

Jim Mugunga, communications expert

More districts won't solve service delivery

Over the past few years, unfortunately, the political and some in the bureaucratic class in Uganda have stepped up their demands for excess, under the guise of "bringing services" nearer to the people.

They agitate and demand for "specialised and focused" entities, which, as they commonly argue, will make all the difference.

Their arguments are often laced with "sweet to the ear political-content" and "promises for political gains". They make their projects easier to sell among colleagues whose mantra is simply and basically, scratch my back and I scratch yours. The evidence is in the more new districts so far created or just waiting to be signed off.

Obvious to all but the creators of such monsters; these 'services nearer to the people' have completely taken on a life of their own than our economy can maintain. Instead of serving the intended beneficiaries, they have proven to take sleazy opportunities nearer to sharks and their cronies.

They are in short a formalised and guaranteed source of mismanagement and the single biggest contributor to a non-functional, blotted and extremely inefficient public service.

It is, therefore, refreshing to hear such champions as Keith Muhakanizi of the Ministry of Finance continually speaking up boldly on the gravity of the problem created by those agitating for more districts.

Although he is definitely treading in murky political waters, he is in usual style forthright to point out that any new district comes with a budget for all associated administrative overheads.

Alongside the creation of a single district comes the demand for several municipalities, which in turn need structures and funding.

Creation of a new district automatically results in several Members of Parliament whose salary, benefits and other facilitation must be met. It brings on board a CAO and all staff such as district health officers, agricultural officers, environmental officers etc, who must be hired and equipped and whose docket must likewise be staffed.

Sadly, there is so far no evidence to suggest that those who agitate for these new political centres and related structures actually realise or care about the magnitude of the resources' needs that they are creating.

I doubt whether they even fathom the possibility that the monstrous political centres may not necessarily interpret into service delivery, let alone take any assumed service closer to the citizen.

On the contrary, several new districts still operate out of infrastructure and facilities of their mother districts.

They still use staff attached to parent administrative units, while the majority have either refused to move or merely absconded from new district stations.

Others, for example, Mityana district, created out of the then Mubende district,



Creation of a new district automatically results in several MPs whose salary, benefits and other facilitation must be met. It brings on board a CAO and all staff such as district health officers

is barely worthy the new title it claims. It barely collects revenue from its major trading centre, which over the years has been rendered non-competitive by the Kampala-Mubende-Fortportal highway that bypassed it.

The district planners seem so unbothered or absolutely incapable of tapping into the opportunity the highway offers to boost local businesses and hence local revenue collection.

The physical impact of Mityana district local economy is evident in this dark, hardly lit sleepy town; with its run down cattle trail-like impassable main street complete with record-breaking horror stories from its main referral hospital.

Mityana, which once upon a time had schools of excellence in education that were often used to offer pilot schemes for innovations in curriculum development in such places as Namutamba has since shifted to unenviable worst position amongst the last in the country.

Mityana district like others of its generation is clearly weighed down by the cost of funding its political and administrative class. The short of it is that the whole purpose and justification for creating these structures is either not realised from the start or is gradually

eroded as time goes by.

The above scenario is playing out in related other fields such as the proliferation of regional, religious or even tribal universities.

The run-away licensing of universities and issuance of charters to appease regional or other sentiments is greatly undermining Uganda's hitherto highly regarded niche in delivering quality education.

Just like setting up a district, the cost of setting up a university; the infrastructure and associated qualified human resources, tools and equipment and the demands of funding research etc are all well documented.

In Uganda, this seems to matter less and "universities" continue to pop up faster than the next chapatti rolex stall.

The majority of these institutions, which started as private entities, in truth end up in need of national treasury support – if they are to bring services nearer to the people!

The difference between the education institutions and the newly created districts is that the acts of the former expose them in real time; unlike the districts for whom the taxpayer shoulders the next local government budget year after year!

So while Muhakanizi and some of his teammates soldier on in this lonely, anti-excesses drive, it is refreshing to note that the cry for a freeze on creating new districts is beginning to sound a little louder. The louder it gets the better for Uganda as we aim to match back on the path to achieving projected economic growth.

Until we take the small, painful steps as a nation, we shall not achieve forecast development. The piecemeal changes such as reforms in wages, pension, government accounts (now single all tin on the radar account), manufacturing and production, settlement of domestic arrears, among others, are part of the guaranteed route to making a difference in the nation's livelihoods.

Of course the recurring challenges such as the cost of living that is propelling public servants across the board to demand for enhanced pay should also be addressed.

These, and other justifiable social projects, including health specialised equipped facilities and insurance and a more reliable standard gauge railway, among others, have to be given priority.

With all the above realities staring the nation squarely in the face, doing nothing to reverse avoidable excesses our time, and pretending that the citizen will bear the brunt endlessly, is not an option.

My prayer is for a solid executive statement during the state of the nation address or budget speech speaking to ongoing new districts craze to help of un-equivocal national policy director the matter.

The writer is a communications expert and spokesperson of the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development