



Commissions. President Museveni flags off road equipment. This was part of the 1,151 pieces of equipment that were to be given out to 118 districts in Uganda during the commissioning ceremony at Bweyogerere, Kira Municipality, Wakiso District. FILE PHOTO

Red Alert. As the government embarks on the distribution of road units to each of the 118 districts, **Amos Ngwomoya** reports that there are concerns that the issues that grounded the road units that were distributed to districts only five years ago could rear their ugly head again.

In June this year, there was fanfare as President Museveni commissioned what State House said were 1,151 pieces of road construction equipment freshly imported from Japan for distribution to all the 118 districts.

The equipment, bought using a loan from the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation, will be used to maintain the roads under the care of district local governments.

Each district will receive a road unit comprising one motor grader, one vibro roller, one wheel loader, one water bowser and two dump trucks.

But only five years ago, the government purchased road maintenance equipment for the same districts from China, the Changlin motor graders that were distributed by FAW, spending a staggering \$100m (Shs 355b).

Ms Monica Ntege Azuba, the Works minister, says the government spent Shs2.7b to buy each of the 118 units, giving a total of Shs318b that was spent on buying the recent equipment. Added to the Shs360b spent for the same purpose in 2012, this means the government has spent at least Shs673b on buying road construction equipment

Fears as govt supplies new district road units

for districts during a period of five years. For equipment that is meant to maintain roads, five years is by any estimation too short a lifespan. But that is how long it took for the government to contract a new loan to replace the equipment it bought from China in 2012, using a fresh loan.

In the parking yards of most districts, the Changlin graders lie disused, many disfigured. In some districts the equipment was abandoned in far off places where they had been taken to help grade roads.

Blame game, fresh worries

The district administrations were left with their old problem of having to grade roads that were rapidly being washed away by torrential rains in many parts of the country.

The central government on its part, blamed the local governments for failing to maintain the equipment, and many of the districts shot back that the equipment bought from China, was sub-standard and

could not effectively discharge the task of ploughing through Uganda's rocks. Much of the equipment, different district leaders said, was disfigured in the process of fixing roads.

"The low standard road construction equipment which government purchased in 2012 was bound to fail because our low budgets couldn't sustain the constant breakdown," Mr Matia Lwanga Bwanika, the Wakiso District chairman, says.

Mr Bwanika accuses the government of carrying out botched procurements regarding the purchase of the equipment bought in 2012.

He says China should not have been the right source for road construction equipment in the first place.

Mr Bwanika raises another fear, which he says undermined the government's earlier attempt at acquiring road maintenance equipment for districts. He says the new equipment "will still serve no purpose if the government doesn't increase

the maintenance fees (accorded to the districts).

He says the remittances districts get from the Road Fund is too little to facilitate the maintenance of the equipment.

In considering the issues arising out of the procurement and maintenance of road construction equipment, it is important to recall that the government had earlier abandoned the practice of owning and operating road construction equipment, preferring to contract out the function to private players.

Tendering out the maintenance of roads in districts, of course, over the years was perceived as one of the biggest areas where corruption took place, with contractors having to remit a big chunk of the contract money to those who offered them contracts.

It is not clear whether it was for this reason that the government decided to reverse the policy and acquire road construction equipment as it had done in the past. But, as is

apparent with the experiment of the acquisitions in 2012, the policy to which the government has reverted is also riddled with problems.

It is not clear, for instance, whether Ugandans get value for money during the procurement of the road units, as Mr Bwanika points out regarding the machines that were brought in 2012. But besides that, there are serious problems to do with maintenance of the equipment.

Mr Bwanika refers to the money availed to districts being too little to maintain the equipment. The maintenance, apart from procuring spare parts for repairs and service costs, will also require having competent personnel to operate and maintain the equipment and fuelling. This is perhaps too big a cost for some districts to shoulder.

According to statistics from the Ministry of Works and Transport, the National Road Fund has been releasing Shs477b annually for the maintenance of roads by all local



Defunct. Grounded tractors at Fort Portal Municipality park yard. PHOTO BY ALEXASHABA



Discused. Malfunctioning tractors that were used to construct Kalangala-Bugoma road. PHOTO BY HENRY LUBULWA



"Government entered a contract with the supplier of this new equipment to offer mechanical assistance for the first three years. We shall also be on ground to assess the performance of local government as far as this new equipment is concerned. We need to appreciate the fact that government is financially constrained but we will always do our best to see that the road network in these local governments improves."

HON. MONICA AZUBA NTEGE
TRANSPORT STATE MINISTER

governments, distributed according to the sizes of districts.

This Financial Year 2017/2018, the Ministry of Works was allocated Shs4.5 trillion, or 20.2 per cent of the Shs29 trillion budget. Last Financial Year 2016/2017, just like the previous eight or so years, this same sector got the sole largest allocation (Shs3.8 trillion). The roads sub-sector, through the Uganda National Roads Authority (Unra), got Shs3.4 trillion.

Regarding maintaining the new machines, however, Works minister Azuba says there is no cause for alarm.

"Government entered a contract with the supplier of this new equipment to offer mechanical assistance for the first three years. We shall also be on ground to assess the performance of local government as far as this new equipment is concerned. We need to appreciate the fact that government is financially constrained but we will always do our best to see that the road network in these local governments improves," Ms Azuba says.

Cries over equity

In distributing the road construction units, the government has adopted the approach of "one man, one vote", or, to be accurate, "one district, one unit."

But some districts are much bigger than others.

"For instance, Wakiso alone has a road network of about 3,000km and there is no way one road construction equipment unit can be sustainable. This is another

critical area which the government must look into by giving out equipment after considering the size of some districts," Wakiso District chairman Bwanika, says. Mr Sam Wadri Nyakua, the Arua District chairperson, says the government should pay particular attention to dis-

1,151

ROAD CONSTRUCTION EQUIPMENT FRESHLY IMPORTED FROM JAPAN

tricts with a big road network.

"Arua District has a road network of 1,200km but we only get Shs600m (annually) yet one kilometre costs about Shs3.5m to maintain. This money isn't enough at all and that's why when the graders that were supplied to us in 2012 broke down, we couldn't manage the costs of bringing them to life again. The problem of low funding cuts across all local governments and we have been engaging the Ministry of Local Government on this issue," Mr Nyakua says.

There are more fears. Mr Ronald Mutegeki, the Bundibugyo District chairperson, fears that with the "bad nature of soils" in his area, the equipment will require high maintenance fees to fix the

road equipment whenever it breaks.

"For instance, the Road Fund fee isn't enough to maintain all the costs that come with the breakdown of the equipment. Many graders purchased in 2012 couldn't get back to life because some local governments realised that they were just liabilities," he said.

Phased delivery

Daily Monitor has established that the equipment will be delivered to the districts in a phased manner because the units already on the ground cannot cover all the districts.

Minister Azuba says that other equipment will be exported, adding that district bosses must not worry about the delayed delivery of their road construction equipment.

Asked about the China-made graders which the government purchased in 2012 but later broke down, the minister blamed the local governments.

"Those graders were meant to maintain and upgrade the already existing roads but not open new roads like how majority of district officials used to do. As a result, they broke down before they could even accomplish work for which they were meant," Ms Azuba says.

She says the new equipment is fixed with trackers to monitor its operation, which will also be used by the government to assess the performance of the equipment in all local governments.

Mr Robert Ziribasanga, the Buyende District chairperson says, however, that the road equipment is commonly broken by the heavy workload they have to discharge.

For Buyende District, which is both rocky and swampy, she says, such equipment would be vulnerable to mechanical glitches not because of the workload but the nature of the area.

"We have one grader which is on and off, and this affects our roads services as a district. When one hears of the Japan-made road equipment, they would of course get excited because Japan makes durable things. But then which assurance can we get that this equipment will really work out with the little funding from Road Fund that we get?" he asks.

Mr Ziribasanga says the available money that will have been spent to open more feeder roads is instead used to maintain the graders and other equipment.

Mr Tom Sserwanga, the Kayunga District chairperson, also has complaints to do with funding, among other things.

He says: "Out of the 1,500km road network in Kayunga District, we can only manage to maintain 350km because of our low budget envelope. We also receive only Shs500m from the Road Fund and this money comes in batches yet it is not even enough. There are other factors like heavy rainfall which makes it hard for some of our road equipment to work hence stalled services," he says.

But Mr Ben Kamumanya, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Local Government, however, says the local governments should not worry about the funding as far as maintenance of the road equipment is concerned.

"Let them not express fear because government has already kicked off training on how this equipment will be handled. For instance, the central region had training in Luweero and it will roll across other regions. Besides, we are meeting all local government officials on August 1 to discuss the same. I think it's too early for them to worry," Mr Kamumanya says.

The seminars and other interventions may put the hearts of district chairmen at rest. But Ugandans will likely worry that the Shs673b spent on buying road equipment alone over the past five years should deliver more value for them.

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