Introduction

Uganda is located in East Africa. It is landlocked with Kenya to the East, Tanzania to the South, Democratic Republic of Congo to the West and Sudan to the North. It is 240,000 square kilometers, inhabited by 28.8 million people of whom 34.7 percent live below the poverty line. It experienced political strife and civil turmoil in the 70’s and a destructive civil war in early 80’s. To date Northern Uganda is still in a state of war by the Lord Resistance Army (LRA).

Since 1986 Uganda adopted pragmatic policies embracing liberalization, commercialization, and macro-economic stabilization. These attracted multinational investments and donor support. This has resulted in economic stability and relatively impressive growth at an average of 6 per cent since 2006.

The Decentralization Policy was introduced in Uganda in late 80s. Since 1992 when it was officially launched, Decentralization has been progressively adopted as the vehicle for implementing government policy and programmes in Local Governments (LGs). Local councils are elected through a democratic process universal suffrage. Substantial decision making powers were devolved to elected local councils, which are the supreme authority of LGs, with the aim of promoting popular participation and improving the access to service delivery. This presentation expounds on Uganda’s experience in the area of promotion of popular participation through the Participatory Development Management (PDM) Programme.

The Legal Framework for Popular Participation in Uganda

People’s involvement in the Country’s development processes is provided for in the Uganda Constitution and the supporting Local Government Act (LGA). National Objective x of the Constitution on the Role of People in Development states that:

“The state shall take the necessary steps to involve the people in the formulation and implementation of development plans and programmes that affect them.”

Sections 35(3) and 37(4) of the LGA CAP 243 respectively state that:

“The District Council shall prepare a comprehensive and integrated development plan incorporating plans of lower level Government for submission to NPA and that LLGs shall prepare plans incorporating plans of Lower Councils in their respective areas of jurisdiction.” and “Technical Planning Committees shall coordinate all plans of Lower Councils and submit integrated plans to their respective councils for consideration and approval.”
To implement these provisions there is an elaborate democratically elected Local Council system comprising:

(i) Higher Local Governments – The City (1), City Divisions (5), Districts (79) and Municipalities (13)
(ii) Lower Local Governments – Sub-counties (900), Town Councils (92) and Municipal Divisions (34).
(iii) Administrative Units – County Councils (151), Parishes and Wards (5,500) and Villages and Cells (45,000)

All of the above Local Governments have Technical Committees comprising all the Heads of Department. The Technical Planning Committees of the Higher Local Governments coordinate participatory development planning processes in their respective Lower Level Governments and Administrative Units.

**Citizens’ Participation in Practice**

Citizens’ participation in Uganda has been skewed towards politics. Adults are allowed, and the majority actually votes their leaders into office. Also the media is predominantly preoccupied with political debates. Sometimes such debates influence the decision-making processes of Local Authorities.

Citizens’ participation in decision making on development matters that affect them has generally been passive. This is based on the real or perceived failure of Governments, Central or Local to deliver expected services to the citizens. This seems to be the real or apparent reason why local people participate more in politics than in development planning and implementation. People tend to look for leaders who can deliver hence the explanation of the high turnover of political leaders. Attempts to solicit peoples’ involvement take the form of occasional one-time consultations, which although sometimes taken to be a proxy for participatory practice, only enable the local authorities to exercise their right to be heard. They are supply focused, not inclusive because they are dominated by the elite and are often marred by mistrust and negative attitudes of both the upstream technocrats and the communities themselves. They therefore don’t allow for peoples’ demands to influence policy making in Local Governments.

Consequently peoples’ needs are not accurately identified to inform policy decision-making processes which results into incidences of resentment and occasionally demonstrations over development decisions taken by local authorities. Often this calls for tireless and at times costly interventions to solicit peoples’ support of decisions already taken. Occasionally the decisions are painfully reversed.

**The PDM Programme**

The Participatory Development Programme is Government’s deliberate effort to build mutual trust and therefore willingness of the Local Authorities to respect and respond to decisions taken and needs identified through citizen’s participatory processes. It is guided by principles of knowledge and awareness of the Government policies and priorities by
the citizenry, self reliance, openness, inclusiveness, transparency and both upward and downward accountability. The Programme is designed to strengthen Local Government institutions to deepen decentralization to the grassroots. Ministry of Local Government and Local Governments implement it with the support of UNDP, Uganda.

The programme aims at assisting Government to implement the above legal provisions intended to empower the local population to effectively participate in planning and management of development programmes which impact on them directly. It also aims at ensuring that peoples’ visions and priorities, right from the village and cell level, are used as building blocks of development plans of higher-level councils and Governments.

**PDM Activities**

Activities under the PDM programme revolve around supporting local governments to involve civil society in decision making and development management. This involves capacity enhancement of the Political and Technical Leadership to support and embrace participatory development management as a working modality in their Local Governments. Specific activities include:

- Training of Lower Local Government (LLG) technical staff as trainers and facilitators of Village/Cell level Community Facilitators.
- Facilitating the selection by the communities themselves and training of Village/Cell community facilitators.
- Production of manuals and guidelines for Village/Cell, Parish/Ward and LLG profiling, visioning and strategic development planning.
- Backstopping the formulation of Village/Cell, Parish/Ward and LLG profiles and strategic and one year action plans. This is done by the Programme management.
- Training technical staff in techniques of integrating community plans into Parish/Ward and higher level Local Government development plans.
- Supporting implementation of community projects generated through participatory processes.
- Establishing depositories/one-stop centers of community level initiatives in LLGs.
- Documentation of PDM practices to enable accelerated learning and sharing experiences widely.

**Programme Results**

The PDM programme was initiated in 8 LLGs (2001 – 2005). Two LLGs were selected from two districts in each of the 4 traditional geographical regions of the Country. Two of the selected LLGs were in urban settings. The programme is being replicated in 10 Districts (155 LLGs of which 15 are urban LLGs)(2006 – 2010)

So far the following outcomes have been realized:
• Communities at the grassroots appreciate government for responding to their aspirations.
• The political leadership is constantly reminded of their social contracts with their electorates.
• The community take keen interest in and own developments in their localities and through village profiling and strategic planning they are able to identify and commit resources within their means to their priority needs.
• The planning process in LLGs is simplified and contributes to upper level local planning processes.
• The PDM process make implementation of other community focused programmes easy.

Constraints/Challenges

Challenges to Participatory Development Management processes revolve around the human attitudinal change, logistical constraints and inappropriate institutional systems at the grassroots level.

(i) Gradual attitudinal change
The Local Government technical staff tends to have a negative attitude on the capability, knowledge and expertise of the public, the community organizations and even NGOs that operate at the grassroots. They tend to believe that grassroots community does not have the required technical know how and other intellectual capacities to produce realistic and technical plans. They therefore do not see value added from engaging community participation.

This attitudinal problem is also on the part of the community, they lack trust for the Local Government officials whom they label to be inefficient and merely exploitive. Because of past experiences of getting no feedback from their participation, some communities are fatigued of further participation.

Through trainings under the PDM programmes the LG staff is gradually becoming supportive and accommodative facilitators of community participation. Establishment of the feedback mechanism and support of strategies and projects identified with community participation is gradually restoring trust and confidence of the community.

(ii) Resource Constraints
Resources, both human and financial, for citizens’ participation in development management are inadequate. Following human resource restructuring exercises in LLGs the positions of Extension Workers, Community Development Officers and Parish Chiefs, which are key to facilitating citizens participation, are largely vacant or occupied by lower cadre staff in acting capacity. Financial resources to facilitate hands-on training of communities are inadequate and very often the programme has resorted to voluntarism, which is associated with laxity.

(iii) Logistical Constraints:
Whereas provision of extension services to the community are a mandatory responsibility of Lower Local Government technical staff, the logistics to enable them reach the community on a regular basis are inadequate. This explains the resort to the one time consultative meeting with the community.

The PDM project has provided some logistical support to enable LG staff to carry out monitoring and technical backstopping of community participation in planning. It is envisaged that with the development of a countrywide roll-out of the PDM strategy, the logistics will be provided for in LGs budgets. It is expected that the introduction of the new revenue mobilization measures (Local Government Service Tax) the financial position of Local Governments ill be healthy enough to accommodate participatory initiatives.

(iv) Inappropriate/Unsupportive Systems at the Community Level
While every adult has, until recently, been a mandatory member of the Village Council and therefore can participate in debates, which if well focused could influence policy making at that level, there is no technical structure attached to the lowest administrative levels of LGs. Therefore useful debates and community relevant innovations that could represent the voice of people at the grassroots do not trickle through to the decision-making levels in LGs. The recent relaxation of the mandatory requirement of all adults to be members of the Village Councils is likely to undermine inclusive participation.

The absence of government paid technical staff at the grassroots level implies that coordination of community participation is done on voluntary basis. Unless there are notable improvements of service delivery at the local level there is no incentive for continuous community participation in the management of development management. There is therefore a dilemma as to what should come first, improved service delivery or people’s participation to improve service delivery? Even where there is notable improvement in service delivery, maintenance of the services is on voluntary basis and their sustainability cannot be guaranteed.

The PDM project has capitalized on the political leaders whose participation is driven by their desire for political mandates. This is however associated with turnovers which call for unending capacity building.

Conclusion
Clearly, despite the existence of an excellent and elaborate decentralization policy, its implementation and especially its deepening to the grassroots is constrained by attitudinal change, financial constraints, human resource capacity and inadequate supportive structures. The basic question is whether decentralization should be deepened down only at the level where capacity has been built. This approach is likely to result into centralized tendencies even in LLGs.

A prudent approach is to consider building capacity by doing, despite the constraints. Supporting the community to participate in implementing the decentralized functions will enable the identification of area specific capacity gaps to be built. This therefore, emphasizes the continued relevance of the Uganda’s Participatory Development Management initiative.
To ensure that the decentralization policy makes a significant improvement in the well being of communities, efforts of all development actors including development partners should be mobilized to support sustainable mechanisms for facilitating grassroots citizens’ participation that transcends the current consultative practices. This can be enhanced by the good will of the Local Government political leaders and Local Government technocrats.