

How health sector has evolved over time

While challenges remain, Uganda's health system today bears little resemblance to the fragile structure of the mid-1980s.

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In 1986, when the National Resistance Movement (NRM) took power, Uganda's health sector was in deep crisis. The country had a limited health infrastructure with a few hospitals nationwide.

The period before the NRM government was marked by civil conflict that caused state infrastructure collapse thus negatively impacting health services. Many hospitals stood in disrepair, health centres were few and poorly equipped, medicines were scarce, and trained health workers were overstretched or had left the country.

For ordinary Ugandans, falling sick often meant relying on home remedies, traditional healers or travelling long distances in search of care that was never guaranteed.

Four decades later, the picture has changed in visible and meaningful ways. While challenges remain, Uganda's health system today bears little resemblance to the fragile structure of the mid-1980s.

From village health centres to regional referral hospitals, from maternity wards to specialised cancer units, the story of Uganda's health sector under NRM is best told through the lives it has touched and the services that now exist where there was once nothing.

From collapse to rebuilding the basics

While an exact cumulative number of health centres and hospitals for 40 years is elusive, the NRM government has significantly expanded Uganda's health infrastructure, commissioning hundreds of Health Centre IIIs recently (like 398 in early 2025) towards a goal of one per sub-county, adding to thousands of existing facilities, though challenges like water and electricity access remain for optimal function.

In April 2025, for instance, the Prime Minister commissioned 398 new Health Centre IIIs across the nation, aiming to improve local healthcare. Government embarked on expanding health centres across the country, creating a tiered system from Health Centre IIIs at parish level to national referral hospitals.

For many rural communities, this marked the first time a formal health facility was within reachable distance. Mothers no longer had to walk for hours to deliver their babies. Children could receive treatment for malaria, diarrhoea and respiratory

infections closer to home.

Uganda had over 6,900 health facilities in 2018, with a significant portion being government-owned, part of the overall health system being built up. The expansion involves adding new facilities and upgrading existing ones, with efforts focused on infrastructure like water and electricity.

The rise of regional referral hospitals

One of the most visible transformations has been the construction and upgrading of regional referral hospitals. Facilities such as Mbarara, Gulu, Mbale, Fort Portal, Arua and Soroti have grown into major centres of care, reducing the pressure on Mulago National Referral Hospital and bringing specialised services closer to the people.

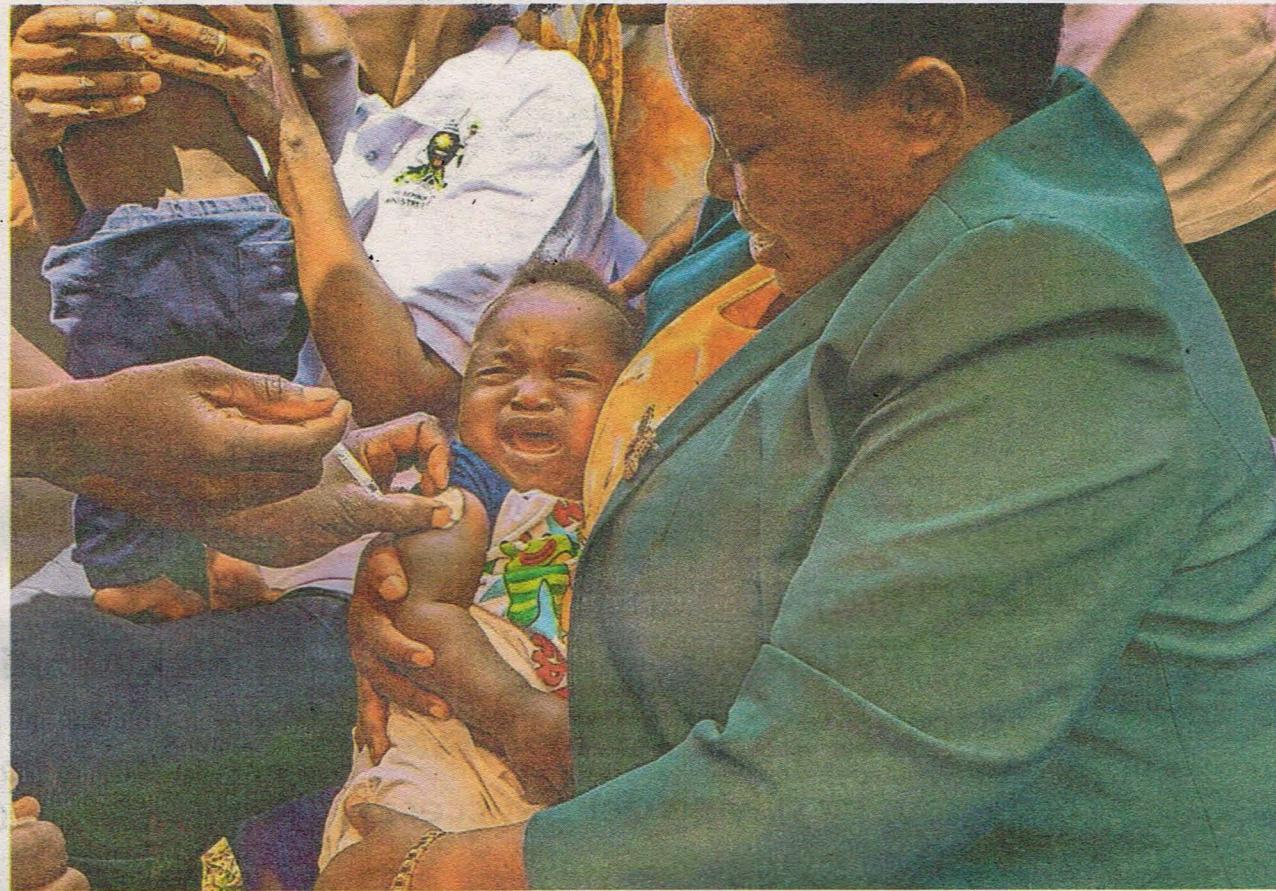
These hospitals now offer surgeries, maternity care, imaging services and specialist clinics that once required referral to Kampala or even travel abroad. For patients with chronic illnesses, this shift has reduced costs, delays and the emotional burden of seeking care far from home.

The expansion has also created training grounds for doctors, nurses and specialists, strengthening Uganda's human resource base in health.

Maternal and child health: saving lives quietly

Few indicators reflect progress as clearly as maternal and child health. Over the past 40 years, Uganda has recorded a steady decline in maternal and infant mortality rates. While childbirth remains risky for many women, especially in hard-to-reach areas, more mothers are surviving pregnancy and delivery than in previous decades.

This improvement is linked to better access to antenatal care, skilled birth attendants, emergency obstetric services and immunisation programmes. Health education has also played a role,



encouraging mothers to seek care early and deliver at health facilities.

For many women, the difference is personal. A mother from eastern Uganda recalls losing her first child in the early 1990s due to birth complications at home. Years later, she safely delivered two children at a health centre with trained staff.

Immunisation and prevention as pillars

Uganda's expanded immunisation programme has become one of the quiet successes of the health sector. Vaccines against polio, measles, tetanus, tuberculosis and other childhood illnesses are now widely available, significantly reducing preventable deaths.

Outbreaks still occur, often linked to misinformation or access gaps, but overall coverage has improved. The emphasis on prevention has also extended to malaria control through mosquito nets, health education and treatment pro-

grammes.

These interventions may not always make headlines, but they have saved countless lives and eased the burden on health facilities.

HIV/AIDS: from despair to global recognition

Perhaps no health story defines Uganda's journey more than HIV/AIDS. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the epidemic devastated families and communities. Hospitals overflowed with patients, stigma was widespread, and death was common.

Uganda's response, marked by openness, community involvement and prevention campaigns, drew global attention. Over time, partnerships enabled the scale-up of antiretroviral therapy, turning HIV from a fatal illness into a manageable condition for many.

Today, millions of Ugandans living with HIV are on treatment, able to work, raise families and plan for the future. Mother-to-child transmission has reduced significantly, and awareness is widespread.

Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja with a baby at the launch of the malaria vaccination exercise in Apac District last year. Uganda's expanded immunisation programme has become one of the quiet successes of the health sector. PHOTO/TONNY ABET

Cancer care: hope where there was none

Cancer was once whispered about in Uganda, often equated with certain death. For years, patients who could afford it travelled abroad for treatment, while others went home to wait.

The growth of the Uganda Cancer Institute as a centre of excellence not only treating Ugandans but also patients from other East African countries has changed that narrative. Expanded facilities, trained specialists and improved access to chemotherapy and radiotherapy have brought cancer care closer to home. Awareness campaigns have encouraged screening for cervical, breast and prostate cancers, increasing chances of early detection.

While challenges such as long waiting times and high costs persist, the fact that cancer is now treatable within Uganda marks a major shift in the health landscape.

Health workers at the heart of progress

Infrastructure and medicines alone do not deliver care. At the centre of Uganda's health sector progress are health workers who have served through shortages, epidemics and reforms.

From village health teams to specialists in referral hospitals, these workers form the backbone of the system. Many have stayed despite low pay, heavy workloads and difficult conditions.

LOOKING AHEAD WITH HONESTY

For ordinary Ugandans, the impact of health sector changes is measured not in policy documents, but in lived experience. It is seen in a child who survives measles, a woman who delivers safely, a patient who receives dialysis or cancer treatment at home instead of abroad.

These everyday victories rarely attract attention, yet they represent the real value of investment in health. As NRM marks 40 years, Uganda's health sector stands as a mix of achievement and unfinished work. Infrastructure has expanded, services have improved, and outcomes have changed.

At the same time, population growth, funding gaps, staff shortages and inequities between urban and rural areas continue to test the system. The past four decades show that progress is possible, but fragile.

The challenge ahead is not only to build more hospitals, but to sustain quality care, protect health workers and ensure that no Ugandan is left behind because of where they live or what they earn. The story of Uganda's health sector is ultimately a human one. It is told in hospitals rebuilt, lives saved and hope restored; one patient, one mother, one community at a time.