

Disaster preparedness under the decentralization system of governance in Uganda

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Abstract

The study sought to determine the levels of disaster preparedness under decentralization among selected districts in Uganda. The districts targeted were 17 and the respondents were district disaster management personnel, in the office of the Chief Administrative Officer, local council members who are the legislators, district disaster management committees and representatives from the community. The results indicated that there is poor capacity on the part of staff in understanding the key standards that relate to disaster responsiveness. The personnel holding these portfolios are not well trained to handle emergency response. 89% of the districts covered had no facilities to evacuate the vulnerable in case of a disaster. However, planning is done at district level and this creates plans for emergencies that have localized dimensions. Resource utilization for disaster preparedness activities can be incorporated in the other plans using locally generated resources. The efforts to build the capacity of the district personnel as well as that of the community to understand the dynamics of disaster management should be done. In conclusion therefore, it should be noted that it is a human right for vulnerable and resource constrained communities and populations to be protected against problems brought about by disasters. By looking at the challenges associated with managing disasters, and by studying the opportunities presented by the decentralization system in Uganda, better options could be generated to establish a more sustainable mechanism to reduce the losses associated with disasters both in terms of human and other resources.

Keywords: disasters, preparedness, decentralisation, Uganda.



1 Introduction

Uganda is a landlocked country of fairly high elevation in East Africa with a total area of 236,040 square kilometers of which the land area is 199,710 and water makes up the remaining 36,330 square kilometers. At the lowest level, is Lake Albert, with an elevation of 621 meters above sea level, while at the highest, Mount Rwenzori, is at 5,110 meters. Uganda is an agricultural country of comfortable climate and good soils. The population is (2002 Census [1]) 24 million of which 51% is female and 49% is male. Most of the economic activity is geared to the production, handling and marketing of crops, livestock, wood and other products arising from these.

In Uganda natural disasters such as droughts, floods, landslides, windstorms and hailstorms contribute well over 70% of the disasters experienced and destroy annually an average of 800,000 hectares of crops making economic losses in excess of 120 billion shillings. Economic losses resulting from transport accidents and fires and other climate related disasters are estimated at shillings 50 billion annually (Uganda National Water development Report [2]).

1.1 Nature of disasters affecting Ugandan communities

The common disasters in Uganda are mainly water related (DWD [3]) The vulnerability of many Ugandan communities to water related disasters is growing by the day due to many undesirable human activities such as deforestation, ecosystem degradation, environmental pollution, social unrest, transport accidents, urban and wild fires and poor land use in many parts of the country.

The following are some of the major water related disasters and how they affected their respective communities in terms of life and other material losses.

Basing on the statistics above, it shows that the opportunity cost for not being prepared for disasters is so high. It is therefore important that efforts to look out for opportunities to make communities more prepared for disasters are long overdue. The Ugandan context of decentralization therefore provides this opportunity.

1.2 Decentralization system of government

Decentralization is the practice of drawing power from the central government to the lower local governments (District & Sub-County). It is provided for in the Local Government Act 1997 [5] as well as the 1995 Constitution of Uganda [6]. Under decentralization, local authorities have more power over resources, more responsibilities and more decision-making autonomy. It is anticipated that the performance of local governments will be increasingly important for growth, poverty eradication and long-term rural development prospects. When it comes to disasters it is however not well documented whether the lower governments (District level) have the necessary capacity to mitigate the negative after effects of disasters let alone manage them. It is therefore imperative that efforts to equip



the relevant departments with knowledge and skills not only to resourcefully plan but to also manage situations that may pose disasters.

Table 1: Water related disasters in Uganda.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Nature of Disaster</i>	<i>Impact</i>
1961/1962	El-Nino Rains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive floods experienced in many parts of the country; • Destruction of Roads, Bridges, houses, crops, and property worth millions of dollars (actual loss not established); • Drastic rise in the water level of Lake Victoria (by 2.5 M submerging all major infrastructures along the lake shores.
1993/94	Drought and Famine	Over 1.8 million people were affected due to lack of food, water, and inadequate pasture for livestock
1997/98	El-Nino Rains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landslides killed 53 people in total, and over 2,000 people were displaced. • Roads, Bridges, houses, crops, and property worth more than US\$ 20 million were destroyed.
1999	Drought and Famine	Over 3.5 million people in 28 districts were affected by lack of food and a large number livestock suffered from inadequate pasture and water.

(Source: PEAP [4])

1.3 Projected solution

In order to have a meaningful intervention for the above, the following were identified as guiding objectives for the whole study.

1.3.1 Overall objective

To determine the levels of disaster preparedness under decentralization among selected districts in Uganda.

1.3.2 Specific objectives

1. To find out the capacity of staff in terms of knowledge and facilities in disaster preparedness and management at district level
2. To investigate the underlining opportunities at the districts in line with planning and resource utilization for disaster preparedness and management



3. To create a sustainable mechanism of empowering district disaster preparedness personnel to plan and manage a holistic disaster management program.

2 Results

Due to resource constraints, only 17 districts out of the 25 most prone districts to disasters were considered in the study. This accounted for close to 68%. The following were realized after the study and shall act as the pillars for future planning to improve on local government capacities in disaster response and management.

2.1 District staff capacity in terms of knowledge

Data from the study indicated that there is poor capacity on the part of staff in understanding the key standards that pertain to disaster responsiveness. 75% of the districts had no staff specifically trained to handle disaster situations. Every human being has the right to life with dignity and respect for their human rights. Local governments have the responsibility to provide assistance in a manner that is consistent with human rights, including the right to participation, non-discrimination and information, as reflected in the body of international human rights. Due to the non professional mechanism that is employed to identify personnel in such sensitive departments, the personnel holding these portfolios are not trained to handle such responsibilities (Sphere Project – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards [7]).

2.2 Facilities in disaster preparedness

In order to measure the capacity of districts in terms of capacity, the indicator that was used was one that looked at how the issue of vulnerability of disaster affected populations was handled. The groups most frequently at risk in disasters are women, children, older people, disabled people and people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH/A). In certain contexts, people may also become vulnerable by reason of ethnic origin, religious or political affiliation, or displacement. It was identified that 89% of the districts covered had no facilities to evacuate the vulnerable in case of a disaster. This therefore means that casualties if a disaster struck could be in double figures. These facilities are critical in terms of both maintaining momentum in strengthening necessary institutionalized capabilities and in being able to measure the adequacy of preparedness capabilities and structures at local, national, regional and global levels (World Conference on Disaster Reduction [8]).

2.3 Opportunities at the districts

2.3.1 Planning

One of the major components that were decentralized to the lower governments was planning (Local Government Act 1997 [5]). The technical units following



well set guidelines undertake planning with a strong degree of independence. The planned options are then passed on to the policy making organs which are the District councils of elected legislators who ratify the plans for implementation. Almost all the districts covered have utilized this opportunity to concisely come up with working options for the communities that they serve. It is this planning opportunity that the districts can use to plan for emergencies as well as disasters as each of these can have localized dimensions.

2.3.2 Resource utilization

Resource mobilization and utilization is one of the other components of decentralization. The districts following set guidelines have the mandate to utilize locally generated revenue and resources to implement the planned activities. The districts surveyed have utilized this as well. It is therefore a great opportunity to incorporate disaster preparedness activities using such resources because this type of revenue is unconditional.

2.3.3 Creating a sustainable mechanism of empowering district disaster preparedness personnel to plan and manage a holistic disaster management program

All the parties involved in the study at the local government levels agreed that it is very important that efforts to build the capacity of the district personnel as well as that of the community to understand the dynamics of disaster management is long over due. Special emphasis shall center on the following standards that need to be developed if a sustainable mechanism is to be put in place.

- 1) Participation of all parties technical, political and the effected populations,
- 2) Initial assessment by the technical teams,
- 3) Response modalities and logistics planning,
- 4) Targeting to measure levels of vulnerability of the affected populations,
- 5) Monitoring of the planned efforts
- 6) Evaluation of the intervention mechanisms,
- 7) Aid worker competencies and responsibilities and
- 8) Supervision, management and support of personnel.

3 Conclusions

In conclusion therefore, it should be noted that it is a human right for vulnerable and resource constrained communities and populations to be protected against problems brought about by disasters. By looking at the challenges associated with managing disasters, and by studying the opportunities presented by the Decentralization system in Uganda, better options could be generated to establish a more sustainable mechanism to reduce the losses associated with disasters both in terms of human and other resources. The local authorities that participated in the study were optimistic that if the findings could be put in practice, a new era in terms of protecting human life in the disaster prone areas shall be born.



References

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