

Decentralisation is no longer relevant to our devt agenda

Before the Constitution was strangled in Parliament on December 20, 2017, decentralisation, which was one of the most viable avenues for policy reform in Uganda, had already become irrelevant to our development agenda.

The Local Governments Act 1997 operationalised the Decentralisation Policy 1992. (This law was amended in 2015.) Its three core provisions include: Decentralisation at all levels of local governments to ensure good governance and democratic participation in decision making by the people; revenue and political and administrative setup of local governments; and election of local councils.

Decentralisation appealed hugely to the post-1986 policy-makers trying to dig the economy out of the pit it had fallen into. So, in the 1990s Uganda embarked on a vigorous decentralisation process to enhance community participation in decision-making in local governance.

Indeed, the concept became a central pillar of policy reform adopted to promote democratisation,



improve service delivery and ensure that communities took ownership of local development projects from planning to implementation. Matters of poverty reduction and service provision were correctly intertwined in a development context.

By mid-1990s, decentralisation was the toast of Uganda. Its viability attracted serious scholars from as far as Japan, such as Prof Fumihiko Saito, who took keen interest in the link between Uganda's development and our "home-grown" decentralisation model, whose up-and-up story made global headlines.

Then things started going wrong in the early 2000s. Around that time, Dr Kizza Besigye made a move to wrest power from President Museveni. Ruthless political competition, low participation of locals in decision-making processes, challenges of implementing policies from different line ministries, and corruption seriously undermined Uganda's decentralisation process.

New studies by scholars such as Prof Yasin Olum of Makerere University, showed that the three key assumptions for Uganda's decentralisation – local citizens participating effectively in decision making, citizens holding leaders accountable, and elected leaders always working in the best interest of their electorate, were largely illusory. Instead it was found that in most cases, citizens had little understanding of their local economies, planning and budgeting processes were too complicated for many locals, and unscrupulous politicians were driving a selfish political agenda.

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