

Over-centralisation of electricity sub-sector undermines delivery

Uganda's electricity sub-sector is caught in a governance paradox.

While generation capacity has expanded to over 2,000 MW and national grid coverage has grown steadily over the past decade, service reliability and last-mile access remain uneven. Many households and small enterprises still face frequent outages, transformer failures, and slow fault response times. Although national access rates have improved, disparities persist, especially in rural and peri-urban areas where infrastructure exists but service delivery is unreliable.

The core problem is not merely infrastructure. It is over-centralised planning, budgeting, and accountability in the electricity sub-sector that have left local governments and citizens largely disconnected from energy decision-making.

Uganda's electricity sector is not only operationally centralised; it is also centralised in planning and budgeting. Key decisions on network expansion, transformer placement, maintenance schedules, and investment priorities are largely made at national-level institutions. Local governments where electricity challenges are most visible have minimal formal authority over infrastructure prioritisation, budgeting, maintenance planning, or monitoring. This disconnect means that decisions are often made far from the communities they affect, resulting in mismatches between national priorities and local needs.

Uganda's decentralised governance framework requires districts and cities to prepare integrated development plans and budgets.

Uganda must decentralise energy planning and budgeting...



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Electricity



However, energy is often treated as an external sector rather than a core local service, despite its importance for urban development, public service delivery, and economic growth.

A clear example is the absence of dedicated energy officers in most local governments. While sectors such as health, education, and roads are institutionally anchored, energy lacks defined ownership at local level. This creates a coordination gap: electricity is essential across sectors, yet no local structure is responsible for planning and managing it.

Regional comparisons show that this is not inevitable. In Kenya, county governments play an active role in identifying demand hot-spots, co-financing projects, and coordinating electrification efforts with national agencies. This has enabled more targeted investments and improved responsiveness to local needs. Uganda, despite having a decentralised governance system, has not institutionalised a similar approach to energy planning.

Limited citizen participation has created a weak accountability ecosystem in which users are treated as passive consumers rather than active stakeholders. The electricity sector offers few structured platforms for citizens to influence planning, budgeting, or performance monitoring.

Electricity losses in Uganda are estimated at around 15 to 17 percent, with a significant share attributed to non-technical factors such as theft, illegal connections, and meter tampering. Vandalism of transformers, poles, and conductors further compounds the problem. A single damaged transformer can disrupt supply to hundreds of households and businesses, leading to prolonged outages, costly repairs, and reduced productivity.

Uganda must decentralise energy planning and budgeting to close the gap between national decision-making and local service realities. Introducing dedicated energy officers at district and city levels would strengthen technical capacity to coordinate electricity needs, identify infrastructure gaps, and engage utilities more effectively.

Uganda's electricity challenge is no longer about generation alone; it is about governance. Without decentralised planning, budgeting, and accountability, service delivery will continue to lag behind investment. Electricity governance must move closer to citizens, where demand exists, rather than remain concentrated within central institutions.

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