



# The Mushrooming of Car Boot Sales in These Corona Times

By Dauti Kahura



Amos Waweru is your typical consultant: he always carries his laptop and speaks the language of consultancy – strategic objectives, writing proposals, project management, conducting feasibility studies, etc. An enterprise development consultant for the last 15 years, Waweru’s consultancy portfolio includes consulting for international NGOs, both in Kenya and abroad “but that is when the going was good”. Now, thanks to COVID-19, things are different. “It is really tough now and I have had to make adjustments,” said the consultant.

With three teenage children, all in high school, dwindling consultancy work in the last two years, and now the lockdown, which has halted his work to a near standstill for the last three months, Waweru had to make some tough decisions. One of them was converting his Japanese-made vehicle into a car boot sales market. “I stayed at home for one full month the whole of April, without work, with a lot of time on my hands, and simply immobile – three things that I was not used to having in plenty”.

Waweru, a resident of Ruiru, conducted preliminary research among the women who sell vegetables at Ruiru’s open-air market. “Where do they get their vegetables, what types of vegetables do people prefer, how are they priced, so that with this information, I could work out the logistics of starting my own little vegetable market from the boot of my car,” said the consultant. The coronavirus has

taken everyone by surprise and upturned many people's sources of income, throwing people completely off-balance, observed Waweru.

Waweru had cultivated the high-flier image of a successful consultant who occasionally travels abroad. So he was initially bothered by what his peers would think of him selling vegetables from his car off a busy thoroughfare. "I'm very well-known in my church community and in my residential area of Membley, to be truthful, I was a tad worried of my image and whether it wasn't going to suffer. I was afraid my esteem among my community would diminish", said the consultant.

When deciding which types of vegetables he should be selling, Waweru found that leafy green vegetables were most in demand. So the next thing he did was to look for a strategic location to park his vehicle and start his business. "I did a little feasibility study around my location and found a bustling stage where the Eastern bypass and Kamiti Road intersect. Already, there were other people selling foodstuff off their vehicles and I decided to join them." (This intersection is popularly known as the "OJ Connection" - people drop off as others board boda bodas or matatus to their various destinations.)

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The leafy vegetables Waweru started with included indigenous vegetables like *kahurura*, *kunde*, *managu*, *terere*, *thoroko* and *osuga*. "The market women told me they buy the vegetables from some Ruiru farmers who farm along the Ruiru River. I didn't know there's a lot of vegetable farming specialising in indigenous vegetables going on around Ruiru town." After his interest in vegetable farming was aroused, Waweru also discovered that on the fringes of Tatu City, the mega real estate project coming up on the outskirts of Ruiru town, "there are huge farms where some people have been growing tomatoes on a large scale".

Waweru set up camp at OJ Connection, but not for long. "I was always looking for better strategic selling areas, because, somehow, I wasn't persuaded OJ was the best location for me." He found one at Kimbo, next to the General Service Unit (GSU) Recce Squad command post, on Kiganjo Road, off the Thika superhighway. (The Recce squad is a paramilitary force that is specially trained in dealing with terrorism and other security-related emergencies.) The consultant's gut feelings on change of location paid off: "I'd been doing brisk business at OJ, but I began doing even brisker business at Kimbo." Waweru's image worries have dissipated; he is making some money "to basically pay my bills and fuel the car".

The car boot sales allowed Waweru to deal with two things: "earn some little money, to be honest it's really nothing - it is from car boot to mouth", and even more critical, deal with the problem of staying idle at home. "It was driving me crazy and I found myself picking quarrels with everyone. I cannot remember the last time I was marooned in the house for this long. I needed to get out, meet my friends, have a drink and just be out there." As he was accustomed to, he carries his laptop with him and keeps himself busy, working on business proposals to potential clients as he waits for his customers.

The Kimbo-Recce Squad junction has become a beehive of activity: We counted more than 20 car boot sales vehicles. "A new vehicle has been pitching camp every week since I came here," explained Waweru. "Somehow, it has become a magnet for people with cars to experiment with selling a variety of foodstuff from the boots of their cars." The consultant said that at first the paramilitary

personnel were apprehensive about people bringing their cars so close to their camp, but they became more relaxed about it, but warned the car boot sellers not to encroach too near the camp's gate.

"This coronavirus pandemic has driven people to try out different and several possibilities of finding coping mechanisms of staying economically afloat as they strive to deal with the bad times", said Waweru. "Yet the crux of the matter is that the coronavirus has just been the catalyst: the economic downturn began with President Uhuru's second term. I'll be open with you - President Uhuru's years have been the worst for my consultancy. I've suffered greatly because I cannot even begin to compare his tenure with President Kibaki's. During Kibaki's time, I made good money and built myself."

Some of the additional 20 or so cars that have since followed Waweru to Kimbo belong to teachers, a travel consultant and two matatu owners. At Kimbo they have created a car boot sales mini-market, selling everything from arrowroots, cabbages, eggs, onions, rice (of the pishori type) and tomatoes.

High school teacher Njenga teaches at a school in Kalimoni. After staying at home for a month and after realising there might be no prospect of returning to school sooner, he started thinking of what to do with the extra time that had been created for him. "We are still getting our pay, so compared to other professionals who may have lost their jobs or face a pay cut, we teachers have so far been spared both," commented the teacher.

"But not used to being idle and immobile, the coronavirus lockdown was driving me nuts - I've never stayed at home from morning till evening, day-in day-out, weeks on end. I felt I was beginning to lose my marbles and I needed to be active and breathe out." As a day school teacher, he and his wife, who is also a secondary school teacher, had started a side hustle (a popular Kenyan cliché to mean an income-generating project for extra cash). They had invested in a 1000-chicken hatchery. "Instead of waiting for customers to come and collect their eggs at home, we used our car to market the eggs and even attract new customers," explained the couple.

For some people, the coronavirus pandemic could as well be a blessing in disguise. "From our car boot sale at Kimbo, we've been doing good business. In a just a short time, we've been pushing between 10 to 20 trays of eggs in a day," said the teachers. "I mean, before coronavirus, we only depended on our traditional customary clients. Now we've created a new market and hope to expand it. A tray of eggs consists of 30 eggs, so, even on a bad day, the Njengas can sell upwards of 300 eggs from their vehicle. At between Sh280 and Sh300 per tray, the teachers can make up to between Sh2,800 and Sh3,000 a day. "If you remove our expenses, we can't complain too much."

The other teacher, a lady who also teaches in a high school, has also been selling eggs. "There are enough customers to share, so it's not a problem that I and my fellow teachers are selling the same thing in the same place. It's a market of varieties. Let the customers have their say". She also keeps a poultry farm where she rears chickens for eggs. The pandemic, opined the teacher, had opened her eyes to pursuing an infinite possibility: of selling her eggs from her car. "Even after the crisis is over, I'll not stop my car boot sale. I've already seen the future and I like what I've seen: the car boot sale is a niche I had not contemplated. I'm not letting it go".

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Two things have worked in favour of the teachers: The fact that they teach in day schools, which

means they don't have to stay in school all day, and they have not been paying cess to Kiambu County Government. Depending on the nature of business and what you are selling, the county government levies between Sh25 and Sh100 per trader per day.

A county official told me that for now, during the pandemic, they had decided not to charge the car boot sales traders. "We've understood the prevailing extraordinary situation to mean that the people are trying make ends meet."

Just further afield, from where Waweru's car was, Ben Kungu's Toyota Hiace, complete with the tracking aerial aloft, was full of fruits and vegetables. Kungu had plucked off the seats of the vehicle to free space for his new venture. A travel and tours consultant, Kungu was hit hard. "Everything ground to a halt and I couldn't get jobs for my 'Shark' [what the Toyota Hiace is popularly called]." His van then was essentially grounded and Kungu was out of a job. What to do in the prevailing circumstances? He decided to go to Ruiru's open-air market, buy foodstuffs in bulk and in wholesale for resale. "It was both to make some money to fuel the vehicle and for my sanity. I felt like I was going crazy staying at home all day with nothing to do."

Next to Kungu's "Shark" were two other vans: the long-distance matatu shuttles known as "Box" because of their shape. When President Uhuru pronounced the cessation of movement in April, many long-distance shuttles that travelled outside of Nairobi County found themselves locked out of work. The owners of these two shuttles said that instead of parking them, like some of their compatriots had done, they decided to convert them into car boot sales markets and sell mostly cabbages from south Kinangop. "Once the cessation ceases, we shall resume our shuttle travel work. For now, let us make use of the vehicles in the most practical way we know how."

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In Uthiru, an old trading centre off Nairobi-Nakuru highway, I met John Ndung'u. Ndung'u was donning a blue coat, and dusting off sweet potatoes that were spread in the boot of his car. "These sweet potatoes are the best in the market because they are from Kisii - sweet potatoes from this region are good because they remain dry and tough and are not watery," said the former taxi driver. "They are fresher because I catch them from my supplier before he deposits the load at Marigiti Market in the city centre." Trucks full of farm suppliers from north and central Rift Valley and western region pass outside Uthiru.

People nowadays prefer sweet potatoes to bread in the morning, said Ndung'u. "Bread has become expensive, but more fundamentally, the sweet potato is nutritious, very fulfilling and is good for school-going children. And there are more than one ways of preparing the sweet potato: you can roast it, you can boil it, you can even fry it, more like potato chips, all to create different tastes of this tasty African tuber crop."

Ndung'u is the chairman of the Muthiga taxi drivers association. Muthiga, which is seven kilometres from Uthiru, is a popular meat-eating and beer-drinking joint. It has become so popular that it is referred to as Nairobi's Kikopey. Kikopey is the famous mouth-watering, meat-eating stop on the same highway, but 120km away in Gilgil, Nakuru County. Ndung'u told me the coronavirus crisis had caught his members completely off-guard. Patronised by the moneyed wannabe who live around Muthiga and the adjoining areas of Kinoo, Kikuyu, Magina, Muthure, Sigona and Uthiru, Muthiga is busiest in the evenings and at night, making taxi-driving a profitable venture.

With the president's announcement of the quasi-lockdown and curfew, taxi drivers in Muthiga

became redundant. They had to quickly think of what to do next, what with families to cater for. “We decided, for those who were interested, to temporarily convert our cabs into car boot markets, as we study the effects of this coronavirus and what those effects portended for our business in the coming days,” explained Ndung’u.

If you take a quick tour of the highway from Uthiru, all the way to Regen and Rungiri, you will see saloon vehicles parked besides the highway, with open boots selling all manner of foodstuffs. “Beginning from Corporation, 87, Kinoo, Muthiga, Regen, Rungiri, all the way to Kikuyu town, most of the vehicles you will see are taxi drivers of our association,” said Ndung’u. The cab driver said if the lockdown and the curfew are lifted tomorrow, he would immediately go back to what he knows best: taxi driving.

But Monica Wangari - who I found selling bananas, avocados, pineapples and pumpkins in Thindigwa, a splashy middle-class residential area off the busy Kiambu Road - was not sure whether she would go back to her old job. “I was an insurance agent, working for one of the biggest insurance companies in Nairobi. Then coronavirus happened. Heads of department were asked by the MD to select which people should be laid off. I happened to be one of the people who were picked,” said Wangari.

Her family type car is a Vox Noah. Now, she wakes up in the morning, goes to Marigiti Market in downtown Nairobi, buys her foodstuff and parks her Noah on the dusty road that cuts across Thindigwa. “I couldn’t stay in the house. I tried in the first few weeks. I thought I was going to run mad.” At first, she had sought to sell off her wares on the Eastern bypass on the way to Windsor Hotel, “but I found there were too many vehicles and the competition was very stiff, so I opted to park in my hood,” said Wangari.

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Not far from where Wangari was parked, I met Catherine Nyawira. A professional cateress, her outside catering business was doing fine until coronavirus come knocking. “My vehicle was for delivering supplies. Little did I know I would convert it to car boot market.” Like Wangari, she opted to sell fruits, but with a bias towards pumpkins. “My pumpkins are from Meru, they are best: they are sweet and dry. Good for mothers weaning their babies off breast milk and for babies generally.” The coronavirus had hit her business hard, said Nyawira. “This is the new reality and it’s survival of the fittest.”

For Kennedy Kiarie from Kiambu town, this new reality is very real. He had been working in the hospitality industry as a sales and marketing executive for a leading hotel in Nairobi. Then coronavirus came. Hotels and restaurants were forced to close down. It was only a matter of time before the workers were asked to go home. He was one of the many employees who was asked to leave. His teacher wife’s salary couldn’t take care of the family and so he decided to convert their family car into a car boot sale market. Unlike Wangari, he does not fear the competition on the Eastern bypass: he has been selling fruits and vegetables just after the roundabout on the road heading to Windsor Hotel since April.

As a full-time Uber cab driver, Kimondo had to contend with the ever-increasing competition from traditional taxi cabs as well from other taxi apps. Yet he was not prepared for coronavirus. When it landed in Kenya, it hit him real hard. He found that he could not cope anymore: his clients had

dwindled to zero. “With people not travelling, many cab drivers were rendered jobless, I being one of them,” said Kimondo. Kimondo is now growing vegetables like sukuma wiki and spinach in his small plot in the Mushrooms area, just behind Thindigwa. “I didn’t need to think twice. Once my cab business tumbled, I turned to my car and went off to sell my wares on the Eastern bypass on your way to Windsor Hotel”.

In these times of coronavirus, car boot sales have become an adaptation mechanism: they give people an opportunity to earn some hard cash and maintain their sanity. One could also surmise that the car boot market has in the short-term become an integral part of the food distribution network, ensuring that people living under COVID-19 and curfew still get their food supplies.

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