



Kayemba and his wife Christine Nakyanzi can afford to smile again after a life-threatening accident in 2017. PHOTOS/ABDUL-NASSER SSEMUGABI.

**Second chance.** Today, the third Sunday of November, marks the 26<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims. Through the story of Evaristo Kayemba, a truck driver, who has been jobless for nearly five years after a tragic accident, **Abdul-Nasser Ssemugabi** finds out the need to remember, support and act, on the scourge of traffic accidents, in tandem with the 2020-2030 slogan.

# Two months in coma: Tale of an accident survivor

**T**rust responders to the accident scene were more interested in the victim's belongings than in saving his life. They robbed him of his phone and money. Twenty-four hours later, Evaristo Kayemba's friends in Kampala read an online news story that he had died in a tragic motor accident. Fortunately, he hadn't. He has lived to tell his story.

Prior to the incident, Kayemba's bosses demanded some answers regarding his route conduct before he would be allowed to work again.

He had to save his job. He knew the trip logbook had the records to defend him. But he had left the logbook in the truck he usually operated, which had been given to another driver.

On that fateful evening, Kayemba borrowed a friend's Toyota Premio and drove at breakneck speed to catch the truck driver on Masaka Highway.

Towards the sharp bend at Kadduggala, a black spot on that road, he attempted to overtake a truck.

It was dark. About 8pm. As he used to do, he dimmed the lights to see any oncoming traffic.

"I didn't see any vehicle and I accelerated to overtake," he recalls. But as fate would have it, a lorry from the opposite direction was equally speeding, with lights off.

"Trying to escape, I veered off the road to my right, and the lorry driver followed me. Bang!!! I blacked out," Kayemba says.

## The making of Kayemba

Before becoming a driver, Kayemba was a turnboy alongside truck drivers plying several routes across the country for about eight years with Harry Transporters Uganda Limited, a company that delivers fuel for Total Uganda.

In 2002, the company promoted him to driver. With experience and consistent training, Kayemba became an expert in safe driving, with reputable conduct and according to Sulaiman Kasirye, transport manager Harry Transporters, everyone was surprised

when he was involved in that 2017 accident. But with his job on the line, Kayemba lost his sense of judgement, ignored all the options, and chose what he would forever regret.

His friend's car was crashed beyond recognition and his life faced a serious survival test.

Colleagues would only learn of Kayemba's tragedy the next evening. Moses Kisekka, head of Total Drivers, is now based in Jinja but by then he was based in Kampala.

"We had called Kayemba's phone numbers but all were off. Then, someone told us the news reported he was dead," Kisekka recalls. "I called a friend to check for Kayemba's body in the mortuary at Masaka Hospital."

Kayemba was found lying motionless in the casualty ward. Colleagues raised funds to evacuate him to Mulago Hospital.

That day, Kisekka had a trip to Fort Portal. And when he saw Kayemba at Mulago the following day, he had no hope his friend would survive. "But we tried anyway."

Kayemba would spend the next two months in a coma.

## The support

Kayemba's left leg was fractured thrice: in the hip, knee, and ankle. His left arm was

# 3,663

Deaths in road accident.

The 2019 Uganda Traffic Police Report shows that an average of 10 people die in road accidents every day. Even during limited traffic due to restricted movements of vehicles as Covid-19 precaution directives, Uganda still lost 3,663 people in road traffic crashes. The average number of deaths in 2018, 2019, and 2020 are 3,744 lives—equivalent to 107 buses carrying 35 passengers under the current half-capacity restrictions.

## Lessons

"I was selfish and impatient; it nearly took me to the grave..." Kayemba admits with regret.

"Had I waited behind the truck, for a few seconds, maybe all this would not have happened."

He wanted to save his job. But he lost time and nearly lost his life.

Since then, Kayemba implores anyone never to drive when deeply stressed or fatigued.

"Stress compromises your concentration and you are prone to making risky decisions," he says in a low pitch, rich in emphasis.

So? "If you

tion' is incomplete without Dr Simon Mukuye.

"We can't thank him enough. He is busy but was never too busy for us," Kisekka echoes Kayemba's commendations of the senior neurosurgeon at Mulago.

"We called him anytime and if he missed our calls, he could text back even when he was in the theatre. He's been part of our life since then... and he always gave us realistic advice and hope... I wish all doctors were like him."

The doctor also advised him to be bold and face the knife again to have the metals removed, because it is the healthier option. Kayemba equally commends his former employer, who paid his salary for about two years until April 2019.

must travel in such a state, let someone else drive you, or take some rest until you are fine."

What if the client is waiting for the goods at his potential destination? Kayemba advises you to tell your bosses to get a substitute driver. This is a policy at serious companies such as Total, though more enforcement needs to be done to ensure it becomes the norm elsewhere.

## Everyone's duty

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Remembering road traffic victims does not intend to remind the victims such as Kayemba of their ordeal; rather remind the public to reflect on the causes of traffic accidents and possible interventions, and tell the victims and their families that their humanity matters and that their loss is everyone's loss.

The commemoration also pays tribute to the emergency crews, police and medical, professionals, who face the traumatic aftermath of road crashes.

Road safety is everyone's duty. Kayemba says a good driver should not only care about his vehicle, but also others'.

"Anticipation is an integral part of our training. We are always

UPDN also implores the government to ensure a thorough investigation of crashes and provide justice to the injured and the bereaved.

Omongo Ndugu, UPDN executive director, says such activism has borne fruit by influencing the government to pass complementary laws and policies, though many are still pending operationalisation.

In partnership with the Private Sector Foundation Uganda, UPDN has so far registered more than 6,000 truck drivers under the National Commercial Drivers' database to gather information for easy regulation of all commercial drivers.

On Dr Mukuye's advice, Kayemba went to work again in late 2019. But he was still on medication, which sometimes made him dizzy and blurred his vision while on the road. He was stopped.

But now he is fit to work again, and if he renews his certificate after a refresher

told to slow down, change direction or stop whenever we expect danger."

Even then, because humans are prone to error, fuel trucks have an on board computer installed inside the cabs to enable trip and hour registration, trip planning, track and trace, truck navigation, messaging traffic, fuel consumption registration, and the possibility to gauge the driver's driving style. In other words, it allows drivers to exchange data with the office in real-time.

Kisekka, head of Total drivers, says the only bodaboda rider who admits they were in wrong, is only the dead one and the one on crutches.

"The rest think they are always right. Yet what matters isn't who is right or wrong, rather who can sacrifice a second or two to avoid trouble."

So, he adds, the government should consider educating the public more about safer road usage.

He adds that at Total, drivers are coached about safety every Monday and Friday, and "we urge them to apply that knowledge and share it with their families and communities. Uganda can achieve a lot if government amplifies such messages across media platforms."

To his peers, Kisekka says heavy truck drivers should be equally humble. They should not feel they are the kings on the road, because you might harm someone today and tomorrow someone close to you falls victim."

## Clarion call

Uganda Professional Drivers Network (UPDN) is an NGO that complements government efforts in road safety through empowering drivers with continuous professional development skills.

During today's commemoration, UPDN will amplify its reminder to the government to establish a national post-crash responses strategy to provide timely emergency care and effective medical and psychological support to people affected by road traffic accidents.

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Responsible. Gen. Katumba Wamala, Minister of Works and Transport

## Government response

### THEIR TAKE

According to Gen Katumba Wamala, Minister of Works and Transport, the Traffic and Road Safety Act 1998 which was amended in 2020, provides for post-crash care including providing access to medical care by road traffic victims regardless of their ability to pay.

He added that his ministry is working with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and other stakeholders to formulate regulations to fully operationalise the Act.

MoH in consultation with other stakeholders developed Emergency Medical Services Policy and this Policy provides for leadership and governance, human resource development, essential emergency medicines and supplies, emergency care infrastructure establishment of well-equipped and staffed accidents emergency units, establishing regional call and dispatch centres, research and development, financing and community education and sensitisation.

MoH also procured ICU equipment for Regional Referral Hospitals, to strengthen critical care capacity at these facilities.

It also conducts Emergency Medical Technicians Course, which is open to the public at Rubaga Training School, and Post-graduate training in Emergency Care at Mbarara University of Science and Technology and Makerere College of Health Sciences.

The Works ministry is also engaging the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP) and Principal Judge on modalities of how to ensure that road traffic victims can get quick justice.

2017  
YEAR OF THE  
ACCIDENT

Kayemba's left arm was fractured thrice in the tragic accident in 2017.