



Unleashing Potential

Citizens' Engagement in Local Government Decision Making Processes:

Towards public finance accountability, transparency, and improved service delivery in Uganda

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OCTOBER 2021

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Executive Summary

The decentralization system of government in Uganda offers local government the mandate to administratively extend social-economic services to the citizens. It also involves citizens in determining specific local public needs and channeling such needs to urgent priority areas. The core objective of decentralization in Uganda is largely to improve public service delivery by bringing services closer to communities and ensuring peoples' participation and democratic control in social-economic and political decision-making. Thus, decentralization is presumed pivotal in global efforts for sustainable development by opening the democratic space though transparent, inclusive, and citizen-driven planning and implementation of services.

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This brief presents citizens' engagement as a tool of creating functional accountable local government systems responsive to the society needs through local government participatory action planning, implementation, and evaluation right from grassroots. The economic transformation of communities at local level can only be met when there is adequate involvement of citizens in the planning and budgeting of the local government resource envelop. To achieve this, the brief recommends that situational analysis should be conducted by local government leaders to solicit citizens' opinions to identify key priority challenges and the needed solutions, undertaking civic education to sensitize citizens about the constitutional roles, rights, and responsibilities in promoting good governance, accountability, transparency, and service delivery right from grassroots, launching

a budget week where draft local government budgets are read out to the citizens before they are passed. It is also vital to establish functional local community committees matching with all the existing ministries at local and central government level, procure toll free numbers/landlines at every level of local government such that citizens can report directly to their leaders and periodical citizens' forums should be conducted to monitor and evaluate the performance of local government leaders. All these should be intertwined and implemented to ignite the potential of local governments to engage citizens and strengthen service delivery, transparency, accountability and inclusive governance in Uganda.

Key words: Citizens' engagement, civic education, local government, accountability, transparency, service delivery, good governance

Background and Introduction

In 1995, Uganda institutionalized decentralization and subsequently, the 1997 Local Government Act (Cap. 243) was enacted. The main objective of decentralization was to restore democracy and return the participation and decision-making power to the people thereby contributing to development through timely service delivery. Decentralization was expected to improve peoples' access to and involvement in decision-making processes in order to assess service delivery issues in areas of health, education, water and sanitation among others; assist in the development of citizen's capacities; and enhance government's responsiveness, transparency and accountability for improved public service delivery. Public participation in decision-making is a mechanism that serves to entrench democracy and promote social cohesion

between government and citizens, particularly as relates to the provision of quality and sustainable services and goods.

Notable Local Government Structural Reforms in Uganda

Uganda as a State consists of the central and local government systems. The constitution provides for a system of decentralization and local government in the Local Government Act 1997 (Cap. 243). However, in urban settings, these are called cities, municipals, divisions/towns, wards, cells, zones and councils while in rural areas there are district councils, counties, sub counties, parishes, and villages. From the Electoral Commission Statistics (2020), Uganda has 146 districts, 2184 sub counties/towns/municipals/divisions, 10,595 parishes and 70,626 villages. The number of districts, municipals, cities and other local government tiers has been changing in Uganda over the last 3 decades. The most recent development was approved by Parliament in 2020 with 15 new cities approved. These are; Arua, Gulu, Jinja, Mbarara, Fort Portal, Masaka and Mbale which became operational on 1st July of the FY 2020/2021 while other cities were set to be operationalized in FY2021/2022 and FY2022/2023 i.e Hoima (the oil city), Lira, Soroti, Entebbe, Moroto, Nakasongola, Kabale and Wakiso created as per Article

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179(1) of the Constitution and Declaration of Cities under section 7(2A) of the Local Governments Act CAP.243.

Such new developments and segmentations of the local governments were aimed at bringing services closer to the citizens and to supporting the achievement of Uganda Vision 2040.

The principal legislation governing decentralization in Uganda is the Local government Act, which in addition to designating the different local government structures, deals with several operational issues and defines various mechanisms and procedures that among other aspects promote service delivery and participation. In contrast to other legislation, section 2 of the Local Government Act defines its objectives which include exercising to the decentralization of functions, powers, responsibilities, and services at all levels of local government. This complements to ensuring democratic participation and control of decision making by the people concerned, as well as establishing a democratic and politically inclusive administrative setup in local governments.

Such objectives underscore the aspirations of community participation, service delivery and affirmative action for marginalized groups. Thus, it can be rightly said that the Act ably takes into account the rationale for the decentralization policy as far as its objectives are concerned. Citizen participation in Local Governance therefore involves citizens assessing their own needs and participating in local project planning and monitoring at grass root levels. Because of the decentralization system, the primary sources of revenue are largely transfers from the central

government hence most of the activities done by local governments are dictated by the central government since it is the primary funder of local government projects. It has been observed that local governments have not fully taken into consideration the participation of local citizens during the decision-making process to clearly channel services directly to the challenges faced by the citizens at local level. Local governments largely consider projects whose funding is tied to specific implementations by the central government other than concentrating on citizen's challenges. They rather await audit from the Office of the Auditor General and yet the would-be primary auditors are the citizens themselves.



Local Government Supervision and Performance in Uganda

The Ministry of Local government is responsible for formulating and supervising national policy and legislation of local government. Thus, Uganda's local government is guided by this Ministry, the Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) and the Inspector General of Government (IGG). The IGG is responsible for supervising local government public financial management, preventing, and investigating any form of corruption.

As noted earlier, local governments in Uganda range from district level to village level/cell/zone. The leaders are democratically elected through a one-person one vote including election of women and special interest groups such as youth representatives (including female

representatives), Persons with Disabilities and workers' union representatives. The Local Government Act Cap.243 provides for 30% as women's quota for representation on local councils in Uganda. This makes the local councils inclusive but the more relevant approach would be the translation of such inclusion into better service delivery for the groups represented.

In 1994, the Uganda Local Authorities Association (ULAA) was formed and later renamed Uganda Local Government Association (ULGA). Local councils always reveal the best performing district in Uganda on annual basis. Local governments receive their funding largely from the central government but are mandated to mobilize local revenue such as through licenses, taxes, tenders and other legal charges.

Why citizens' participation in local government decision making processes?

Many local government public services such as roads, schools, health facilities receive inadequate local government funding because they lack current information regarding such facilities. In some instances, there is under budgeting for these services while at the same time, implementation, transparency and accountability tend to be poor. Such information can easily be obtained through the engagement of citizens during decision making processes such as budgeting at local government level. Some of the district local

government authorities return unspent funds to the central government yet the quality of services remains poor. This results into failure to fully engage citizens in local governance.

Citizens' participation has been recognized as one of the main components of good governance. This is more practical and realistic at local level where increased engagements of citizens will create direct routes of transparency, accountability thus enhancing timely and citizen-oriented service delivery.

The missing link is the bottom-up planning since any government loophole in service delivery at local level implies citizens have little or no opportunities to participate in developing the public policies/decision making that impact on their daily challenges. Citizens' participation in local government decision making has been advocated for as an effective tool of strengthening the level of citizens' trust and public awareness about government ongoing activities. Huang and Feeney (2016) argue that local government must put into consideration the increasing awareness of the public through civic education to attract citizen participation. The implication is that citizens have to be sensitized to strengthen their capacity to participate in local government decision making.

Government weakness at local level implies that citizens have little or no opportunities to participate in designing the public policies/decision making that impact on their daily challenges as contended by Lindsay and Tamar (2017) on their study on information for accountability and transparency in education systems.

Citizens are believed to have a deeper understanding of their challenges far better than their leaders thus they can easily identify priority challenges that the local government need to address being that they are mandated to bring services closer to the people. It takes time for leaders who spend much of their time in office to know the state of health facilities, sanitation at village level, state of water availability, education services, and status of transport routes, security threats and other aspects. The gap can be bridged through engagement of local citizens in decision making and exchange of community opinions. However, transparency and better service most of the citizens are not aware of their constitutional rights, roles and responsibilities in promoting good governance, accountability delivery.

Therefore, public involvement ensures that citizens have a direct collective voice in local government decision making processes, implementation, and evaluation. Many local governments tend to exclude or minimize public participation in decision making efforts claiming that citizens' engagement is too expensive and time consuming, yet many citizens' participation programs are initiated in response to public reaction towards a proposed project or initiative.

There are tangible benefits that can be derived from an effective citizen involvement program for instance information and idea generation on public issues, transparency, timely service delivery and proper channeling of services to priority areas.

Civic engagement at local level is the most promising way of involving the public and identifying itching citizen concerns and how best

they can be met. Providing more opportunities for citizen participation and input in government performance evaluation and policy decision making is an important strategy for improving trust in government.

Local governments continuously face the challenge of improving their quality of public service and their ability to implement adequate policies and practices in response to economic and social development needs. Development demands also influence citizens' expectations regarding local government responsiveness, transparency, and accountability.

The participation can therefore be physical through engaging citizens at village, parish level, virtual engagements through online forums and virtual discussion rooms, electronic polls etc. Citizen participation programs can be categorized into various levels of interaction and influence in the decision-making process, moving from basic to more in-depth participation: information, communication, consultation, deliberation, and actual decision making. Similarly, engagements can be through (1) communication, where information is conveyed from the government body to the public; (2) consultation, where information flows from the public to the government; and (3) participation, where information is exchanged between the public and the government and some degree of dialogue takes place.

Citizens who receive quality feedback and responsiveness when interacting with government through public participation programs are likely to perceive that they gain useful policy information that helps them to better understand government and community challenges.

Key Policy Recommendations to Strengthen Citizens' Engagement in Local Governance

- Situational analysis should be conducted by local government leaders to solicit citizens' opinions to identify key priority challenges and the needed solutions. This will enhance impactful allocation of public resources during local government budgeting processes and decision making. This will promote bottom-up planning by local councils.
- Undertake civic education to sensitize citizens about the constitutional roles, rights, and responsibilities in promoting good governance, accountability, transparency, and service delivery right from grassroots. The use of film screening to conduct civic education sessions should be emphasized especially in hard-to-reach areas.
- Incorporate Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in local government citizen engagement citizens. This will ease soliciting of feedback from citizens as portrayed in the Third National Development Plan (NDPIII).
- Launch a budget week where draft local government budgets are read out to the citizens before they are passed. This will enhance citizens' feedback and concerns for inclusion in the local government budgets before they are approved.

- Establish functional local community committees matching with all the existing ministries at local and central government level. For example, committees on education, health, security, transport and works e.t.c should report to their respective supervisors in order of the hierarchy of local government administration from village/cell to district/city level. Local council chairpersons should provide periodical reports to their supervisors, parish leaders to their supervisors e.t.c up to district and central government level to enhance citizen-oriented services.
- Toll free numbers/landlines should be available at every level of local government such that citizens can report directly to their leaders.
- Periodical citizens' forums should be conducted to monitor and evaluate the performance of local government leaders. Local government leaders should present their annual district plans to the citizens upon which this evaluation is based. This will enhance accountability, transparency, and citizen-oriented service delivery, build public trust in government systems, and bridge the communication and relationship gaps between local government leaders and citizens.

Conclusion

Local governments must move towards a participatory and meaningful democracy that can provide equality and welfare for all citizens. Local government are now in the frontline of social and political change no longer being simply a subsidiary of central government. They need to work closely with citizens in delivering a complex agenda of public services, economic growth, and social welfare. Citizens' engagement in participation programs is directly associated with their assessment of government transparency and accountability especially when engaged during the decision-making process.

Informed citizens and popular participation in policy making pave way for democratic governance. A reactive state and governing processes that are transparent to citizens improve the relationships between citizens and their local government leaders. The state alone cannot solve society's many problems or provide the remedies for democracy's deficits, this also requires citizens' action. A meaningful democracy must strengthen civic voices, demonstrate responsive governance systems and promote the interest of all its citizens.

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