

GOVERNMENT, DISTRICTS LOSING BILLIONS IN ROTTING VEHICLES

By Billy Rwothungeyo

The Government is losing hundreds of millions of shillings trapped in undisposed of old vehicles which lie derelict at the different district headquarters. The non-disposal of the vehicles is beginning to raise eyebrows leading those responsible in the local and central government to face accusations as to who is to blame for it.

The biggest culprits, according to the Auditor General (AG), are Adjumani, Mpigi, Rubirizi, Nakasongola, Kibuku, Pallisa, Nebbi and Bushenyi districts. But other districts also have their share of undisposed of vehicles.

In his report for the year ending June 2015, the AG noted that these vehicles in the yards deteriorate with time and as a result lose value. The AG's senior communications officer, Gloria Nakibuka Namugera, could not put a figure to the loss yet because the assets have different values, but says the sum is in hundreds of millions of shillings.

The question, therefore, is why are districts not disposing of these vehicles? The Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Authority (PPDA) Act clearly states the procedure for disposal of government assets, including old

Mbale district procurement officer George Masaba says there are always many parties who have interest in the vehicles

vehicles. It states that they can be disposed of through public auction, bidding, direct negotiations and sale to public officers or destruction. They can also be disposed of through conversion or classification into another form for disposal by sale, trade-in, transfer to another person and disposing entity and donation – though donation has to be done with the permission of the finance minister.

Both local and central government officials responsible for the disposal of the vehicles have denied responsibility and instead pointed fingers at the other.

Hope Olive Nakyana, the chief administrative officer (CAO) of Jinja,

says user departments at the district usually insist that they will get money and repair grounded vehicles.

"Before you realise it, they are three or four in the parking yard."

In Arua, the district procurement officer, Sam Draku, blames the top leadership.

"Entities should have an interest in disposal to start with. If the accounting officer has the drive, establishes a board of survey, makes these members work and comes out with a report, then everything will fall in place," he says.

"Maybe procurement is more of a priority for many entities, so they tend to forget about disposal," he adds.

His assertion seems to be supported by PPDA, which points out that during procurement audits, it usually discovers that some entities do not have disposal plans.

Mbale district procurement officer George Masaba, whose district is one of the star performers, lays the blame on district procuring and disposal units, not CAOs.

"Districts

are failing miserably with disposal because they do not keep proper records of assets. So they do not know when a vehicle is supposed to be disposed of," Masaba says. He adds that procurement officials need to alert and advise CAOs on what to do.

But Masaba also reveals something interesting. He says there are always vehicles – from civil servants to political bigwigs.

Some people want these vehicles, but want to get them cheaply. Because of the long periods they are parked, some people remove vital parts, leaving a shell which they buy off cheaply as scrap and then go home and fix the missing parts that they stole.

For some of the politicians, he says, there is fear that if they stop the disposal of an old vehicle, it can be used against them by their opponents.

"They fear that their opponents can use disposal activities to discredit them," You see, when so and so came

to our district, he said all our vehicles are too old when 'suppli'. It is just a case of poor handling by the user, so they fear to report it for disposal," he adds.

Draku agrees, saying when the vehicle or motorcycle is disposed of, it is usually just a frame and that clever person who stole the parts will also take the frame home where he has kept the engine.

"If the process of disposal is expeditious, some of these thieves would be chased," he says.

Forces outside the district

But the district authorities also point fingers at the ministries – which they refer to as external forces – for some of the mess. They say some of the vehicles, especially for sectors like the Office of the Prime Minister, education and health departments, are not disposed of because the ministries and the local governments do not seem to agree on what to do.

"We have an old Northern 2 YEARS Roseline Adongo Luhoni, Mbale chief administrative officer, says in her Ntungamo posting in 2014, she wrote to Chief Government Valuer to go to Ntungamo to look at the items for disposal in vain. She says she only got a phone call from someone in the valuer's office in April this year, saying they have seen the letter.

Works ministry blamed The Ministry of Works and Transport was also partly blamed for the mess. Roseline Adongo Luhoni, Mbale chief administrative officer, says in her Ntungamo posting in 2014, she wrote to the Chief Government Valuer to go to Ntungamo and look at the items for disposal in vain. She says she only got a phone call from someone in the valuer's office in April this year, saying they have seen the letter.

"You can see the time lag. It took over two years for the call to come through, and yet the board of survey report is valid for only one financial



Old vehicles rotting away at the Nebbi district parking yard. Such vehicles usually lack a new spare parts. Photos by Billy Rwothungeyo

According to the Auditor General, the biggest culprits are Adjumani, Mpigi, Rubirizi, Nakasongola, Kibuku, Pallisa, Nebbi and Bushenyi districts.

Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF) vehicle. The last time we did disposal, we wanted to dispose of it but the NUSAF people refused, saying they will do it by themselves. Three years down the road, the vehicle is rotting here," Draku explains.

NUSAF is a government project implemented mainly in northern Uganda and is overseen by the Office of the Prime Minister.

Government motorcycles rotting away at Nebbi district headquarters

year. Ideally, when the board of survey comes out in August, it should be implemented between August and June."

Milly Kukiriza, the procurement officer of Kibuku district, says even getting an engineer from the regional works office in the neighbouring Mpigi district to assess vehicles is a challenge.

"We write to them and they do not respond. The board of survey does their work, but when it comes to getting the engineers and valuers to come to the district, it is a struggle," she says.

"For the vehicles you see lying there, we wrote letters as far back as 2015. Even when PPDA comes to do audits and they ask us about the vehicles, we tell them the same story."

PPDA speaks out

When contacted, PPDA denied responsibility, saying it does its part.

"After conducting our procurement audits, we make recommendations for disciplinary action against culpable entities. For district local governments, we make recommendations to the Ministry of Local Government," PPDA spokesperson Sylvia Kirabo says.

The local government ministry also pushes responsibility to the district officials. Issa Gomonye, the commissioner for urban administration at the ministry, says local governments are self-accounting, so the ministry cannot answer for their wrongs.

"What we do is advise the local governments to implement the recommendations of PPDA to dispose of the vehicles."

Other stakeholders' say

Gilbert Kermundu, the Chief Government Valuer, admits that his office is partly to blame for the old vehicles' fiasco at the districts. "The challenge is how to harmonise our schedules with those of the works ministry engineers when we are called upon by districts to go evaluate these vehicles for disposal," Kermundu says.

"My officers may be ready to travel to a particular district on one day, yet the chief mechanical engineer's team is not ready on that day, and vice versa," he explains.

But Eng. Tony Kavuma, the commissioner mechanical services and chief mechanical engineer at the works ministry, denies his team being at fault.

"When my office receives these requests, we acknowledge and act on them. We have enough engineers to cover all the districts in Uganda. May be it is the Chief Government Valuer who does not have enough staff."

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RECOMMENDATIONS DETERRENT MEASURES

A number of the officials in the districts recommended that the PPDA and the Auditor General institute more punitive measures as a deterrent against what is happening at the districts as far as disposal of vehicles is concerned.

"Let entities take responsibility. Accounting officers need to start taking disposal of assets as seriously as they do with procurements," Draku says.

And Masaba says users must also be held responsible.

"When a car has broken down, how do you take care of it? Where do you take it? Someone should be answerable."

According to PPDA, more stakeholders need to put districts on the spot over these commissions and omissions.

"We call upon the non-state actors and the general public to join the authority in our efforts to mount pressure on the government entities to take disposal of public assets seriously," Kirabo says.

MISSING PARTS

A number of cars that are rotting away at district headquarters have few parts like the engine and tyres missing. Sometimes, the parts are stolen by unscrupulous workers who put back the parts after buying the vehicles cheaply.



Auditor General John Muwanga

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A government tractor rotting away at Arua district headquarters

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