

Why neglecting capacity building for local councils undermines democracy



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As Uganda reels from its just-concluded elections for president, parliament, and local councils on February 12, 2026, the nation stands at a pivotal moment. Voters turned out in the millions, expressing hopes for better services, greater accountability, and greater participation.

Uganda's local councils, foundation of grassroots governance, remain structurally weakened, unprepared, and institutionally neglected. For the past 15 years, the central government has failed to allocate resources for the orientation and training of newly elected local leaders.

This neglect has crippled citizen engagement, planning, budgeting, legislation, oversight, and service delivery across the country's 135 districts, 11 cities, 31 municipal councils, 25 city divisions, 1487 sub-counties, and 589 Town Councils. What is at stake is not administrative tidiness, but the survival of Uganda's decentralisation project as a credible democratic and development framework.

From Kampala's metropolitan councils to rural districts in Karamoja, West Nile, and Busoga, I have witnessed councils paralysed not by bad intentions, but by institutional unpreparedness. Many councillors assume office with no grounding in the local governments functionality, no exposure to public finance rules, and no training in participatory governance.

With more than 75 per cent of the elected members being new, and a substantial leadership turnover, the result is predictable. Council meetings descend into procedural confusion; mandates are misunderstood; and political debates collapse into confrontation rather than deliberation. A councillor in Wakiso district confided to me last year: "We won on promises of roads and functional health facilities, but we don't know how to turn votes into budgets."

This is not isolated; it's systemic. ACODE's Local Government Councils Scorecard has consistently demonstrated that councillor performance in legislation, accountability, and service delivery

monitoring is closely linked to capacity-building interventions. Councils that benefited from structured training and mentorship under the Scorecard Initiative recorded marked improvements in legislative output, oversight of service delivery units, and responsiveness to citizen concerns. Where such support is absent, councils struggle to function as deliberative and representative institutions.

The consequences ripple outward, eroding public trust and development gains. Citizen participation, a constitutional pillar of Uganda's decentralised system, has plummeted. Without trained leaders who understand how to convene inclusive forums, facilitate dialogue, and respond to citizen priorities, council meetings increasingly become symbolic exercises dominated by local elites. Women and youth, despite constitutionally-guaranteed representation, are often marginalised in practice, undermining both equity and legitimacy.

Planning and budgeting suffer most acutely. Local governments derive more than 90 per cent of their revenues from central government transfers, yet councillors lack the skills to scrutinise these allocations or align them with community needs. Field evidence from Karamoja and West Nile shows councils approving budgets with limited scrutiny, allowing ghost projects and substandard works to proliferate. In contrast, councils that have received training in participatory planning and budget analysis demonstrate stronger prioritisation of social services and a more effective use of discretionary grants.

Further, oversight of local council executives, meant to check corruption and malfeasance, degenerates into partisanship. The Inspector General of Government's report (2025) flagged more than 500 local corruption cases, many of which can be traced to oversight failures by under-equipped councils. Weak political oversight directly contributes to corruption risks, procurement failures, and the non-implementation of audit recommendations. These are not failures of law, but failures of institutional capacity.

Why, then, has this gap persisted? Fiscal constraints

are often cited, yet the numbers tell a different story. Allocating approximately Shs 20 billion annually, equivalent to less than 1 per cent of the Equalisation Grant, would be sufficient to provide mandatory orientation and core training for all newly elected councillors. Instead, the government has relied on sporadic donor-funded initiatives that cannot substitute for a national, institutionalised programme. As ACODE's research on councillor performance demonstrates that continuous training is foundational to the effectiveness of decentralisation

The case for institutional strengthening is ironclad, blending pragmatism with principle. First, the government should regularly provide for mandatory orientation with a standardised, government-funded program. The government should partner with CSOs and universities such as Makerere University, Gulu University, Lira University, Kabale University, and Muni University to deliver standardised modules on budgeting (using tools such as participatory budgeting software), gender-responsive governance at a relatively cheaper cost.

Thus, institutional strengthening of local governments strengthens grassroots democracy. Without capable councils, citizen participation will continue to wither, corruption will deepen, and service delivery will stagnate. With trained and empowered local leaders, Uganda can revive the promise of decentralisation as a vehicle for participation, accountability, inclusion, and development.

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