

# *Beautiful Chaos!!*



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Along Ronald Ngala Street Before Eviction

## Case Study of Nairobi City, Kenya

### Somewhere between formal and informal.....

Most African cities are well known for informalities. Street vending and hawking are particularly popular as they serve as the main source of income for the urban poor.

In urban mobility, these activities are often criticized as a hindrance to the seamless flow of movement and connectivity within cities and towns. These talks have escalated over the years and mitigation measures have since been put to try and curb this “problem”.

As a mobility enthusiast, I’ve always held a strong view that street vending and hawking should be restricted to certain locations in the urban settings, and strictly prohibited in some key areas. However, my recent encounters with urban economists have made me follow a different line of thought. Economists believe and factualize that the market dictates how cities will be! Is this a fallacy?

My encounter with the renowned urban planner, Alain Bertaud, in his speech, mentioning how cities act as a labor market was very illuminating. How critical is street vending and hawking as a key component in economy and urban mobility?



No better way to understand this than to dig into the recent occurrences in the Nairobi central business district (CBD)

The new regime came in with a new phrase “**Let’s Make Nairobi Work**” and with that, new policies were put in place to try and make the city work. Previously, street vending and hawking was a menace, characterized with constant “*tom and jerry*” chasing between the vendors and the local authorities (*kanjo*). The street vendors put there displays everywhere. In front of building facades, along pedestrian walkways and even along back lanes. Moving from one location to another was harder than staying righteous!

One of the main initial policies that stood out was the idea of abolishing hawking in the CBD and restricting the vendors between 5pm till late on weekdays, and all day on weekends and holidays. In my view, this was a good idea as it provided faster locomotion during working hours. However, as most people leave work at 5pm, peak hours were still chaotic as the street vendors were in full swing.

That was just the beginning though. In the county governments’ eye, the idea was not good enough and they took the bar a notch higher.

**No street vending and no hawking on weekdays!**



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Along Tom Mboya Street, After Eviction

From the **mobility experts** point of view, this is the best thing that happened to the city in a long time. This meant reduced travel time, more trip distributions, reduced pedestrian conflicts within facades and walkways, reduced vehicular-pedestrian conflicts as people now use the walkways more and fast circulation within the city.

From the **urban economists** point of view, a nightmare to the city's economy. According to the International Labor Organization, the informal economy makes a significant contribution to employment creation, income generation, poverty reduction, and economic growth in Kenya. World Economics estimates the size of Kenya's informal economy to be approximately **33%** of the GDP, representing around \$109 billion at GDP purchasing power parity levels.

No vending means loss of employment to people who are already considered to be of low income. The government did restrict them to operate in the alleys, but will they get as much customers as they used to? Are there enough alleys for them?

The bigger question that the county government should ask is, **what benefits do the hawkers bring to the county and what are the repercussions of evicting them?**

Adding unemployment to a Nation that is already crippled with unemployment is not a smart move. This will only



fuel the already existing loathsome feeling towards the government. Was there enough research and a consensus reached before implementation or the government is just as irrational as majority of the citizens think.

### **So, what next?**

My opinion on this might be skewed or unskewed, lacking enough research or having just enough, misguided or informed, honest or dishonest, all depending on one's interests. However, finding a solution is not rocket science. There are a lot of case studies on matters of urban mobility, success and failures, that might help guide the people sitting on the “big table”

Having a flawless CBD works great for all of us but we should consider the short and long-term effects. My quick advice will be to involve both the urban mobility experts and urban economists to help provide sound and well-informed decisions. **Let's Make Nairobi Work!**

### **Author**

**Sam Rholex.**



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