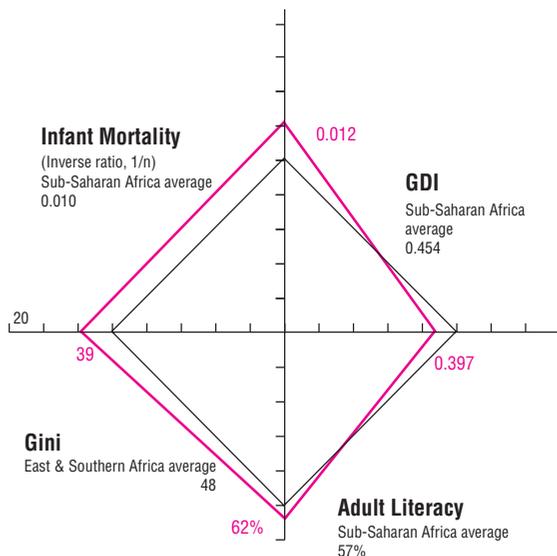


• ROBERT EKONGOT

PROGRESSING WITH HANDICAPS



The Equity Diamond: National values in terracotta compared to regional ones in blue.
 Source: **Infant mortality:** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*; **Adult literacy:** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*; **GDI** (Gender Development index): UNDP, *Human Development Report 1998*; **GINI:** World Bank, *World Development indicators 1998*. (The regional average for this indicator was calculated by *Social Watch*).

The Ugandan government, like others represented at the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development (WSSD), made a series of commitments. Since then, major themes in Uganda have been poverty eradication, good governance, democratisation, economic liberalisation, human rights, promotion of the marginalised groups especially women and people with disabilities (PWDS), gender equality, and education and health for all. This report reviews those commitments to which Uganda has given priority.

There has been some progress in Commitment 1, in creating an enabling environment for achievement of social development. Some notable achievements include the return to constitutional government through the writing of a new Constitution in 1995, and the enactment of the Local Governments Act in 1997, which gives greater autonomy to districts (local councils) and creates spaces for citizen participation.

There is a marked increase in observance and respect for human rights. Extra judicial (state inspired) killings in particular have been checked. Uganda has also ratified a number of key United Nations Human Rights (UNHR) instruments covering: economic and social and cultural rights; civil and political rights; rights of the child; elimination of all forms of racial discrimination; the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment and the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The roles of the Uganda Human Rights Commission, civil society groups and especially the media in all these changes need recognition.

With regard to democracy, despite guarantees of association enshrined in the constitution, Uganda still restricts operation of political parties. The country has been dubbed a 'one party state', a situation that will remain until a national referendum determines otherwise (by lifting of ban on political parties). The biggest concern here is that the ban on competitive political activity, which the government initially promised would be 'short-term', has been in effect for too long. Consequently, it is now perceived as an attempt to monopolise political.

While parliament has asserted itself and is seen to be doing its job, there is a feeling that it is not yet independent enough and is easily manipulated by the executive! Other concerns include corruption and lack of transparency and accountability. There is a general sense that corruption has reached alarming rates and that the major culprits are persons in high positions, even in the very institutions that by law are meant to curb or fight corruption, namely the police, the Inspector General of Government and the Auditor General's Office. In the current situation, justice is seen as being denied to the deserving majority.

While there are some gains toward achieving *Commitment 1*, the greatest problem is still low participation of the people. People have little knowledge of their rights and they lack organisation to take advantage of the changed environment and reap the potential benefits. The government is seen as not listening enough to people's concerns. Contrary views are politicised by attributing them to the opposition.

With regard to *Commitment 2*, on eradicating poverty, Uganda remains among the poorest countries in the world with a per capita income of USD 300. The current government has made poverty eradication a major policy thrust and developed the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP), which sets 2017 as the target year for reduction of absolute poverty (currently at 46%) to less than 10%. The debt burden is a major constraint to achievement of this target.

Other initiatives for eradication include: enactment of the Land Act, a revolutionary new law that empowers people by enabling them to own and exploit land for their own benefit; and establishment of the Poverty Action Fund, which uses resources from debt relief for social development, especially improving education, health and social

infrastructure. Micro-financing as a strategy in poverty eradication is strongly promoted. The government has established funding programmes such as the Poverty Alleviation Project (PAP) and the Entandikwa credit scheme.

The government has said that the national budget should be pro people, and this is demonstrated by increased allocations over the last two years: allocations for Universal Primary Education (UPE) increased by 281%; for Primary Health Care (PHC) by 647%; for rural feeder roads by 114%; and for agriculture extension by 920%. This conforms with the Public Investment Plan (PIP), which prioritises the above areas along with water supply.

Overall, there is an intention to eradicate poverty, but the feeling is that poverty is growing and that the benefits of liberalisation and macroeconomic policies are not reaching the people. Consequently, the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project is being implemented to re-examine the situation and recommend new initiatives. This project is supported by the government Vision 2025 programme.

Other contributing factors (problems) need to be addressed in the context of poverty. These are related to infrastructure, agriculture, illiteracy (human resource development), and war in some parts of the country.

To *Commitment 3*, the goal of promoting full employment, the government has not given adequate attention over the last five years. If anything, the employment market has shrunk greatly as a result of economic policies calling for retrenchment in government and semi-government organisations. No national policy to address the issue exists and exploitation is rampant. Youth (in particular school leavers) are especially affected. The only major initiative in this area was the establishment in 1998 of the Uganda National Network Advocacy Group (UNNAG), a committee of 25 persons from a cross-section of NGOs to look into employment under the broad ILO initiative, Jobs For Africa (JFA). UNNAG is not as active as it should be, and pressure about this should be intensified.

The most important measure to be taken is provision of relevant skills to transform manual labour to technical or skilled labour. There is also need to recognise the informal sector and to strengthen the voices of workers, which have been seriously weakened. Gender sensitivity in employment is beginning to be addressed, but this is restricted largely to the elite class.

On *Commitment 4*, the goal of Social Integration, divisions in Uganda are based on tribe, region, religion, cultural practice and economic status. The greatest guarantor of minority rights is the Constitution, where rights are enshrined with the greatest beneficiaries being the disabled and women who have seats at the political decision-making levels reserved for them. There is a minister specifically designated to represent the interests of the marginalised. Other concerns being addressed include war veterans who are being provided with various life skills and women's access to higher education through affirmative action.

On *Commitment 5*, there is no doubt that strides have been made toward attainment of equality and equity between men and women and more especially toward women's participation in political life. A gender policy in place and a full ministry deals with the mainstreaming of this concept and practise. The Constitution provides that each district elect a women's representative to parliament and reserves a third of seats in the local councils for women. Women hold key political appointments in the judiciary and cabinet including the vice presidency among other portfolios.

There have been many initiatives aimed at uplifting the participation of women in most spheres of life and recognising their roles in production. They remain a disadvantaged group in almost all areas of life, however. Even where spaces for women have been created, their utilisation remains a problem. This became evident with the follow up on issues raised at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

In line with the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, the

government of Uganda has released a National Action Plan on Women. It is a five-year plan setting out critical areas of concern, objectives, actions and indicators to monitor implementation of the action plan.

Commitment 6, to eradicate illiteracy, is at the top of the agenda. The show piece is the Universal Primary Education (UPE), which provides free education for up to four children in every family. There are many programmes advocating education for girls, but the crisis here remains the quality of this education. Facilities are inadequate, as are preparations for post primary education given that enrolment has jumped from an earlier figure of 2.5 million to almost six million children. Many NGOs are involved in literacy work and promotion of equitable access to education, especially because about a quarter of the country's population is made up of illiterate youth and adults.

Government adult education programmes that used to be prominent seem to be fewer. NGOs have engaged in this area to fill the gap in their own small ways. A National Adult Literacy Committee is currently proposed. The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development in collaboration with the World Bank has evaluated functional literacy programmes in Uganda as a basis for future work in this area.

On health, there is a massive World Bank funded children's nutrition project. A widely-publicised programme for vaccination of children below the age of five has succeeded in achieving vaccination percentages higher than 75% across the country. As mentioned above, there has been a big increase (reportedly of 647%) in resources allocated to health in recent years. Overall, the government aims to achieve 100% coverage by 2017 in primary healthcare (currently at 49% coverage), safe water (currently at 34%) and primary education (currently at 80%). HIV/AIDS remains major challenge. Infant mortality rates are down and now stand at 97 per 1000.

There is a growing recognition and involvement by civil society with social development, expressed in their participation in budgetary discussions and planning processes.

The challenges observed along the way are many. The WSSD commitments remain largely unknown to many in country, including official circles. The results of the Fourth World Conference on Women have been better disseminated. Accessing information from government circles remains a problem and since the latest statistics on various areas of interest are not readily available, actors are forced to rely on old data!

Co-ordination structures are still lacking and monitoring needs to be stepped up so that annual reports and updates are issued regularly. The government has put some policies and structures in place, but it is still weak on action.

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