiatives and strategies and systems that we put in place.”

Endnotes

¹ Oskar Semweya-Musoke, “Did NRM really lose because of Jennifer Musisi?” *The Observer*, March 21, 2016, <https://observer.ug/viewpoint/43188-did-nrm-really-lose-because-of-jennifer-musisi>, accessed December 2019.

² “Musisi hails departing KCCA chief,” *New Vision*, November 1, 2016, https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1439071/musisi-hails-leaving-kcca-chief, accessed January 2020.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Juliet Waiswa, “KCCA calls for more garbage collection partners,” April 1, 2019, https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1497463/daily-generated-garbage-shocking-kcca-calls-partners, accessed January 2020.

⁵ “Adhere to Garbage Collection Arrangements Set by KCCA, says Minister,” May 31, 2019, <https://www.kcca.go.ug/news/357/#.Xih6R8hKjIU>, accessed January 2020.

⁶ Juliet Waiswa, Agnes Nantamb, “Garbage management: KCCA calls for more partners,” April 1, 2019, https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1497453/garbage-management-kcca-calls-partners, accessed January 2020.

⁷ Unless cited otherwise, quotes from Judith Tumusiime are from case writer interviews conducted in-person, over the phone, and via e-mail from April 1, 2019 through November 15, 2019.