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## UGANDA'S YOUTH

### OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE SECOND YOUNGEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

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Uganda has the second youngest population in the world after Niger: 78 per cent of its inhabitants are under 30 and 56 per cent under 18.<sup>1</sup> With an average birth rate of 6.2 children per woman and a growth rate of 3.3 per cent, the Ugandan population is one of the fastest growing in the world.<sup>2</sup> This demographic development entails challenges that need to be addressed: particularly in the labour market and in the education and health sectors. The politicians have the urgent task of developing concepts for tackling these issues because there are already processes underway that are far-reaching in their impact and partly irreversible. A massive rural exodus is only one example. Young unskilled workers are streaming from rural to urban areas in ever greater numbers, seeking to escape increasing lack of food supply in the country, domestic violence or neglect, or because they have lost their parents. Their search for educational and job opportunities, health care, social benefits and infrastructure is causing increasing unemployment in the urban centres as well as the proliferation of slums and criminality. Against the backdrop of an economic situation that is already depressed and a per

- 1 | USAid, "Navigating Challenges: Charting Hope: A Cross-Sector Situational Analysis on Youth in Uganda", 2011, <http://uganda.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/YouthMap%20Uganda%20Exec%20Version.pdf>, 2 (accessed 12 Apr 2013); cf. also Republic of Uganda, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, "Key Facts on Ugandas Population", 2012, [http://popsec.org/key\\_facts.php](http://popsec.org/key_facts.php) (accessed 12 Apr 2013). According to DSW, 48 per cent are children, i.e. below 15 years of age: Stiftung Weltbevölkerung, "Länderdatenbank", <http://weltbevoelkerung.de/oberes-menue/publikationen-downloads/zu-unseren-themen/laenderdatenbank.html> (accessed 12 Apr 2013).
- 2 | Republic of Uganda, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, n. 1.

capita income of 1,300 U.S. dollars in 2011, this is a devastating development. With respect to these circumstances, Uganda can be seen to reflect the situation of most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

What are the dangers, as well as the opportunities, that the population growth entails? What is the outlook for the masses of young people, whose number is ever increasing?

### **FROM "WHITE" TO "BLUE" COLLAR: MORE "TRAINING" INSTEAD OF "EDUCATION"**

Malawi was the first African country to introduce free schooling in 1994, followed three years afterwards by Uganda. In 1997 Universal Primary Education (UPE) was announced. School fees for state schools were abolished for up to four children per household, and the President personally advocated that access to primary education should not only be free but compulsory as well. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni had made this the key issue of his 2006 re-election campaign. His threat to have non-compliant parents arrested has been quoted frequently. Although the number of children enrolled in school rose considerably as a result, there is still no regulatory framework in place that would make access to school not only free but also compulsory. The initial euphoria has given way to disillusionment because certain factors were left out of the equation. One of these was that it proved impossible to satisfy the need for more classrooms, teaching and learning materials as well as, most crucially, teaching staff. Over-

crowded classrooms filled with up to eighty pupils sitting on the floor without pen and paper are by no means uncommon to this day. And the teachers' inadequate training, huge deficiencies in subject knowledge and very low pay have been and still are contributing to the poor quality of the teaching and undermining the willingness of parents to send their children to school. Especially in rural areas, this willingness is not particularly high as it is. Many parents consider school a waste of time and put their children to work on the fields in their neighbourhood instead, supposedly to more profitable effect. They can also not afford the cost of school uniforms and lunches, and those who do have the means prefer private

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schools. School buildings that have become dilapidated because they have not been renovated for decades, long journeys on foot to get to school, and – according to the latest headlines – the absence of toilets, which is putting girls in particular off attending school, are all things that further increase the frustration of parents and pupils, but also of teachers, whose work ethic has deteriorated alarmingly. Even rape is not an uncommon occurrence. The number of school drop outs is disconcertingly high, and only just over half the Ugandan population possess a certificate confirming that they have completed their primary education. This has resulted in a population with only rudimentary skills in reading and writing and other areas, the worst imaginable start for the country's youth.



Pupils participating at a "democracy fare" of the KAS: Deficient schooling is the reason for an only rudimentarily literate and skilled population. | Source: KAS Uganda, Acfode.

Those who succeed in continuing their education at the higher level not only need families with deep pockets, but will frequently come to the realisation that the acquired knowledge is not especially helpful in the search for work and in their subsequent working lives. The gap between the curriculum and the actual requirements, between theory and practice, is simply too large. One of the reasons is that Uganda's school and education system still takes its cues from the 1950s, the time when the country gained its independence from the UK. With the departure of the British civil servants, a gap emerged in the labour market

that needed to be filled urgently. Secondary education was therefore skewed primarily towards producing the administrators, accountants and office staff that the public sector needed.<sup>3</sup>

To the present day, white-collar jobs (in public administration and offices, in NGOs, etc.) are “more highly regarded” and prestigious than the usually more profitable occupations in skilled trades and commerce. The low regard for manual labour and craftsmanship that goes back to colonial times has resulted in a dearth of specialised expertise and practical knowledge, i.e. a skills shortage. Vocational and technical colleges are not sufficiently well established and are looked down upon – although it is precisely these types of institutions that could, at least in part, solve the problems of the Ugandan education and labour market. One response to the alarming skills shortage is frequently to employ skilled workers from India and other Asian countries while the Ugandan population can only provide amateurs and improvisers or unskilled labour. And although many Ugandans have misgivings about this situation, “education” is still held in high esteem and admired. “Training”, on the other hand, is derided and looked down upon.

Everybody who has the necessary means is therefore keen to go to university, which emulates an (obsolete) British academic system full “of pomp and circumstance” and doles out academic titles such as Bachelor and Master in an inflationary manner. Genuine opportunities to find a job with these qualifications are vanishingly rare; there is a wide gap between supply and demand. And the quality of the institutions of higher education is also becoming increasingly less impressive – there is insufficient funding for teaching and research. The times when the Makerere University in Kampala was not only the oldest but rightly so the most well-respected university

**The quality of the institutions of higher education is becoming ever less impressive. The times when the Makerere University in Kampala was not only the oldest but also rightly so the most well-respected university in East Africa are over.**

3 | Recently, the “National Curriculum Development Center” has taken on the task of implementing the reform – the curricula are to be revised by 2014 – and in its work it is referring to a position paper with recommendations on education policy prepared by KAS Uganda: KAS Office Uganda, “Young Leaders Think Thank Presents Education Policy Alternatives”, 26 Sep 2012, <http://kas.de/uganda/en/publications/32537> (accessed 12 Apr 2013).

in East Africa are over. The universities are thus sending some 400,000 young people into the labour market where there are less than 9,000 corresponding positions available. The unemployment rate is particularly high among young academics.

**“YOUNG, MALE – UNEMPLOYED”:  
JOB PROSPECTS IN UGANDA**

Shifting from the outlook on education to that of work: According to estimates, youth unemployment in Uganda is between 70 and 83 per cent; around 80 per cent of the unemployed are aged under 30.<sup>4</sup> “Young, male – penniless” meets “young, educated – jobless” – the volatility of such a mix should not be underestimated. The government has realised the danger. It has created a programme entitled “Skilling Uganda” to counteract it and to provide the market with what it demands. Similarly, the National Development Plan (2010/2011 to 2014/2015) is meant to ameliorate the situation. And the BTVET Act (Business, Technical and Vocational Education and Training Act) of 2008 is intended to provide training specifically for those jobs that are available in abundance. Unfortunately, few take advantage of the programme for financial reasons, and it is not very successful due to a lack of resources and inadequate coordination with the private sector.

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The labour market actually offers a variety of opportunities. There has been a noticeable upturn particularly in the agricultural, telecommunication and IT sectors as well as in tourism. The largest sector, however, is still agriculture, which, at over 75 per cent, offers most of the jobs. 60 per cent of the 80 per cent of Ugandans who work in agriculture are in the “youth” category.<sup>5</sup> There could be many opportunities to make their activities here more productive and profitable, but there is a lack of advanced technologies and there are some fundamental deficiencies as well: unclear ownership situations and very poor infrastructure (the lack of roads and vehicles frequently forces farmers to sell their produce to middlemen at dumping prices) leave the agricultural sector at subsistence level.

4 | USAid, n. 1, 8 et sqq.

5 | Ibid.

The government has also set up a number of programmes in other sectors to meet the challenges in the labour market, but the implementation leaves much to be desired. The population is generally not well informed about access options and eligibility criteria, is frequently put off by nepotism and excessive red tape, or simply has little confidence in government programmes. A considerable proportion of the funds also “disappears” in obscure channels and because of corruption. Nepotism is also a widespread problem in recruitment in Uganda. People are recruited far more often according to ethnic and family relationship criteria rather than qualifications and skills.

For all these reasons, large numbers of job seekers are absorbed by the informal sector. As is the case in most African countries, this is the sector that is experiencing the greatest boom: motorcycle taxis, domestic staff, casual workers (particularly in construction), small traders, etc. abound. It is estimated that there are over 800,000 micro-businesses in Uganda employing one and a half million people – over 90 per cent of those not employed in agriculture or the private sector. Trade represents around 72 per cent of the informal sector.<sup>6</sup> The reasons for people moving into these highly insecure jobs are the fight for survival and destitution rather than prospering business start-ups or the drive for economic growth. It is easy to get in, difficult to get ahead, and there is no social security safety net whatsoever to support people when they leave these jobs. Another characteristic is that women make up 92 per cent of the informal sector in Uganda.<sup>7</sup>

### **YOUNG AND DYNAMIC? YOUNG – AND IN DANGER**

Unlike in the West, where challenges in the health sector are linked to the consequences of an aging society, in Uganda it is the young people whose health is the main cause for concern. Of course, Uganda is no exception on a continent, where life expectancy is around age 50. The causes of the dangers to the younger generation are age-related – it is

6 | Worldbank, „Urbal Informal Sector in Uganda. Presenting during the Key Labour Market Issues Course“, Apr-May 2005, [http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/211247/Uganda\\_Urban%20Informal%20Sector.pdf](http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/211247/Uganda_Urban%20Informal%20Sector.pdf) (accessed 12 Apr 2013).

7 | Ibid.

the area of sexual and reproductive activities that holds the greatest risks. One important factor is still the scourge of HIV/Aids, which has afflicted Uganda particularly severely. Uganda used to be one of the African countries most devastated by Aids, but has been able to extricate itself from its stranglehold through a targeted information and health

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policy. The new infection rate, which had been as high as 15 per cent, and in some areas even 30 per cent, back in 1992, had dropped to five per cent by 2001.<sup>8</sup> But in spite of one of the most advanced information campaigns on the continent and massive increases in donations, the achievements of the former prodigy in “the fight against Aids” have been reversed – with the new infection rate currently back up to between six and seven per cent.<sup>9</sup> This is due to a number of different reasons. As is the case in many (not just African) countries, there is a trend towards a certain “carelessness” and “habituation” noticeable as a result of access to effective treatment and the increase in life expectancy. But the main reason is considered to be the fact that as the influence of evangelical groups increases, the so-called ABC Programme (abstinence, be faithful, condoms) is being skewed increasingly towards the first two aspects, while condoms are in part openly rejected.

Aids remains one of the great obstacles to development as the disease tends to affect young people in the “best years” of their productive lives and working capacity. It is estimated that there are currently 1.2 million people infected with HIV living in Uganda, including 150,000 children.<sup>10</sup> Nearly two million – some 20 per cent of all Ugandan children – have been orphaned due to Aids. On the entire

8 | Uganda AIDS Commission, “National HIV&Aids Strategic Plan 2011/12-2014/15”, Dec 2011, 22 et sqq., <http://aidsuganda.org/images/stories/Publications/NSP.pdf> (accessed 30 Apr 2013).

9 | Flavia Lanyero, “Return to Abstinence, Museveni Tells Youth”, Daily Monitor, 3 Dec 2013, <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Return-to-abstinence--Museveni-tells-youth/-/688334/1635174/-/4nhsagz/-> (accessed 12 Apr 2013); cf. also UN, *Global Report. UNAIDS Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic*, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2010, 28, [http://unaids.org/documents/20101123\\_global\\_report\\_em.pdf](http://unaids.org/documents/20101123_global_report_em.pdf) (accessed 12 Apr 2013).

10 | Avert, “HIV and Aids in Uganda”, <http://avert.org/aids-uganda.htm> (accessed 12 Apr 2013); UN, n. 9, 186.

continent, there are already an estimated 15 million children who have lost their mother, father or both.<sup>11</sup>



The President at a conference in London: The success of the Museveni government in fighting HIV is significantly regressive. | Source: Russell Watkins, UK Department for International Development (CC BY-SA).

There are some signs of improvement in the second “problem area” of mother and infant mortality. Compared to 2001, the number of women dying in childbirth fell from 550 to 438 for every 100,000 live births.<sup>12</sup> During the same period, infant mortality fell from 99 to 54 per every 1,000 live births,<sup>13</sup> which means the figure in Uganda is better than the African average (67). One of the reasons is that specialist medical staff assist with the birth in 59 per cent of cases, while it was only 42 per cent in 2006.<sup>14</sup> Despite this, the number of women dying during or subsequent to childbirth remains alarmingly high and usually due to circumstances that could be remedied: dilapidated health centres that are difficult to get to, a lack of transport facilities as well as medication and equipment, untrained staff and power outages. In their desperation, hundreds of women went to the High Court in Kampala in 2012 to file a

11 | Ibid.

12 | Uganda Bureau of Statistics, “Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2011”, Aug 2012, 239, <http://ubos.org/onlinefiles/uploads/ubos/UDHS/UDHS2011.pdf> (accessed 12 Apr 2013).

13 | Ibid., 79.

14 | Ibid., 105.



lawsuit against the government and compel it to improve conditions through a court ruling, making reference to the “human right to health”. The lawsuit was rejected; the court did not want to interfere in “political matters”.

And therein lies the rub: it appears there is a lack of will to prioritise this issue. Particularly as there are other areas that do not appear to suffer from a lack of funding. However, health, and in particular the health of the younger generation, must not be neglected. Young people must be taken seriously as a factor affecting development and their potential must be utilised; they play a central role in economic, sustainable, social and societal development.

### **THE YOUNGER GENERATION AS A POLITICAL FACTOR: MOTIVATED, COMMITTED – FRUSTRATED**

The politicians have come to the realisation that young people need to be taken seriously as a factor relevant to both development and politics. Quite apart from their enormous voter potential – young people under 30 made up over half of the electorate during the last Ugandan elections in 2011<sup>15</sup> – the potential for young people effecting change is considerable. Their social and political influence

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turns them into the most important target group for political education. The potential is there – and it needs to be utilised and channelled to good effect if one wants to avoid the situation where it forges its own path, as last happened during the “Arab Spring”. The importance of involving young people in political and social decision-making processes cannot be overestimated. Nor should the dangers resulting from their susceptibility be underestimated.

In spite of all the above-mentioned problems, the outlook is better than it appears; there are definitely a great many opportunities, and the impulses often come from the young people themselves. These days, young people are increasingly aware of the fact that they are in the majority and of the potential power this gives them. The younger generation in Uganda, as is the case in most of Sub-Saharan Africa, no longer wants to stand on the side-lines, no longer

15 | UN, n. 9, 17.

wants to be talked about, but wishes to be involved in the debate. It yearns for its potential to be acknowledged and furthered, to be seen as problem-solvers and no longer as problems to be solved. It wants to become involved in decision-making, take on responsibility. In short, young people want greater participation and are increasingly insisting on having this demand met as well. Currently, the main topics occupying the minds of Ugandan's young people are still unemployment, education and health; but issues of the future that will affect them in years to come, such as environmental protection, climate change and intergenerational equity, are also increasingly gaining their attention.

The young people of Uganda are becoming increasingly motivated but also frustrated as their engagement is not always finding an appropriate outlet or achieving the intended result. "Engaged but unempowered" is their accusation. However, some measures are now being taken at the political level to mobilise young people by setting up numerous programmes to allow them better access to decision-making, increase their empowerment and strengthen their competence.

### **YOUTH AS A TARGET GROUP**

As far back as 2001, a National Youth Policy (NYP) was established to mobilise the country's youth (aged 15-24) as a "resource" and ensure that it would be involved in national development processes. The NYP thus concentrated on issues pertaining to youth involvement and to strengthening future leadership potential in civil society and government. The NYP, which has not amounted to much more than lip service and not produced many concrete measures or discernible strategies to date, is currently being revised. The new draft envisages more interaction and stronger cooperation with other society groups, amongst other things, and describes concrete steps to strengthen the sense of ownership and capacity building among the youth. Another national institution intended to represent youth interests is the so-called National Youth Council. It was founded in 1993 with the objective of bringing together the various youth associations under one umbrella organisation so they could speak with one voice.

In politics, there are even quota to ensure youth participation. In Parliament, there are not only quota for women, the disabled and soldiers, but also some seats reserved for youth representatives (aged 18-30), one of whom must be female. But with the Members of Parliament numbering approximately four hundred, the young MPs have hardly any influence or none at all, which means that this otherwise remarkable measure remains without impact in practice.

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At a municipal and local level as well, youth representatives are given access to political decision-making bodies through quotas. The

Local Government Act of 1997 provides for one male and one female youth representative at all administrative levels, from the district down to the parish. But entrance to higher office is usually difficult for young people because of the nomination fees, which they have to pay themselves and which are also imposed in parliament.

Young people also have opportunities to become involved in party politics in the still young multi-party system, which was introduced in Uganda in 2006. All of the most important parties in Uganda have a youth organisation, which is meant to represent the youth interests in the particular political party. It is hoped that acting as an additional voice in the democratic interaction the young members will blow some fresh wind into the sails and provide new impulses for shaping policies. But the party youth wings lack training, assertiveness and leadership qualities – and as a result they often do not have the ear of the party executives.

It is not as if politicians take no action at all. When one adds other opportunities to become involved, the youth associations and initiatives, and also considers the numerous projects and support programmes of international organisations and NGOs, a lively picture emerges that is full of efforts to sufficiently provide for the needs of young people and to strengthen them in their respective roles. There is also a great deal being done for Uganda's young people in civil society in theory. But it appears the efforts have not (yet) brought forth sufficient fruit or that they fail through inadequate and ineffective implementation. In this young multi-party democracy, young people still don't have the

influence they might be afforded; they feel marginalised and excluded from essential decision-making processes. There are many reasons for this. One may be a tradition – widespread throughout Africa – that expects elders to be given unquestioned respect. The experience and acquired wisdom of age is a decisive factor in African society and a crucial prerequisite for recognition and power. The attitude of never questioning the standing or the opinion of their elders is instilled in children at a very young age and is deeply ingrained in people's thought patterns. Traditional African society assigns children and young people merely the roles of listener and pupil. And in spite of the self-assurance they may demonstrate amongst themselves, young people find it difficult to free themselves from this tradition. Similarly, older people do not always find it easy to take the young seriously, to acknowledge their potential and their innovative spirit, to value their creativity and allow them to make a contribution of their own.

Another reason for the marginalisation of young people and their difficulty in accessing political positions and key functions is the role money plays in politics. Young people generally lack the funds to organise election campaigns or to compete with the older candidates, who usually have greater financial means at their disposal owing to their age. Additionally, even putting themselves forward as candidates for political positions involves virtually insurmountable obstacles although legislation provides for their membership in political bodies. Both paying the nomination fees as well as collecting supporters' signatures are easier to accomplish for older and experienced candidates than for younger applicants. Finally, the role played by patronage and nepotism in politics – as in the labour market – is not to be underestimated. The connections a young person has with older party or committee members are more likely to be decisive for their inclusion in decision-making processes than their qualifications.

Quite apart from these obstacles, some of the reasons young people in Uganda are poorly integrated in political decision-making processes lie within themselves. They often have insufficient leadership and lobbying skills and are divided along party and ethnic lines. Particularly the latter means they are finding it hard to utilise the potential

of their numerical superiority. In addition, it is often the case that young people aspire to leadership positions without possessing the required training or qualifications. This prevents them from influencing decision-making processes to their advantage or from making active contributions to the shaping of Uganda's political and social landscape.

Young Ugandans thus have an ambivalent relationship to politics. On the one hand, what drives them to become involved in politics is often a desire for improvement – they wish to participate and make a difference. They recognised a long time ago that power is not the key to sustainable change. Young people have become part of the political process in a variety of ways – as candidates but also as election assistants and campaigners. And their turnout is very high.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, many young people have the impression that their voices do not count for a great deal and that their impact is even less significant.<sup>17</sup> One factor that results in young people becoming increasingly frustrated with the role they can play in politics is the fact that politicians are trying to corrupt them and buy

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their votes. Many young Ugandans are also in danger of becoming victims of manipulation because their frequently desperate situation makes them easy targets of empty promises.

Finally, young people often respond to government programmes and politicians with rejection and cynicism due to the high level of corruption and bribery, which keeps coming to light in Ugandan politics. The aim must therefore be to strengthen the former tendency and to weaken the latter in order to nurture and strengthen the motivation of Uganda's young people.

Young Ugandans are not "rebels". They have a desire to become involved in the existing system, but keep encountering obstacles and boundaries that appear insurmountable. But in spite of the frustration that this may entail, a "Ugandan Spring" is not likely to happen. The young people in Uganda as a group are still too "disorganised" and split along ethnic and social lines for that to happen. For

16 | UN, n. 9, 17.

17 | Cf. USAid, n. 1, 17 et seq.

them, the same applies as for the opposition. Many may take to the streets, but there is no “movement” to speak of. Protest actions are generally limited to the capital and are frequently not based on a specific agenda. The latter is usually reduced to the smallest common denominator, which unites the young people as well as the opposition and can best be described by the term “anti-attitude”. They also lack approaches to solve the issues and alternatives to put forward. This is one of the main problems preventing them from utilising their potential to good effect in order to steer Uganda in a direction that would benefit them in the future.

### **AFRICA GOING MOBILE? “NO AIRTIME!”**

What is also missing is the mobilising power of new and social media. According to surveys, over 70 per cent of young people in Uganda have never had access to the Internet; the number of regular users is concentrated in the capital and does not exceed five to ten per cent.<sup>18</sup> Although practically everybody (96 per cent) now has at least one mobile phone, hardly anybody has the means to actually pay for calls. Complaints about the lack of airtime has therefore become a “constant mantra”, and people are busy “beeping” or sending the occasional text. Weak networks and frequently interrupted connections also make calls and surfing a less than effective and productive experience. The underlying technology itself, which provides the prerequisites for using new media or social networks, is not widely available – not at all in rural areas and only to a limited extent in urban environments. In view of this, it hardly matters whether mobile phones are internet-enabled or not. And even when they are, their potential is not recognised or not utilised. Twitter, Facebook, etc. are used more for “gossip and chit-chat” and for socialising than as a communication platform for social issues or as a means for a serious exchange of opinions about political concerns. The radio is still the main means of information.

18 | Five per cent of young people in Uganda have access to the Internet on a daily basis, and around ten per cent occasionally (one to three times a week): USAid, n. 1, 18.

But as the number of young people increases and with technical facilities improving, it is only a matter of time before the younger generation in Sub-Saharan Africa too will begin networking and organising. Young people have generally become more political, more engaged – at least in Uganda. They have realised it is their future that is at stake, and they want to have a hand in shaping this future. The aim must be to devote greater attention to this phenomenon at the international level and to support the countries south of the Sahara in their efforts to create prospects for their young people. The democratic changes in this region create challenges but also numerous opportunities, which need to be recognised and supported.