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Will 2018-19 infrastructure budget address stakeholder concerns?

The transport and works sector budget allocation for 2018/19 has gained a slight increment to 21.4% from 20.8% in 2016/17, could this be the long awaited answer to our concerns to have better lives accruing from better infrastructure, or it is a drop in an ocean to the many questions within the circles of the national construction sector?

The 2018/19 infrastructure sector objectives include; putting in place an adequate, reliable, efficient multi-modal transport networks, improve the human resource and institutional capacity of the sector to efficiently execute the planned priorities, strengthening the national construction industry which includes fast tracking the enactment of the Uganda Constructions Industry Commission (UCICO) Bill and increasing the safety of transport infrastructure services, whether the finances allotted to achieve these objectives are “enough” or not, is everyone’s concern. The sector is not well financed to achieve its intended objectives, but whether the little that is allotted is put to good use or not, we may all want to ‘ask’.

You may recall, the Road User Satisfaction Survey 2016 by the Uganda Road Fund, showed a decline in road safety with road users rating safety of Uganda’s roads at 2.45 points out of four points compared to 2.52 points the previous year 2015. A good number, 55%, of road users did not feel safe while travelling on Ugandan roads.

A lot of recommendations were made during the dissemination of this survey, including enhancing compliance to national and international standards for infrastructure development, the challenge remains on implementation of stakeholder recommendations and the quality of projects we deliver, could it be budget constraints that lead to “not” implementing to standards and within the specified legal framework, or someone somewhere is not doing things right, or there are gaps within our policy framework, or the public needs to follow their ‘money’, we may want to ask these questions.

Improving infrastructure networks can be a hugely expensive task. New railways, roads, oil refineries, power dams, desalination plants, broadband connections and upgrading existing infrastructure can cost hundreds of millions, and often, billions of dollars. At the same time, their impact is equally huge. Getting the delivery of such infrastructure right is, therefore, an issue of real importance. Cost overruns can run into hundreds of millions of dollars; a poorly specified project can fail to meet the objectives set out for the investment and ultimately for the sector. As a result, improving infrastructure delivery and transparency should be a key priority for government agencies across all sectors, and this should be part and parcel of the budget framework. Including infrastructure transparency in the policy framework such as the Procurement Policy (under review), the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Authority Act, Monitoring and Evaluation policies and availing a stable budget to follow up implementation of these provisions.

Many actors and stakeholders have raised concerns on the quality of projects being delivered under the various sectors of education, health, works and transport. In 2017, CoST, a multi-stakeholder infrastructure transparency initiative published two reports, the First Assurance Report and Scoping Study (www.cost.or.ug) pointed out some of the key issues that are affecting effective delivery of infrastructure projects in Uganda including; a lack of trust and appreciation from the public including; projects

exceeding their budgets and timeframe, amendments being made to project original scope, challenges faced in obtaining approval for land acquisition, a lack of control and supervision processes to ensure quality construction and the health and safety of workers, limited citizen engagement, limited compliance of procurement entities to procurement regulations, weak information disclosure efforts and systems, lack of a central body to regulate and enhance information disclosure on infrastructure data, limited financing for lower governments delaying delivery of projects and a weak oversight role from key oversight bodies such as the Inspectorate of Government, Ethics and Integrity, among others. Government invests a lot to improve infrastructure, but the general public seems not satisfied. The President has come

out on many occasions asking ministries and agencies to ‘open up’ and inform the citizens about what the Government is doing, may be they would appreciate and build trust, as well as own government programmes.

The scoping study by Africa Freedom of Information Centre on Access to Information in 2016 revealed that, most people do not appreciate government programmes because they do not know what the Government does. What are we concealing anyway? The Ministry of Information and National Guidance is mandated to promote an informed, engaged and oriented citizenry that supports socio-economic transformation, a lot of platforms and avenues have been put in place to address the same, however, much is being done online although mostly consumed by the elite class, the youth who are around 77% of the population are interested in entertainment and ‘fun’.

Furthermore, we all understand internet penetration in Uganda is still low, only 31.3% (UCC) of the population has access to the internet. We need to identify ways in which we can interest the general public to government programmes. Initiatives such as CoST matter at this point to support opening up of infrastructure data. The Office of the Prime Minister has established *Barazas* – a physical platform to increase the rate at which government interfaces with the general public, but these are organised once in a quarter per sub-county, and given our demographics, a few people attend these *Barazas*, and more so the follow up of issues raised on the *Barazas* is weak because the districts have limited capacity to do so, maybe we are investing too much in service delivery and less in monitoring to ensure efficiency and effectiveness of these investments.

The budget framework paper 2018/19 policy recommendations, do not clearly indicate efforts to enhance access to information with budget allocations, it is important that as we invest more into service delivery, we invest into informing the general public of what we do, and we should increase financing on access to information, citizen engagement and strengthen initiatives and stakeholders that promote transparency and access to information, lest we shall keep singing the same piece of music. While there have been many highly successful deliveries of infrastructure in the country’s recent history, there are still lessons to be learned. With stakeholders demanding greater transparency and placing additional scrutiny on infrastructure decisions, the Government should be very keen to ensure that investment outcomes do not fall short of expectations.

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Eng. Frank Kweronda

Construct toilets on all the major highways

Public convenience facilities along highways are a fundamental right of passengers and tourists. Uganda has experienced a significant increase in passenger and freight movement on national highways. Highways provide the main network to facilitate trade and movement of goods and passengers and are the lifeblood of the economy. It has thus become essential to provide road travellers with not just good road infrastructure, but also with adequate facilities to relax and take a break from highway travel. Apart from several other issues, lack of proper roadside toilet facilities in the country is one major issue that perturbs most of the people travelling upcountry. Shockingly, there are no public places of convenience available on these highways, as a result travellers are compelled to urinate or defecate in the open causing damage to the ecology and pollution.

On most national highways, demand for essential services is usually met by private individuals through the provision of gas service stations and other small roadside businesses where proper hygiene for the public is not usually guaranteed.

However, on most motorways and the new express highways such as the Northern bypass and Entebbe Expressway where access is restricted and road users are generally unable to stop, the availability of such services is often limited. Actually, the biggest problem of travelling on national highways is finding decent stops for rest-rooms. In some stretches I have travelled it’s impossible to find a facility and one needs to improvise.

Meanwhile, long distance buses tend to drop off passengers near bushy areas or forests for toilets services

The primary objective of developing these roadside public sanitation facilities is to improve the convenience of highway users by providing a standardised experience to them at designated locations. In addition, wayside amenities enable improved road safety by providing adequate resting facilities for road users and thereby reducing fatigue related road accidents.

Roadside public toilets services is an idea which should involve building modern toilets services along all major highways in the country. Which takes into

account public sanitation and hygiene. There is an unhealthy tendency of passengers throwing waste and plastic materials out of moving buses. Most of these plastics never decompose causing land pollution. Meanwhile, long distance buses tend to drop off passengers near bushy areas or forests for toilets services.

Just recently, some travellers were whining on how they had to urinate and even in some cases defecate in open due to lack of rest-rooms along the roadsides. In a few places with toilets such as fuel stations, the sanitation is poor.

Terming the act of easing oneself in the open as undignified, forcing people to defecate or urinate in public due to absence of public conveniences is akin to violating their dignity,

Citizens travelling on highways need to be protected from open defecation, untreated disposal of waste into streams and contamination of water supplies, which could become a big problem with tourist influx coupled with lack of proper civic amenities. Since we are also promoting tourism all over the country, we expect our tourists to find good sanitation facilities as they travel. We hardly enjoy sightseeing without proper toilets and our travel experiences are not memorable as we imagined,” said one tourist recently.

Also looking at this issue from the gender perspective, men have never had a big problem because they just go behind the nearest tree and relieve themselves. Women are left with dangerous options like going into the nearby bushes, with strange men lurking around.

Government can explore a Public Private Partnership (PPP) arrangement whereby performance and management contracts are signed with various procured operators of these public highway sanitation facilities. Where the issue of money becomes a bottleneck, the Government can always fully or partially subsidise for the operation and maintenance of these facilities so that they are well maintained at any time. This will make its citizens and tourists enjoy their journeys to various destinations across the country.

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Improving infrastructure networks can be a hugely expensive task costing billions of dollars

