

Will technology deal with procurement flaws?

By Billy Rwothungeyo

Public procurement procedures have often been the target for blame on the delivery of goods and services, especially by politicians.

Indeed, several high profile projects have been held back by lengthy procurement processes. It took two years to procure a contractor for the Karuma hydropower project, a process which should have taken six months.

Finally, the construction of the 600MW dam kicked off after the Chinese company, Sinohydro Corporation, was handpicked to undertake the works, a move which side stepped the procurement process.

Others are the construction of the National Social Security Fund pension towers and several road projects, including the Mukono-Katosi road, have been held back by similar squabbles.

It seems even the amendments to the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Authority (PPDA) Act, which came to force in 2014, have not helped matters, because the law is being amended again.

E-procurement emerges

The electronic procurement, often referred to as e-procurement, has been touted as a possible magic bullet to address the delays.

Befittingly, last week's 10th East African Procurement Forum in Kampala, hosted by PPDA was held under the theme: *Leveraging the use of technology to improve public*



Works on Mukono-Katosi road were halted because of the procurement contract saga between Eutaw Construction Company and Uganda National Roads Authority

procurement outcomes.

At the forum, PPDA's acting executive director Benson Turamye, revealed to the *New Vision* that the public procurement regulator, will seal a deal with a provider this month, which will signal the start of the transition from manual to e-procurement in public entities.

Already, Rwanda and Kenya have taken on e-procurement, a move Uganda is hoping to emulate next financial year, starting with a pilot project in 10 selected entities, before a

countrywide rollout.

So, will going electronic improve the outcomes of public procurement?

Turamye explained - how e-procurement will improve efficiency.

"There is going to be improved efficiency by minimising the procurement cycle time through reduced transaction time. We hope to realise more value for money through the reduction of costs of conducting procurements," Turamye said.

"We are also going to have centralised tracking of transactions, which will enable reporting on requisitions, items purchased, orders processed and payments made," he said.

Turamye also promised that there will be more access to procurement information to the general public and civil society organisations when e-procurement is ushered in.

Grace Nakuya, a senior procurement specialist at the country office of the World Bank, said the adoption of e-procurement will weed out corruption.

"E-procurement removes the need for human contact, therefore, in the first place, reducing the incidences of corruption. It is also, by its very nature, transparent. Once you submit it (a bid), no one can change it."

Augustus Seminega, the director general of the Rwanda Public Procurement Authority had some advice for Uganda ahead of the much anticipated rollout of public procurement year.

"We had to improve our infrastructure first. We have fibre optic cables in the

whole of Rwanda. The government has invested a lot in information, communication and technology education of the population. With these conditions, the time was right for us to rollout e-procurement in Rwanda," Seminega said.

Technology not everything

Nakuya warned that technology alone will be inadequate in transforming the outcomes of public procurement and that transforming people's mindsets is important.

"When you introduce a new technology, it should be fit for your circumstances and context. On the other hand, you need to prepare the people to have sufficient change management and sensitisation, so that they own the technology."

Joel Katerega, a member of the PPDA tribunal, said Uganda should follow in the footsteps of Kenya and abandon the many sub-committees in the procurement cycle.

It was intimated at the forum that PPDA is pondering dumping contracts committees entirely in the public procurement system.

The Inspector General of Government, Justice Irene Mulyagonja, said it will take more than just technology to get rid of corrupt tendencies among public procurement stakeholders.

"Companies conspire to fix bid prices. One time, they agree that company X takes the bid, the next time, company Y, they co-ordinate in such a way that it is not easy to get them," she said.

ON THE GROUND

■ Benson Turamye, PPDA's acting executive director, explained that e-procurement will improve efficiency. He said: "There is going to be improved efficiency by minimising the procurement cycle time through reduced transaction time."