MPs accuse finance ministry of frustrating SAGE roll out

By Henry Sekanjako and Maria Wamala

Members of Parliament on the social protection forum have accused the finance ministry of frustrating efforts to have the elderly fund under the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE) rolled out to the whole country.

The legislators agreed to petition President Yoweri Museveni, demanding that he prevails over the finance ministry to ensure the full-scale roll-out of the programme.

The chairperson of the forum, Jacob Richards Opolot (Pallisa County), said the ministry is not enthusiastic to give money for SAGE because there is nothing that comes their way.

Through the gender ministry, the Government in 2010 started piloting the SAGE programme in 15 districts. The elderly persons currently benefiting, get sh25,000 per month.

Following the successful implementation of the programme on a pilot basis, the Government entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the UK Department of International Development (DFID Uganda) and Irish Aid Uganda to implement a phased national roll-out of the SAGE programme in 2015.

As part of the MOU, the Government, committed to provide counterpart funding between financial year 2015/16 and 2019/20 respectively to take over funding in seven of the 14 pilot districts while rolling out SAGE to 40 new districts.

Currently, the programme reaches beneficiaries in 40 districts of which 28 are funded by Government and 12 by development partners.

However, according to the MPs, failure to roll out the programme to the entire country is discriminatory against the potential beneficiaries in other districts.

Elderly persons receiving their SAGE grant. MPs argue that the programme should be rolled out countrywide or be abandoned

Speaking during a meeting to review the SAGE implementation at Parliament on Wednesday, Opolot said the finance ministry was adamant about the programme because its officials have nothing to get from it.

"They would easily want to kill a programme that does not directly benefit their selfish interests," he said.

He added: "There are a number of programmes that do not benefit people but the finance ministry is quick to provide money for them because something drops along their way and they gather it, but this one does not give them that opportunity," he said.

"This habit of practising sectarianism against senior citizens is not good. This money looks little, but it can be a curse on the progress of this country. Let us halt this programme until the Government is able to roll it out to the entire country," Bernard Atiku, (Ayivu County) said.

"We are not being fair to the elderly persons who have not benefited from this programme. We either halt it or phase it out. We cannot continue with the status quo," Kenneth Lubogo, the Bulamogi County MP, said.

Beatrice Rwakimari (Ntungamo District) said the President needs to know the political implications of implementing the programme in some districts and leaving out others.

Bunyole West County MP James Waluswaka said the worst scenario is when one's district is neighbouring one receiving the money while theirs does not.

He added: "A 90-year-old in Kabale is the same as one in Kotido. They have the same challenges and needs."

However, according to the gender ministry, the programme has been hampered by limited budget availed for the programme.

During the recently concluded budget process for the financial year 2017/18, sh17.5b out of the required sh29.15b was allocated, leaving a shortfall of sh11.65b.

BETWEEN THE LINES:

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...orters detained in Nalufenya facility