

THE LEGAL AID CLINIC MANAGES OVER 10,000 CASES PER YEAR

LDC LEGAL AID CLINIC **STRAINED** AS CASE BACKLOG INCREASES

By Michael Odeng

The Law Development Centre (LDC)'s Legal Aid Clinic management says it is overwhelmed by the high number of cases referred to it.

Clinic managers say the surge started after key development partners, including the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), froze funding. DGF's activities were halted in 2021 by President Yoweri Museveni over allegations of financing subversive activities.

The clinic is mandated to provide services, including pro bono legal aid services and conduct the clinic legal education programme for the bar course students.

Speaking to *New Vision* at the LDC premises in Makerere, Kampala, Legal Aid Clinic manager Lydia Lubega Namuli, said the Government took over the support previously provided by DGF.

DGF, a non-governmental organisation, was a major funder of legal aid clinics in Uganda, and its support had a great impact on increasing access to justice for vulnerable populations.

However, its departure meant that the majority of the organisations that relied on it for funding to provide legal services free of charge closed shop, leaving a vacuum, which the LDC clinic has attempted to fill.

According to Namuli, the clinic used to receive about sh300m annually from DGF. However, she said the Government has since raised its contribution from sh500m to sh3b.

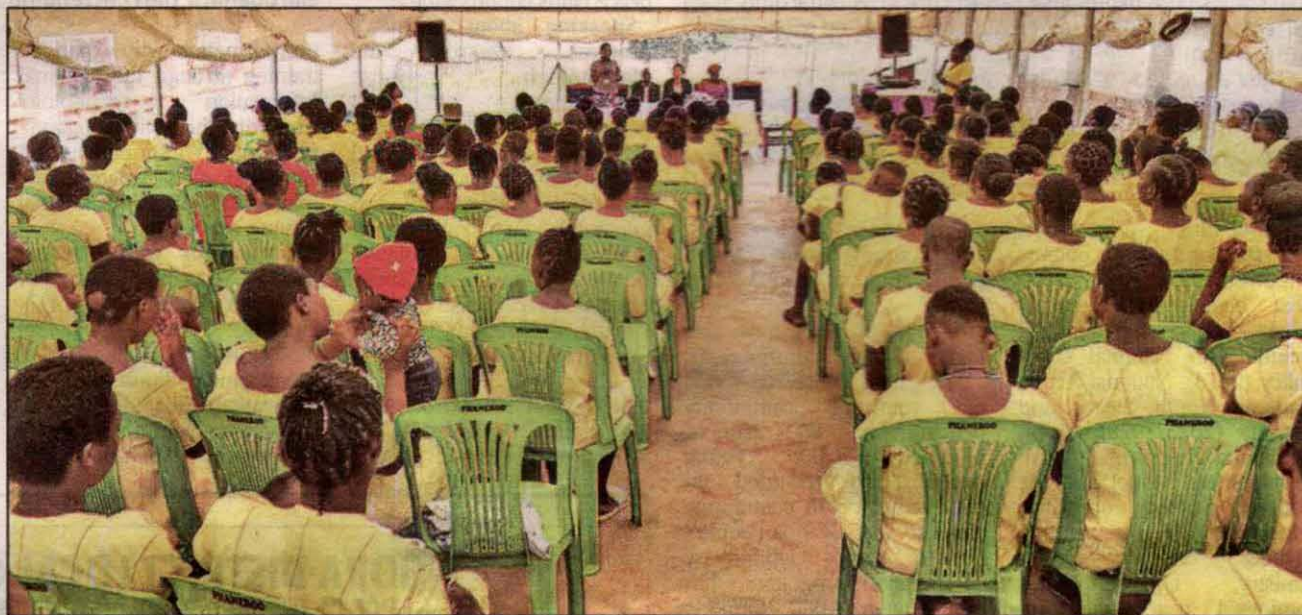
Namuli said the funding remains insufficient, given the heavy workload that was transferred to the clinic after the closure of DGF-supported legal aid organisations.

"This is just a drop in the ocean. When DGF closed, many organisations that depended on it for funding began referring indigent clients to us," Namuli said, adding that they need more funding, especially for human resources.

Namuli revealed that the clinic previously handled about 1,000 cases per year, but now manages over 10,000 across its eight centres in the districts of Kampala, Jinja, Masindi, Mbarara, Mbale, Lira, Adjumani, Kabarole and the LDC campus.

She said private lawyers charge over sh2m for a full maintenance case, about sh10m for land disputes, and over sh500,000 for bail applications.

Despite these costs, the LDC clinic does not charge



Inmates of Luzira Women's Prison attending a Legal Aid Clinic session



Senior legal officer Rose Kaweesa (left) and the reconciliator, Agnes Awotunde (second-right), sensitising inmates at Luzira Women's Prison



Legal Aid Clinic of Masindi officers after carrying out an outreach to Hoima Prison

vulnerable communities for such services.

Namuli said due to limited staffing, including lawyers, research assistants, clerks and other critical personnel, the clinic is unable to manage all the cases that come its way.

Uganda currently has 38 High Court circuits, but the LDC Legal Aid Clinic operates in only eight. Namuli said they are expected to serve all circuits nationwide, a task that remains impossible under current funding levels.

CAPACITY CHALLENGES

Citing the challenges, they face, Namuli noted that demand for their services continues to grow, yet the number of advocates remains limited and the rising student population is overwhelming.

"The demand for our services far outstrips our capacity. With the suspension of Democratic Governance Facility activities, many legal aid organisations are now unstable and are referring their clients to us," she noted.

She also highlighted funding volatility, explaining that they must operate within the budget allocated to LDC despite numerous competing priorities. In addition, they continue to grapple with technological and data-management gaps.

She further cited geographical and inclusivity challenges, noting that many clients require interpreters, including sign language and that some have speech or hearing impairments.

"We are still falling short

when it comes to addressing disability and language barriers," she added.

According to Namuli, many of their clients also face socio-economic hardships.

"Our clients are poor and often come to us with personal challenges beyond the legal issues. Many cannot even afford transport. We have not been able to adequately respond to these burdens," she said.

AT-RISK POPULATIONS

The clinic's mandate includes providing critical services to needy and poor litigants, juveniles, and victims of injustice.

However, because its operations are confined to eight circuits, millions of vulnerable Ugandans in the remaining

30 circuits face barriers to legal representation, exposing them to exploitation, wrongful convictions or the inability to challenge oppressive practices.

Marginalised populations, including women, children, and rural communities, bear the brunt of this gap, which compounds cycles of inequality.

EQUIPPING LAW STUDENTS

The clinic recently marked 25 years of a home-grown innovation that seamlessly links learning to service, bringing justice within reach of vulnerable communities while shaping future advocates ready for real-world practice.

Namuli said the clinic runs a unique student-led model that equips law students with practical legal skills, while

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Robert Mackay, the deputy head of the bar course, said his department ensures bar course students participating in the clinical legal aid programme are motivated by a strong sense of social justice.

"Our recruitment policy for the legal aid programme is voluntary. We reach out to students and invite them to register for the clinical education programme. Our goal is to equip young lawyers with the skills to interview clients who cannot afford private legal services and to provide solutions to their problems," he said.

Mackay noted that most of the disadvantaged face issues such as land grabbing, gender-based violence and disputes over property and inheritance. He said they rely on legal expertise to protect their rights regarding land ownership, succession and cases involving juvenile offenders.

"Many of these individuals lack proper documentation, which allows the wealthy to exploit them and seize their land," he noted.

providing free legal aid to poor clients.

She observed that over the years, the clinic has pioneered child justice interventions and expanded its Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) programmes, fostering partnerships with the Judiciary, the Police and Prisons to enhance access to justice.

"Since we have expanded, we handle criminal justice, civil justice, land justice, family justice and labour matters. We also incorporated alternative dispute resolution mechanisms such as diversion, reconciliation, and mediation," she said.

Namuli explained that they use a mixed model of students and advocates, where one advocate supervises several students to ensure the provision of legal aid in the magistrates' courts.

"The strength of this approach is that the model is fully embedded within existing structures within the academic system, justice system, and government frameworks," she noted.