



Transforming Uganda's Public Policy, Economy, and Politics; What we must do to make Uganda better



**Synthesis Report of the Proceedings of the 7th
State of the Nation Platform**

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List of Acronyms

ACODE	Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DP	Democratic Party
EAC	East African Community
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MP	Member of Parliament
NRM	National Resistance Movement
STON	State of the Nation
TTI	Think Tank Initiative
UNCCI	Uganda National Chambers of Commerce and Industry
UPC	Uganda People's Congress

Introduction

It is quite common to hear Ugandans complain, quite reasonably, about the poor delivery of public services and goods. They do not like what they see in their hospitals (rotten facilities and not enough drugs), in their schools (crowded classrooms with inadequate scholastic materials), and on their roads (potholes and accidents), to cite a few examples. They blame it on public corruption and a lack of political will to fight it hard. If you listen carefully, it is mostly the most economically productive people (aged 25-45) who complain loudest.

But who should improve things? That is a question posed at the 7th meeting of the State of the Nation Platform, most of whose members fall in the dissatisfied age group. Appropriately, the discussion was led by a panel drawn from amongst the STON members to compel self-reflection. After all, those who are younger and economically active largely drive transformation of society. It helps very much when they are also as educated as the STON panellists and members. So Mr. Morrison Rwakakamba, the chief executive officer of the Uganda National Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Ms. Lydia Wanyoto-Mutende, a member of the East African Legislative Assembly; and Mr. Richard Todwong, a special presidential adviser on northern Uganda; made the panel.

While some of the challenges facing Uganda today and possibly in the medium term could be easily identified, there was a bit of uncertainty about how to properly and effectively address them. The uncertainty was displayed through a series of questions that ranged from the rhetorical and the philosophical to the anguished.

What is the vision, mission and objective of our generation? Why are we living at this time? What do we want to change? What future do we need? What means are we going to use to achieve that future? Who is going to lead us? Are we just making comments and leaving it at that? What are our own value systems as a generation, as Ugandans? Are we not making an assumption that we are talking about a homogenous generation?

The questions did not have to be answered fully and immediately but, if anything, they sparked off some good amount of serious thinking about the state of affairs in Uganda. The debate concluded that a decent starting point, arguably, is that Ugandans need to nurture a value system that respects honesty, hard work, and community service. In that conclusion was the realisation that the status quo leads the country nowhere good. The question, which this brief attempts to answer, is whether the STON members and others in their generation will step up to the plate and do the right thing.

Summary of Discussion

Challenges of a Generation

Previous generations, it was said, identified their key political challenges clearly: to fight colonialism, to fight Idi Amin and his military dictatorship, and to fight Milton Obote and his civilian dictatorship. The organising principle was that with colonialists and dictators out of the way, the good Ugandans would embark on transforming Uganda into a united, peaceful, and prosperous country. It would seem from the discussion, however, that Uganda is not yet the society envisaged back then even if leadership has changed several times, with each new group of leaders promising a better life.

The STON generation faces several challenges.

- Runaway corruption
- Lousy education system
- Poor leadership
- Lack of personal responsibility

Runaway Corruption

The Inspectorate of Government Act 2002 defines corruption as the abuse of public office for private gain and includes but is not limited to embezzlement, bribery, nepotism, influence peddling, theft of public funds or assets, fraud, forgery, causing financial or property loss and false accounting in public affairs. According to a World Bank study, Uganda loses about

\$300 million (Shs600 billion) a year to public corruption. It is worth noting that Uganda's national budget was just more than Shs6 trillion in the financial year 2009/10. Public perception of corruption is consistently poor, even getting worse. Out of a maximum score of 10 on the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Uganda scored 2.8 in 2007, 2.6 in 2008, and 2.5 in 2009.

"If we don't rescue this country today from corruption, the country is wasting time. We are pretending." That declaration by panellist Richard Todwong captured the pessimistic mood that surrounds the issue of corruption in Uganda today. The statement also, in a way, pointed to the pervasiveness of the vice in the Ugandan society. Participants cited some examples. Services do not match the money sent to frontline administrative units such as the district and the sub-county. "Money is either kept in the bank or swindled," Mr Todwong said. Tenders, especially at district level, are not given to competent people and, therefore, business organisations such as the Uganda National Chamber of Commerce and Industry receive many complaints from aggrieved firms and persons. The 2006 National Public Procurement Integrity Baseline Survey Report found that the government lost about Shs149 billion in the 2004/05 financial year in various flawed tender deals in the 13 central government institutions or agencies,



Mr. Richard Todwong, the Presidential Advisor on Northern Uganda, discussing the runaway corruption in Uganda during the 7th session of the State of the Nation platform on April 2, 2010 at Protea Hotel in Kampala

26 districts, and seven municipalities studied. As the *Daily Monitor* reported in 2007, the pocketed billions were enough to fund the building of about 1,600 furnished four-stream classroom blocks with an office and store plus five-stance latrines at an average cost of Shs90.5 million each – the rate used under the School Facilities Grant – and relieve UPE schools of congestion. Also, nearly 50% of the contracts do not have records of bid opening, which are a key indicator of the transparency of the process. Indeed, procurement-related corruption accounts for much of public sector corruption in Uganda and in East Africa as a whole. One participant, striking a seemingly contrarian note,

argued that in the past corruption in Uganda was institutionalised and thus normal. He said there is much talk now because there are attempts by the State and other actors like civil society to fight it and ensure accountability.

Lousy Education System

There is a mismatch between skills acquired while undergoing training at an education institution and requirements in the labour market. “A good education system ought to work for our country,” said Mr Morrison Rwakakamba. “Uganda is the only country in the region importing people to run hotels, and fix broken tractors.” The reported lack of preparedness for the job market of graduates of the Ugandan



*Morrison
Rwakakamba,
UNCCI Secretary
General (left)
shares a moment
with Hon. Lydia
Wanyoto (right)
after discussing
the challenges
of the education
system in
Uganda.*

education system in the recent decades is something that many employers have lamented. They say, for example, that the potential employees cannot even write a coherent cover letter for a job application. This is ironical because Uganda likes to present itself as the education destination of choice for ambitious young people from within the East African Community and Southern Sudan.

Poor Leadership

“Leadership is a problem that cuts across all levels,” a participant said. Leaders at the various levels are said to be despondent, to have resigned themselves to an inability to fundamentally improve the lives of the people they lead. Yet real leaders, far

from being despondent and resigned, should be churning and trying out new ideas to solve problems facing the people. The leadership the country has could be incapable of rising to the occasion partly because many in its ranks are corrupt, have no conception of leadership, have no management skills, or all of the above. Largely because of a failure of leadership – despite the existence of laws, regulations and standing orders – there is poor delivery of public goods and services. Key public sectors such as health and education are continually bedevilled by problems like absenteeism of staff, and leakage and sheer wastage of public money and other resources. Recent public expenditure reviews in the education and health sectors carried out by the World Bank and the Government of

Uganda report some sobering statistics. On a given day, for example, “37% of health workers are absent from work, costing government the equivalent of Shs26 billion per year”.

In education, “daily head teacher and teacher absenteeism was estimated at 27% and 19% respectively, and less than 20% of paid teachers who were present in school were in the classroom teaching”. There are consequences for this state of affairs. For example, Uganda has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality in the world (435 per 100,000 live births) and is unlikely to meet most of its health-related MDGs.

Lack of Personal Responsibility

The majority of the members of the STON generation, arguably, live or aspire to live lavish lifestyles. “We live outside our means yet sustaining lavish lifestyles like driving fuel-guzzling cars just to be seen is expensive,” Ms Wanyoto said. The need for the good life has led some in the generation to engage in corruption. Ask yourself how clean you are, a participant said. Because some in the STON generation have taken on the bad habits, they are never outraged at practices like corruption. Others are simply apathetic, possibly as a result of feeling helpless and hopeless.

What Needs to Be Done

So what do the STON members think they should do to tackle the big questions of their generation? Several ideas emerged out of the debate.

- Changing the values
- Taking up politics and stopping laments
- Being closer to the communities
- Believing in the power of one
- Improving the knowledge base

Changing the Values

Overall, the STON generation ought to embrace a value system that respects hard work, frugality, tolerance, honesty, and active engagement in public affairs.

The work ethic of the STON generation, a generation that is crucial to the productivity of the Ugandan economy, needs an overhaul. Panellist Wanyoto told her audience that as a member of the East African Legislative Assembly she participated in the negotiations to establish a common market for the East African Community member states and came away with disturbing statistics. “For every one Chinese, you need 45 Ugandans to do the same thing!” she said. “We have a problem with our work ethic.” She added that for every one Kenyan, you need six Ugandans to do the same thing. Uganda, even then, is a little better than Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi in labour output and productivity. That is no consolation,

however, because Uganda needs to be playing at the very top of the league if it is to continue making gains against poverty. Some 31% of Ugandans live in extreme poverty.

Mutual respect and tolerance are crucial values as well. Mr Todwong decried what he described as the disintegration of Uganda along regional and ethnic lines. Sectarian differences are being exacerbated by economic hardships and a type of politics that appears to be not as inclusive as it should be. Those differences, however, should be debated in a vigorous but civil manner. In any case, they should not stand in the way of addressing common problems such as corruption. “Those who fought Amin were UPC, DP,” noted a participant while underscoring the need for unity of purpose. “There is need to live beyond our political cocoons,” said yet another. “Uganda is bigger than that.” Respecting standards allows for co-operation across political, ethnic, and religious lines on a number of things for the greater good. For example, when the Ministry of Disaster Preparedness reportedly delivered “bending” pangas to people leaving camps for the internally displaced back to their homes in northern Uganda, political opponents like Mr Todwong (NRM) and Mr Norbert Mao (DP) condemned the ministry.

Whatever the STON members do,



Richard Todwong, Presidential Advisor on Northern Uganda (left) Chairman Mao, Gulu District Local Government (centre) and Godber Tumushabe (right) during the 7th session of the State of the Nation Platform

they should be “courageous in speech” and challenge those politicians and government officials who while quietly accepting failure do loudly proclaim success. The STON generation must speak up and present an honest critique of the prevailing state of affairs in the country. As they say, there is need to speak truth to power. Otherwise, as one participant rhetorically quipped, “how can we be understood that we are speaking for the good of the country?”

Financial independence is crucial if the STON generation is to avoid the temptations of corruption such as bribery either to keep quiet about an issue or to do something unseemly. But acquiring financial independence so as to provide oneself with intellectual and political freedom means that the STON generation must cultivate a culture of savings. “We live in credit,” Ms

Wanyoto said. She urged members of her audience to struggle to have money they can keep away. “If you can be bought,” she said, “you will not keep your values. Serious personal savings give you strength to say no!” Savings, however, are just a beginning. It is important to save and then to invest by taking appropriate risks. Otherwise, a pile of money sitting on one’s savings account in the bank benefits the bank more than the owner. This is because the interest received on savings in a bank is almost always less than the rate of inflation, which means such a saver is losing money. Yet today one can make money investing in real estate. Or, better still, one can put money in the stock exchange, an investment opportunity that never existed in Uganda for the parents and grand parents of the STON generation.

Taking Up Politics and Stopping Laments

The STON generation laments a lot about what is wrong in Uganda today but does not do much to improve things. “Pick up interest in leadership instead of lamenting,” was a call that most participants seemed to rally around. “We need to change the leadership of this country in terms of education,” Ms Wanyoto said. “Parliament is too critical to leave it to the uneducated or people who have nothing else to do. You the educated must take the risk if you must create change. Don’t shun leadership roles however tough the experience.” It was observed that good people shun politics because it has come to be dominated by thieves, liars, and charlatans. But by keeping away from politics, the sensible Ugandans allow things to continue degenerating because more and more thieves, liars, and charlatans who have nothing better to do come in to fill the void.

To volunteer to join public service, say by becoming an MP, one must be inspired by something bigger than his or her own sense of glory. There has to be a burning ambition to want to improve public life by ensuring that Ugandans get better roads, health care, education, and that most of them get progressively richer. Yet that inspiration cannot come out of the blue. One must feel very strongly that what is available

today is not good enough despite the existence of opportunities for doing better. As a generation we must generate outrage and anger for change to move things, said one participant. “Most of us are satisfied with the status quo because of our placements,” the participant said. That is not a satisfying place to be. So let us join politics, said another participant. We can then clean up business and several other areas of public life. While at it, there is no need to get into conflict with the older generation, a participant cautioned. Conflict of some sort, however, may be inevitable. Change does not always come easy because entrenched interests tend to resist it for fear of losing their privileged positions.

It is, however, not just about joining politics because not everyone can be a politician. There is the need as well to create what panellist Rwakakamba described as a “competent civic citizenry”. The STON generation could do well, for example, to create an alliance of taxpayers to demand accountability and better public goods and services. This can be done with young people joining trade organisations such as the Uganda National Chamber of Commerce and Industry or the Uganda National Farmers Federation where they can meet others interested in business and farming so as to pursue common interests as responsible citizens.

Being Closer to the Communities

To create change at the national level, work needs to start at the community level and yet “we cannot change our communities unless we are part of them”. The notion of community organising is arguably the freshest idea to come of the 7th STON discussion, and not just because the inspiring President of the United States, Barack Obama, developed his engagement in public affairs as a political organiser in the poor South Side of Chicago, America’s third largest city. It is because organising in the communities to ensure safety, better schools, better roads, clean water and other such services and goods is something almost non-existent in Uganda. Yet places like

India are making progress partly on the basis of serious community work led by ordinary people with a public consciousness. So panellist Wanyoto’s plea to the STON generation to “create networks at national and regional level for more benefits but also do something for your communities” was very sensible. To emphasise her point, Ms Wanyoto recounted her own experience. “My father had three wives and a big house,” she said. “When he and his wives passed on, I turned the house around into a community library [open to all]. So the community is with us. Also, I slaughter two or three goats whenever I am home. Let us be relevant and useful to our communities.” Possibly the bigger point here is not so much to lead community members by the hand and do things for them but



A section of the Core Group members of the platform during the 7th session of the State of the Nation Platform on April 2, 2010 at Protea Hotel Kampala

rather to work together with them. That is an approach that is respectful of community members because it treats them as adults who just happen to need a little help here and there.

Providing leadership help in the communities in a thoughtful and sensitive way would allow STON generation members to become role models and thus put themselves in a position to inspire more change. A STON generation member who is a successful farmer in the community can be a useful role model for others to try to invest in intensive and high-yielding methods of farming however small their landholding. “There is a positive correlation between governance and economic development especially [as that touches on] the incomes of the people,” a participant said.

To organise in the communities, STON members must be organised themselves. They need to create networks amongst themselves as a form of social capital. “We need to mobilise ourselves first before we mobilise the population,” a participant said. This means supporting one another where necessary.

Believing in the Power of One

Supporting one another suggests the importance of working in groups. Just how possible is that? As STON member Arthur Larok pointedly noted, the assumption that one is talking about

a homogenous generation is mistaken. He said amongst members of the STON generation are those that are powerful and comfortable, comfortable and powerless, uncomfortable and powerless, and powerful and uncomfortable. This therefore calls for the articulation of a broad agenda for transformation and identification of a political platform to take it forward; building of civic agency to support the agenda; and building economic empowerment.

Ms Wanyoto, however, said STON members “cannot always take comfort in groups.” There is something known as the power of one, which calls for individuals to take risks to move things for the good of all. She illustrated her point by talking about poor service delivery in the health sector. On his way back from receiving relief supplies from the Kenyan government at the Lwakhakha border post for the Bududa mudslide victims in March 2010, Prime Minister Apolo Nsibambi’s helicopter crash-landed in the Bugiri Hospital compound. He was taken to the hospital, a major district hospital by the Malaba-Jinja highway. Ms Wanyoto, travelling by road from the same border function, stopped by the hospital. The whole place was filthy with overflowing pit latrines, bare beds, general poor waste disposal. There is an opportunity here for a member of the STON generation to make money while helping improve services, she said. Anyone could decide to maintain hospitals if he or she came

up with a workable model. You can say, ‘pay me and I manage hospital waste, which is a big problem’. One does not necessarily need a group to undertake such a venture.

Improving the Knowledge Base

It is just about impossible to create positive change from a point of ignorance. Pursuit of knowledge by STON members and others of their generation is essential. To what extent are we exposed to the problems of this country in a concrete way? To what extent have we travelled around the country? How much are we reading? One member said the monthly STON discussions are helping raise “our

political consciousness”. That is just one contribution. There is a lot more to learn through more discussion, reading (a member suggested starting a book club for STON members), and travel.

Real knowledge makes change easier to achieve. And the STON generation is the generation that must help bring about transformative change. Speaking on February 5, 2008 while campaigning to be the Democratic Party presidential nominee, then-Senator Barack Obama said: “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

Conclusion

If the STON generation is the generation of big change, that suggests a need for serious thinking and organisation. The State of the Nation Platform may want to consider leading the way by developing some form of Plan of Action that lays out the steps to be taken to achieve the “change that we seek”.

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About State of the Nation Platform

The State of the Nation platform is a national policy forum to promote upward and downward policy conversation on contemporary public policy and governance issues in Uganda. The platform brings together individual leaders and professionals in the public sector, the private sector, civil society, the media and other interest groups into a policy discourse on contemporary policy and governance issues in the country. As an innovation in policy outreach and communication, the platform is a hybrid of ACODE's breakfast dialogue format, interactive panel discussions and outreach through media. This policy outreach initiative has been conceived and is made possible with core funding support to ACODE provided under a grant from the Think Tank Initiative (TTI).

The State of the Nation platform as a policy dialogue fora is defined by five core features:

A core group of persons selected based on their professional backgrounds and achievement, public roles, active leadership in their social groups and interest in public policy and governance issues. Because of the individual influence and positions of its individual members, this core group acts as the brain trust of the State of the Nation platform and provide a policy feedback loop between citizens and policy makers.

Local Level Segment is an innovative elements of the State of the Nation platform as a strategy for downward and upward policy engagement. The district fora aims at localizing national policy debates and putting them into the local context.

Students Segment are organised to nurture and encourage a new generation of young leaders in the country, special segments of the State of the Nation Platform are from time to time organized targeting students and student leaders. Like the District segment of the platform, the students' segment are organized in the different parts of the country and attendance is by invitation.

All proceedings of the various State of the Nation platform are fully recorded. ACODE has entered into partnership with a number of media houses (TV and Radio) to ensure that the proceedings are broadcasted to a wider audience. In addition, the proceedings are also produced in the form of video and audio podcasts and loaded on the internet so that they can be accessed through ACODE and other partner websites.

The participants in the State of the Nation platform have been built into a citizens network linked through electronic media, in particular, e-mail, cell phone and shot message texts. Building on the lessons from previous policy campaigns, the participants are mobilized into a network of citizens exchanging views and ideas on contemporary public policy and governance issues, helping members leverage key policy and decision making centers to increase the impact of their work, and generating consensus on issues of national importance.



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