

LETTER OF THE DAY

Why it's still costly to access public services in Uganda

In almost all public institutions are client charters decorated as wall hangings. On them are written core values such as transparency, integrity, accountability, equity and fairness. However, these written values take the backseat as the unwritten rules take the day in the course of service delivery.

The National Governance, Peace and Security Survey report released by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (Ubos) last year indicated that nearly five out of 10 Ugandans don't trust public institutions. It further revealed that the level of trust in public institutions had declined from 54 percent in 2017 to 47 percent in 2024/2025. These are not just statistics, they are peoples' experiences who feel public institutions are corrupt, bureaucratic and can hardly live up to their expectations.

No wonder, it's a commonly held belief that you must know someone, who knows someone, somewhere to somehow get a service. Otherwise, being on your own might cost you a life. Imagine waking up so early to stand in the queue as the general rule states "first come, first serve" for most public institutions, only for someone who woke up five hours late to find their way first to see that doctor you have been longing to see.

Punctuality doesn't matter in some public institutions - what matters is being connected to someone there - who can handpick you to meet that commissioner or registrar to solve your problem. Statements like "please come back tomorrow" are typical of many public servants.

Unfortunately, the long dis-



tances trekked by clients is negligible. Sometimes it's the temperament of the official you came to see that day to determine one's fate - whether to be worked on or be postponed. Some clients reach an extent of lodging nearby some public institutions because they cannot afford transport back home until their issues solved.

Transparency and integrity may for now mean something until you meet that court clerk asking you to speak as a "Ugandan" for your matter to be expeditiously handled. A tax officer somewhere in Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) will ask for "motivation" before clearance of your goods regardless of the anticipated losses on the same

goods.

Accountability now lies in the museum of most public institutions. You may look odd to some officer handling your pension request the moment you turn up with all the required documents. For some reason, they expect you to at least have missing documents to allow the fixers with the system milk the situation.

Getting a placement for your child in some government schools is almost impossible, if all you are presenting are good grades. The stinking reality is that those good grades should be accompanied by something - and once you are not willing to part with an "envelope", another parent whose child has

poor grades is willing to get that placement at a cost.

Merit is a thing of the past. If you doubt this, try applying for any government job. In fact, life will shortlist you faster than all the public institutions where you have applied for jobs. Unless you have that uncle who drinks from the same bar with some influential government official, you might keep applying for jobs until you finally give up. The unpopular opinion is that a system that recognises merit over connections is blemished. Not to downplay connections but at least they should escort merit.

Equity and fairness are clear on paper in many public institutions but limited in practice. This is why the elderly, widows and orphans are the biggest victims of land grabbing. Yet in most cases, the land grabbers are invisible powerful actors in the system where the victims should seek either help or justice.

The situation is as complex as everyone thinks. Today, the market is filled with more power brokers than neurologists. Literally, there are people paid to connect you to some public officials, maybe you have just not met them.

One wonders if the actual problem is institutional or a moral breakdown. Whatever the case is, our public institutions need to reform and uphold professional core values if public trust and confidence is to be restored. I doubt whether that would be really asking for too much.

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