FROM 33 IN 1986 WHEN NRM CAME TO POWER, TO 122 TODAY, THE DISTRICTS KEEP INCREASING

Will the new districts survive on their own?

BY RONALD MUGABE

On July 1, the people of Rukiga constituency woke up under a different cloud. That day marked the end of their historical connection to Kabale district. Though this separation might not have come with a huge concrete wall built to demarcate a boundary between the two Rukiga-speaking districts, it sure ended the dependence of Rukiga on Kabale's resources.

For Patrick Besigye Keihwa, the Kabale district LC5 chairperson, this part of Kigezi is no longer under his jurisdiction. This also happened in Namisindwa, Pakwach, Butebo, Kyotera and Bunyangabu as they too became districts.

The others Kagadi, Kakumiro, Omoro and Rubanda, attained district status last year.

At the time of independence in 1962, the country had only 18 districts. When the National Resistance Movement (NRM) took over power in 1986, there were 33 districts. Today, the number has significantly risen to 122 – and still counting.

Still to come are Nabilatuk, Bugweri, Kasanda, Kwania, Kapelebyong and Kikuube, which will become effective in July next year. Obongi, Kazo, Rwampara, Kitagwenda, Madi-Okollo, Karenga and Lusot will follow in July 2019.

SKEPTICISM

Several stakeholders, both local and international, have criticised the move by the Government. But despite the criticism, government insists on establishing more districts in what it believes will increase political social service delivery.

Many have come to the conclusion that although the move seeks to enhance political participation at the lower level, it has not translated into real community involvement in policy decisions. Neither has it contributed to improved social service delivery.

Makerere University don, Prof. Mwambutsya Ndebesa, says the continued formation of districts is not viable.

"All these districts rely on the central government for almost 80% of their needs. They cannot raise revenue locally because they do not have enough sources of tax. Worse still, the Decentralisation Act does not give them many sources of taxation.

"They used to rely on graduated tax, but ever since it was abolished, district local governments look to the central government for support. The resource from which they would get their tax would be agriculture, but this is not taxed," he argues.

"The old districts may have infrastructure, office equipment and machinery, but the new ones do not and it will take some time for them to acquire those tools," he adds.

Prof. Ndebesa also points out that 'districtisation' has often been criticised because it increases pressure on the already meager resources of the central government.

"Our budget is so narrow that whatever is sent from the centre to these districts is hardly enough to cause substantial positive impact. It is no secret that this is done based on political rather than social service delivery logic," he elaborates.

Many of the local government headquarters have no resources to build or hire accomodation. Kalangala district headquarters is one of the older ones

INFRASTRUCTURE ABSENT

A 2014 research paper (Districts creation and its impact on local government in Uganda) by Jane Ayeko-Kümmeth, a PhD candidate at the University of Bayreuth in Germany, highlighted that the starting point of any public administration demands presence of physical infrastructure, not just for service provision, but also to accommodate social service providers such as civil servants and policy makers.

"Unfortunately, for Uganda, most of the new district governments do not have basic buildings. As one civil servant in Wakiso observed: "The system is surrounded by numerous challenges having to hire accomodation for the headquarters". A visit to some of these districts proved some of the lamentations, as most offices lacked even the basic furniture, had no electricity or access to clean water. Naturally, the state of infrastructural development impedes local government practices. In the absence of well-developed social infrastructure, it is difficult to attract qualified personnel critical for the running and management of local governments," the paper reads.

OPTIMISTIC LEADERS

But Tom Butime, the Minister for Local Government, in a telephone interview with *Saturday Vision,* emphasised that these districts are budgeted for and, therefore, can be able to run their activities without so much inconvenience.

"When you speak about the districts not having premises for their headquarters, I find it odd. Many of those districts find their way in county or sub-county headquarters. It is only Pakwach that I think has such an issue because they are working in a building belonging to the Ministry of Health, but arrangements are being made to get them their own premises," he explains.

Prof. Mwambutsya Ndebesa

Butime also adds that the new districts are required to discuss with their parent districts so they can share some facilities as they transition into their new status.

Jogo Kenneth Biryabarema, the Rubanda district LC5 chairperson, says running the one-year-old district on a small resource envelope has been a tedious experience, but has greater hope for the future.

"We got district status, but lacked almost everything required to run independently. We can hardly collect any local revenues. For example, Rubanda has a lot of forests but we do not have a hammer to stamp the timber. The dealers, therefore, still prefer to deal with our mother district, Kabale and this is where the timber revenue goes; meaning we lose out on it," he explains.

"Our budget is so narrow that whatever is sent from the centre to the districts is hardly enough to cause substantial positive impact"

Biryabarema also points out the challenge of limited staff. "The staffing levels are low. We share staff with Kabale. In most cases, we only have departmental heads who are also serving in interim capacity and lack the required experience. This overstretches us because such officials cannot go to the field to do tax collection," he elaborates.

Biryabarema blames this on the Government's failure to enable young districts transition from their mother districts.

"We share old vehicles with Kabale. This brought about the challenges in transportation and service delivery within the district because even the two vehicles we moved with from Kabale broke down. Right now, both the chairman and chief administrative officer do not have vehicles and this forces us to perform below capacity," he says.

However, Biryabarema is appreciative of the fact that Rubanda obtained district status, stating that this has come with significant benefits such as improved water systems, roads, a new 22-office block. In addition, there is revenue sharing from organisations such as the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and non-government organisations like UNICEF have also been able to move to the district.

"Using the little money we get from the central government, we have allocated about sh400m to construct and repair six gravity flow water schemes. We also used about the same amount to improve our district road network. Now that we are waiting for our own road construction units, I believe we shall do a lot better," he states.

RESOURCE SHARING

Godfrey Byamugisha, the interim chairman of Rukiga district, told *Saturday Vision* that they (district leadership) have not yet received money from the central government, but are mobilising resources to set the district rolling.

"We are borrowing resources such as furniture from our five sub-counties to put at the district headquarters at Rwamucucu," he explains.

Byamugisha anticipates challenges ranging from inadequate staff, lack of office space, transport, machinery and unavailability of accommodation facilities, but is still optimistic.

"I foresee our Mparo Health Centre IV being elevated to a district hospital. We are also going to change the area where our headquarters are located to Rukiga town council and this will facilitate more development initiatives," he says.

Going up north, Odongo Obote, the LC5 chairperson of 10 -year-old Otuke complains of significant inadequacies that hamper service delivery.

"We survive on the help from development partners such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency which is paying our health workers in the district," he explains.

Obote says they have resolved to re-strategise by setting priorities and approaching more development partners on issues of health, sanitation and environment since the funding they get from the central government cannot enable them meet their people's needs adequately.

It remains to be seen whether things will go as he anticipates, but many questions remain on how independently these districts will run smoothly, especially those without local resources to mobilise revenue from.