

Building an Ethical State

Case of Uganda



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Executive Summary

Despite its National Ethical values, the Code of Conduct and Ethics for Public Service and Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament, Uganda is witnessing a decline in the level of morality as demonstrated by the high levels of corruption, lawlessness, sexual exploitation, demotivation and lack of patriotism. Benchmarking from other successful countries, this paper makes policy recommendations in four areas: legislation, advocacy via religious, cultural, media and private institutions, promotion of the National Ethical Values policy, and establishing an Ethics infrastructure that guides, monitors and controls Ethical conduct in the public.



Introduction

Ethics has often been referred to as principles, general judgements and norms that govern behaviour (Bartneck et al, 2021). Morality on the other hand is a complex set of rules, values and norms that determine or are supposed to determine people's actions. Ethics is rather objective than subjective. Uganda's national ethical values policy consists of 10 values including; honesty, justice and fairness in dealing with others, respect for humanity and environment, social harmony, national unity, integrity, hard work, creativity and innovativeness, social responsibility, national consciousness and patriotism (Tumuhimbise, 2018). Uganda also possesses a Code of Conduct and Ethics for Public Service and Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament that set standards of behaviour to ensure impartiality, objectivity, transparency, integrity, efficiency and effectiveness of Public Officers when performing their duties (Ministry of Public Service, 2005; Parliament of Uganda, n.d.).

National ethical values are the foundation of socio-economic and political development, yet, over the past few years, we have seen a decline in upholding these values by Public Officers, Members of Parliament and the citizens at large (Human Rights Watch, 2013). *Many everyday situations challenge the nation's ethical values and integrity from skipping a line, littering, forging documents, using disrespectful language, sexual exploitation, to using one's position to give someone an undue advantage over others.*

Institutions which are constitutionally mandated to fight corruption and other social ills in society are overwhelmed by the enormity of the ethical decline and low levels of Integrity to an extent that renders them ineffectual. Some of the institutions have been infiltrated and their operations are being influenced by unprincipled interests. The Inspectorate of Government (IG) whose mission is to promote good governance, accountability and rule of law in public office reported 763 Corruption, Ombudsman and Leadership Code complaints in the last half of 2020 in its performance report to the parliament. In addition to the cases reported, challenges cited in the report included inadequate skills, gaps in the legal framework for combating corruption, funding shortfalls, limited public engagements, and sensitization (IG, 2021).

The decline in upholding ethical values and integrity in the country can be associated with the lack of training and application of the content and rationale of ethical standards, the improper use of official power, and lack of awareness of the requirements of professional responsibility. *Poor remuneration of public officials, unnecessary administrative 'red tape', low monitoring of ethical conduct coupled with impunity have increased opportunities for bureaucrats to extract bribes and 'facilitation payments' or subvert the process outright by 'losing the file'.* Furthermore, the public is not aware of expected ethical conduct, reporting channels in case of misconduct, and if they are aware, some are afraid of the ramifications and often feel that their reports are ignored. Peer pressure and unethical behavior of leaders and parents have also compelled many to betray their morals.

Additionally, poverty in the nation and high unemployment rates have created motivation for and a breeding ground for immoral conduct such as dishonesty, child marriages, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, and social conflict.

As a result of the decline in ethical values and integrity in the nation, there has been decreasing public trust in government, high levels of corruption and lawlessness. The Afro-barometer 2020 survey indicated that less than 20% of the public trust government institutions, including Parliament, Electoral Commission, local government, Police, URA, and Courts of law. This public trust in government institutions is quite low compared to public trust in Religious (63%) and traditional leaders (45%) (Afrobarometer, 2020). Additionally, between 2012 and 2020, Transparency International data indicated that Uganda's corruption rank rose by 12 positions to 142 out of 179 countries.

There is also a deficit in the rule of law amongst government officials, as shown in the Afro-barometer 2020 survey, where 55.7% of the respondents mentioned that officials who commit crimes often go unpunished, yet ordinary people are often punished for their crimes (Afrobarometer, 2020). Furthermore, sexual offences have become rampant with the moral decline. This has led to increasing teenage pregnancies, divorce, rape and cases of HIV/AIDS (Apondi, R et al, 2021). Data from the Uganda Health Management System (HMIS) and Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development reports indicated a 24% increase in post-rape reports to 22,013 and a 17% increase in reported teen pregnancy and 860 sexual violence reports during the pandemic.

The decline in the nation's ethical values and integrity has weakened public service delivery, which bears negative effects on the nation's socio-economic and political development. It also poses great danger for Uganda's cohesion, unity, patriotism, stability, freedom and prosperity. A study by International Alert on youth perspectives on identity and national unity in Uganda indicated that many youths were not proud of being Ugandan because of association of the country with corruption, poverty, unemployment and police crackdowns (International Alert, 2013).

Implications of the current unethical state

The unchecked decline in ethical values and integrity will and is already producing a dispirited public service, a mounting generation of angry youth, unprecedented social and economic uncertainty, weak representation in Parliament, poor quality leadership, more unemployment, injustice, civil disobedience, wider inequalities and higher multidimensional poverty rates. For these reasons, the ethical transformation of society is vital.

The continuous decline in ethical values and integrity will also undermine the achievement of the sustainable development goals. The United Nations 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commits to eradication of poverty and achievement of sustainable development by 2030. SDG 16 focuses on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

The attainments of the Africa Agenda 2063, East African Community Vision 2050, and the National Development Plan (NDP) III goals also remain challenged in the wake of declining ethical standards and integrity in the country. Aspiration 3 of the Africa Agenda 2063 envisages an Africa of good governance, democracy and respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law.

Benchmarking

In order to put ethical values and integrity into effect, case studies from countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggest communication and training on core values and ethical standards for public servants in order to provide clear guidance to help solve ethical dilemmas (OECD, 2000). Training to raise awareness within the public can be done through traditional and social media.

Successful countries have also built a working environment that emphasizes integrity, core ethical values and transparency through effective human resource management and efficient digital systems. This ensures that government officers remain ethical before, during and after taking up public office. Finally, *monitoring compliance, detecting, investigating and criminalizing breaches of ethical principles and rewarding high standards of ethical conduct are highly advised for attaining high levels of national ethical standards.*

Policy Recommendations

In its 2020 performance report to the parliament, IG recommended amendment of the leadership code, introduction of ethics and integrity at an early stage, increased supervision and performance reviews for public servants, appoint more judges in the court of appeal, as well as an update of public information among others. In addition to the efforts of institutions such as the Inspectorate of Government and the Directorate of Ethics and Integrity, this policy brief recommends two categories of intervention to strengthen ethical conduct in the country.

The first addresses mindset change. This aims at inculcating ethical convictions and behaviours among the citizenry and will involve empowering faith-based organizations but also training and sensitization of public servants in ethics and patriotism. An extra mile can be taken by engaging citizens via social media, talk shows, radio, and television, to create awareness and practice of the National Ethical Values Policy as well as recognising and rewarding individuals that have demonstrated high ethical conduct. This will help create a positive perception towards practising ethical values and portray good examples in the country.

The second, recommends strengthening ethical systems, institutions, and infrastructure to prevent and punish unethical conduct. This strategy will include popularizing, upholding, and defending ethical values and integrity in policymaking, budgeting, and ensuring government accountability and citizen commitment.

Creating a digital platform that enables public online evaluations of government institutions and tracks performance indicators and targets to monitor the impacts of ethical conduct on a regular basis can also help strengthen the monitoring system.

In conclusion, building towards an ethical state requires a change in mindsets about right and wrong right from childhood, creating a suitable legal environment that punishes wrong and rewards right doing, and equipping the leaders with skills to enable transparency.

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