When a nation starts to question its own mind

One in four Ugandans is living with a mental health condition.

When you first hear it, the number is almost impossible to grasp. Out of a population of roughly 45 million, that means about 11 million people—children, youth, adults—quietly struggling with anxiety, depression, trauma, or other mental health challenges. Breaking it down, adults, more than half the population, account for around six to seven million people, while children and adolescents make up another 3.5 to 4 million.

Now imagine it in everyday life. In a classroom of forty students, 10 carry invisible weight that no one talks about.

In an office of 20 colleagues, five are silently fighting battles that don't show on the surface.

Walk through a neighbourhood of 100 homes—25 hide stories of quiet suffering, of distress that never made headlines.

These are not abstract numbers—they are lives, families, friends, neighbours. People you know, people you pass every day, people whose pain is invisible until it becomes impossible to ignore.

Before 2010, northern Uganda lived under a very different reality. The Lord's Resistance Army insurgency left trauma etched into every home, every child, every community.

In those villages, distress was visible, named, undeniable. Because it could not be ignored, it demanded some response, however limited.

Elsewhere, mental suffering was quieter, often dismissed as weakness, spiritual failure, or personal flaw.

Care remained concentrated in institutions like Butabika National Referral Mental Hospital. The unspoken rule was that mental illness only mattered at its most extreme, when it became violent, disruptive, or visibly mad.

After 2010, the crisis began to spread nationwide—but it changed form. Economic strain tightened around a growing youth population. Education expanded, but opportunities lagged.

Urbanisation fractured traditional support networks. Social pressures increased, and the shock of Covid-19 exposed long-simmering vulnerabilities. What had once been overt trauma in the north now became silent, persistent strain across the country. Anxiety, depression, substance misuse, and quiet despair became widespread—but invisible.

Uganda's threshold for recognising mental illness remained dangerously high. Help is sought only when distress becomes extreme, dramatic, impossible to ignore.

Millions continue to function while deteriorating quietly, until the point of crisis: suicide, addiction, collapse.

The system was designed for visible breakdown, not the slow erosion of well-being that now defines the national landscape.

Uganda did not stumble into this reality. It evolved into it, structurally and socially, without ever redefining what mental health means.

The question is no longer how we got here—it is whether we can finally see clearly enough to act, recognising distress before it becomes a crisis.

Because if we fail to shift the threshold, one in four will stop being a statistic—it will become a mirror reflecting a society that ignored its quietest cries for far too long.

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Denis Yub
Mental Health

Mr Denis Yub is a human rights activist& sociopolitical commentator.

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