

The Makutano Market Revitalization: How Strategic Transformation Revitalized Trade in Meru County

County:	Meru		
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Introduction

Located in the Eastern region of Kenya, Meru County flourishes as a vibrant hub of agricultural abundance. The County is known for its rich produce of both food and cash crops. Miraa, a stimulant crop, has a market that has grown significantly over time despite facing various challenges. The main food crops produced in Meru include maize, beans, potatoes, and bananas. Farmers in Meru County sell their products through different channels, including direct sales to traders and local markets. Most of these produce end up at the local markets for retail.

The County's agricultural success has led to substantial growth in the trading sector. According to the Meru County Integrated Development Plan (2018-2022), the County has over 1,000 traders who sell their products across 10 fresh produce markets, with a combined capacity of 500 stalls, though the recommended capacity is 700 stalls (Meru County Department of Trade, 2019). This trader population increased significantly to 1,500 by 2020 (Meru County Economic Survey Report, 2021), creating significant pressure on the existing market infrastructure.

Market planning and development has been a critical challenge for Meru County's administration. With limited market capacity and growing trader numbers, market congestion became inevitable. Among the various markets in the County, Makutano market emerged as a focal point of these challenges, serving as a central hub for agricultural trade in the region.



The Challenge

The infrastructure limitations led many traders to establish informal selling points along roadsides. This created multiple problems for the community, including traffic congestion and safety hazards. The County faced challenges in maintaining orderly commerce, with roadside selling creating unclean and unsafe spaces throughout commercial areas. Traders working in these conditions reported difficulties related to exposure to weather elements such as rain and dust.

From the consumer perspective, the congested roadside trading environment created safety concerns. The crowded spaces became hotspots for petty theft, while the lack of designated parking areas made shopping inconvenient. Inside the official markets, stall owners faced their own challenges. They complained about the deteriorating condition of market facilities and found themselves in constant conflict with roadside traders who effectively blocked customer access to the formal market spaces. These roadside vendors often offered products at lower prices by avoiding government fees and taxes, creating unfair competition.

Despite the County's efforts to construct additional market stalls, the problem persisted as many traders continued to prefer roadside operations due to better visibility and customer access.

Implementation of the practice (**Solution Path**):

To address these mounting challenges, the County Government, through funding from the Kenya Urban Support Programme (KUSP I), initiated a comprehensive transformation of the Makutano market (Kenya Urban Support Programme Implementation Report, 2022). The process began with civic education campaigns for traders to help them understand the benefits of the rehabilitation and secure their buy-in. Despite these efforts, there was significant resistance from traders who feared losing both their established spaces in the market and their regular customers once the rehabilitation was complete.

After extensive consultation and assurance from County officials, traders eventually accepted the rehabilitation plan. The County then implemented a temporary relocation strategy, moving vendors to a designated section of the Makutano Bus Stop. This area was carefully subdivided to ensure both public transport operations and trading activities could continue without mutual interference. Enforcement of this transition required coordinated efforts from the County Government, Municipal manager, elected Committee members, and local police to ensure compliance from all traders. The rehabilitation project took two years to complete, addressing the environmental challenges that had previously plagued traders, including exposure to dirt, wind, and rain. Upon completion, traders were systematically relocated back to the renovated market.

Following their return, the traders established a self-governance system through a committee comprising seven members (4 men and 3 women), democratically elected for five-year terms. This committee was tasked with market governance and ensuring traders' needs were adequately addressed. The committee implemented a robust Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM) to resolve disputes efficiently. Their regulatory framework included strict enforcement measures, such as a three-month expulsion for any trader found violating established rules. This governance approach proved effective, with most issues being resolved at the committee level without requiring County Government intervention.



Figure 1: The ground floor of Makutano market where traders selling fresh produce are stationed

The market transformation dramatically increased capacity, expanding from an initial 114 traders to accommodating 460 vendors, representing a significant improvement in the County's market infrastructure and economic opportunity.

Results of the practice (**outputs and outcomes**)-

The Makutano market transformation yielded several significant improvements:



Figure 2: A section of the parking spaces that have been freed after the restriction of roadside trading

- Improved Infrastructure:** The market now features modern facilities with ample parking space to accommodate both traders and customers. The Committee leadership ensures traders benefit from adequate security and modern sanitation services throughout the facility. One of the most notable design improvements is the vertical organization approach: groceries and fresh produce vendors operate on the ground floor, creating easy access for customers with heavy purchases, while traders selling clothing, salon services, and other non-perishable goods are strategically positioned on the upper floors.



- **Enhanced Trading Environment:** Traders enjoy increased sales in a more attractive, weather-protected environment. The secure environment allows traders to safely leave property at their stalls overnight without constant fear of theft, reducing the daily burden of transporting all goods to and from the market. Perhaps most importantly, the covered structure protects produce from contamination and allows for business continuity regardless of weather conditions.
- **Improved Regulation and Compliance:** County enforcement against roadside selling and the establishment of informal mini-kiosks (vibandas) near the market premises has successfully channeled customers into the formal market. Though occasional nighttime roadside trading occurs, the committee governance system effectively manages most violations, escalating only complex issues to County leadership.
- **Safety and Security:** Both traders and customers report feeling safer in the new market environment compared to the previous roadside trading arrangement. The clear layout, designated pathways, and organized stall arrangement have substantially reduced opportunities for petty theft and other security concerns that previously beset the area. This enhanced security creates a positive cycle where increased safety attracts more customers, which in turn generates more business for traders and tax revenue for the County.

Lessons learnt:

- **Importance of Civic Education:** Effective civic education is crucial in helping citizens understand new initiatives and securing their buy-in for development projects.
- **Leadership Matters:** The quality and effectiveness of the elected committee leadership significantly impacts how progressive the traders will be and how well they can benefit from market facilities.
- **Government Support:** Ongoing support from the County Government has been instrumental in sustaining the improvements and addressing challenges as they arise.
- **Organization Drives Commerce:** A well-organized marketplace attracts customers and enables traders to sell their produce without interruptions, creating a virtuous cycle of economic activity.
- **Safety Enhances Trade:** Both traders and customers value and respond positively to improvements in safety and security.

Recommendation:

- Based on the Makutano market experience, the following recommendations can be made for similar market development initiatives:
- Invest adequate time and resources in civic education to ensure citizens understand what is being introduced and to secure their buy-in for development projects.
- The committee leadership elected matters significantly in how progressive the traders will be and how well they can benefit. Support for leadership development and good governance should be part of market development plans.
- Continuous support from local government is essential for the sustainability of market improvements and addressing emerging challenges.
- Market designs should prioritize security, organization, and protection from environmental factors to create an environment conducive to commerce.
- Establish clear governance structures with appropriate enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with market regulations and the resolution of disputes.

PHOTO GALLERY



Figure 3: A photo of fresh produce in Makutano market



Figure 4: Clean and decongested paths leading to the upper floors of the market



Figure 5: Water tanks for water provision and storage used for cleaning of the market as well as the toilets



Figure 6: The leadership of the committee for Makutano market