

Citizens' manifesto

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BY YAHUDUKITUNZI

As Uganda heads toward the 2026 General Election, frustrations over poor service delivery are becoming louder across communities. This has raised a critical question: could these persistent failures finally influence how citizens vote?

Across the country, pothole-filled roads, drug stock-outs in health centres, chronic water shortages, understaffed schools, and delayed government projects have become part of the everyday lived experience of millions of Ugandans. While these issues are not new, their political weight appears to be increasing sharply, with more citizens openly blaming elected leaders.

Findings from Twaweza's Sauti za Wananchi survey—released last week—confirm this shift. According to the survey, health services (48 percent), food insecurity (42 percent), unemployment (42 percent), and poor road infrastructure are the most pressing issues affecting Ugandans today. Others are poverty, poor healthcare and corruption. These concerns echo across villages, towns, and trading centres, revealing a nation grappling with a growing service delivery deficit.

At the national level, citizens identify a wide range of pressing issues, with unemployment (39 percent) and health services (39 percent) topping the list. These are followed by the rising cost of living (33 percent), corruption (27 percent), hunger (27 percent) and poverty or inequality (24 percent).

At the household level, the picture shifts slightly. The cost of living (42 percent) and hunger (40 percent) emerge as the most immediate worries, alongside unemployment (39 percent), health services (34 percent), poverty/inequality (33 percent) and the quality of education services (21 percent). This reflects how national challenges translate directly into everyday struggles for families.

Comparing trends over time, the survey shows that in 2023, economic concerns such as unemployment and the cost of living were dominant. While they remain critical, health services have risen back to the forefront, echoing the heightened concern during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 to 2021.

Corruption, meanwhile, has consistently ranked among the top challenges, underscoring persistent governance issues.

Taken together, the three most serious problems facing Uganda today can be grouped into: Firstly, economic matters: unemployment and the rising cost of living; secondly, public services: health services remain a major concern, and thirdly, governance: corruption continues to undermine trust in institutions.

The survey further indicates that



Patients and health workers in a hospital. Across the country, pothole-filled roads, drug stock-outs in health centres, chronic water shortages, understaffed schools, and delayed government projects have become part of the everyday lived experience of millions of Ugandans. PHOTO/FILE

regional differences add nuance to this national picture. In Greater Kampala and the central region, poverty/inequality and the cost of living are cited more often, while hunger is less emphasised.

In northern Uganda, hunger is the dominant concern, with unemployment ranking lower.

Eastern Uganda shows slightly greater concern for health services and hunger, while western Uganda places less emphasis on the cost of living but more on land issues.

Demographic factors also shape perceptions. Rural residents, poorer households, and those with lower education levels are less likely to cite unemployment but more likely to highlight corruption and hunger. Wealthier and better-educated citizens, by contrast, are more likely to emphasise poverty and inequality. Gender differences are minimal, though men are more likely than women to cite corruption.

Interestingly, the survey highlights that residents of northern Uganda are generally more satisfied with government performance across a range of issues, including job creation, inflation management, crime reduction, and fighting corruption. In contrast, citizens in Greater Kampala, western, and central regions are more critical of government performance, except in water and sanitation services, where Kampala residents report higher satisfaction.

Overall, the survey underscores that Uganda's challenges are multidimensional. Economic pressures, public service delivery, and governance concerns intertwine to shape citizens' daily lives. While unemployment, health services, and corruption stand out, regional and demographic differences reveal the complexity of addressing these issues in a way that resonates across the country.

What ordinary Ugandans say

Yet beyond statistics, the real story lies in the voices of ordinary Ugandans—voices that suggest frustration is no longer silent.

SERVICE DELIVERY

Service delivery is no longer a silent issue managed by technocrats—it has become a political battleground. Roads, water, education, and health now define how citizens judge leaders. Across Uganda, frustration is shifting from quiet complaints to open criticism.

Whether these frustrations will translate into real voting shifts remains to be seen. But one thing is clear: the 2026 elections may be shaped not by promises—but by performance.

"We go to the health facility and find only Panadol. You cannot treat a sick child with Panadol alone. Every election year, they promise to fix this, but nothing changes," Ms Justine Masette, a charcoal vendor in Bulambuli District, who has voted in every election since 2006, said.

Mr Godber Tumushabe, a policy analyst, observed that service delivery has emerged as a major concern for voters, as reflected in widespread discussions across social media. "Citizens consistently highlight the poor quality of road infrastructure, limited access to education, and inadequate healthcare services as the most pressing issues affecting their daily lives."

He said President Museveni, leveraging his incumbency, seeks to project himself as addressing or promising to resolve these problems. Mr Tumushabe, however, noted that after nearly four decades in power, such claims are increasingly unconvincing to many Ugandans.

"In contrast, the leading Opposition leader, Robert Kyagulanyi, has been framing these issues in innovative and creative ways that resonate with voters, particularly the youth. By linking broken service delivery to joblessness and presenting a vision of a 'new Uganda', Kyagulanyi's message appeals strongly to younger citizens who bear the brunt of unemployment and poor public ser-

vices," he said.

Ms Sarah Bireete, the Executive Director of the Centre for Constitutional Governance, observed that many voters, particularly in rural areas, appear to be suffering from what she described as a form of Stockholm syndrome. She said these citizens often develop positive feelings toward a regime that has consistently failed to deliver basic services such as quality roads, healthcare, and education, largely due to corruption and misplaced priorities.

She explained that limited access to information prevents many from fully connecting the dots between governance failures and their daily struggles. "Some citizens do not even link public funds to taxes, a disconnect worsened by the removal of graduated tax. As a result, they are more easily persuaded by the ruling party's message of peace under the NRM, while overlooking the fact that corruption itself poses a serious threat to long-term stability," Ms Bireete said.

Dr Juma Kakuba Sultan (PhD), a political scientist at Kyambogo University, told *Saturday Monitor* that "Ugandans are beginning to move away from being swayed by politicians' incentives or handouts, instead demanding tangible developmental outcomes such as improved road infrastructure, better health facilities, and quality schools."

Vulnerabilities

The Executive Director of the Anti-Corruption Coalition Uganda (ACCU), Mr Marlon Agaba, observed that most voters, particularly in rural areas, remain vulnerable to handouts rather than focusing on substantive issues. By contrast, regions with higher levels of education such as central and Kigezi, tend to focus more on issues of governance and service delivery.

"Districts that consistently vote for the ruling NRM [National Resistance Movement] at levels of 90 to 100 percent are often those that are extremely underdeveloped and underserved. Look at Karamoja Sub-region, including districts such as Amudat, Karenga, and Kabongo, which are hard-to-reach and suffer from poor service delivery yet still vote over-

whelmingly for NRM," Mr Agaba said. He added: "Similarly, districts like Obongi and Budibungo lack basic services and even secondary schools, but still register NRM support of around 95 percent. This, he argued, shows that voting behaviour in these areas is not shaped by service delivery but by other factors."

Mr Agaba further pointed out that the Opposition has been weakened by internal divisions, citing the splits within Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) and the challenges facing the National Unity Platform (NUP). These divisions, he said, undermine their ability to mount a strong challenge. Meanwhile, the President continues to pledge new districts and distribute handouts as part of his campaign strategy.

Mr Agaba concluded that at the constituency level, poor service delivery failures can be decisive in determining electoral outcomes. Where services are lacking, voters are increasingly frustrated, and this frustration has the potential to shape who wins in future elections.

Dr Kakuba, however, cautions that dismantling the ruling NRM party's entrenched networks remains a formidable challenge. Loyalty to the party is still strong in many areas, especially rural regions, despite growing impatience over unmet needs and unfulfilled promises.

He added that while this fear continues to influence older generations, younger Ugandans, particularly the youth, are less receptive to such arguments and may instead rally behind Opposition parties that speak to their generational demands.

Voting shift?

Dr Kakuba observed that although service delivery could become a decisive issue in shaping the 2026 polls, many voters still view the election period as a "harvesting season," when promises and handouts from candidates are expected and honoured.

Not Mr Fredrick Mboizi, a boda boda rider in Budaka District. He told *Saturday Monitor* that poor roads have crippled trade.

"If we keep voting the same people, then we are also the problem."

His words are echoed by young farmers who believe political leaders have not prioritised rural infrastructure. Civil society organisations say the growing political awareness is a result of increased access to information, social media, and civic education.

Mr Timothy Chemonges, a political expert, said Ugandans are increasingly feeling the impact of poor service delivery. Impassable roads, drug stock-outs, and water shortages are no longer abstract policy issues but daily frustrations. These experiences, he noted, are pushing voters to scrutinise government performance more closely as 2026 approaches.

"For some, it may reduce enthusiasm for the ruling party; for others, it may trigger a search for more responsive leaders, especially at the local level. In certain areas, we might even see voter apathy as a quiet form of protest against unmet expectations," Mr Chemonges explained.

Mr Chemonges said while frustration is undeniably growing, it does not automatically overturn long-standing political loyalties.

"Many voters still rely on historical party ties, community networks, or patronage systems," he said. "A real shift is only likely where deep dissatisfaction meets a credible political alternative that convinces people things can be different. Without such alternatives, voters may remain unhappy but still vote the same way or simply stay away from the polls."