

Will life ever change for Uganda's poor?

Poverty creates extreme despair. Meagre salaries, squalid housing, hunger and disease have crippled the lives of citizens. It is time we did something



Most Ugandans cannot afford decent housing

Some days you hardly know how to keep going, how to even take another step. The hunger pangs gnaw that much at your stomach. But it's your children and their lack of good food that worries you more, especially these days since they are so sick.

Then there is their school, that horrible place, barren walls so empty of any worthwhile teaching or supplies or hope for tomorrow. You can't afford anything better. Now the rent at your home – not much of a home, you realise – has increased again. Soon you will move to a place without water or electricity.

At work you have asked often enough, but the entire matter is little more than a joke now. You get the same answer every time like a splash of muddy reality. No, your employer says, he can't afford a raise for you. Not even a small one.

Apparently nobody in Uganda can. This is the picture painted so well for you. But you have never believed it. You see enough Ugandans getting ahead. You know about the waste too, and the corruption. You may not read very much, but people talk.

You realise you are hardly alone in all this. You have enough friends who also make up the working poor. One friend, who works at a restaurant, earns barely sh1,000 a day. Are not even the dogs entitled to more scraps from the table?

Yes, you are the tired face of Uganda's underclass, the working poor in what is among the poorest of developing nations, a face that feels like it's getting bonier by the hour. This is the daily grind for so many Ugandans like you, walking on this long dry road without an end in sight.

If you had the ability to read more, the newspapers would tell you that more than seven million Ugandans, in fact, live below the poverty line. Of those, almost three million are the poorest of the working poor.



Thomas Froese

These newspapers also report recent rumblings of raising Uganda's minimum wage. NGOs and labour groups are lobbying again for an increase not seen in Uganda in the last 30 years. It was in 1984, when today's political leadership was like a youth soldiering in the midst of civil war, when Uganda's minimum wage was last increased to a paltry sh6,000 a month.

While Uganda's neighbours have raised their own minimum wages – Kenya recently by 14 percent, Tanzania just last year – the issue has not been on Kampala's radar. Back in the 1990s a government advisory board did make recommendations for a substantial hike. But they went unheeded.

So now the lobbyists have come again. It's time for change, they say. Far past time. This time, slowly, change might even come. There is the 2012 minimum wage bill still to be debated in parliament, along with a government promise to set a new minimum pay rate by July 2015.

But even this doesn't give much hope, no,

not for you. Because the unfortunate truth is that a raise in its minimum wage is no cure-all for any developing nation. It's often only select working groups that benefit. You are caught in the sort of poverty that is much deeper and wider.

The rich world, of course, has no concept of any of this, no clue about what it means to live on a dollar a day. There, even the poorest citizens have social safety nets.

More so, most workers in rich nations are employed in the formal job sector. Conversely, in the world's lowest income countries, the reverse is true. As many as four in five workers in Uganda are just like you, stuck in the informal sector of casual work.

You rise with the sun and retire well into the night, along with so many others after a long day on farms or in the service sector or as domestic help, among the millions of casual workers who, in Uganda, reportedly earn a median income of just sh50,000 a month.

But even if Uganda had a new minimum wage tomorrow it wouldn't matter for you. Or would it? Would this sort of legislated increase actually trickle down to help raise at least some casuals' earnings? Yes, this does happen in some poor nations. Just like there also might be consequences that are a higher minimum wage can sometimes force some businesses and industries to let some workers go.

In truth, such unknowns are simply part of any economy, but, like with anything in life, without courage to move ahead nothing will change. Social safety nets, for example, will never get created without new ways of looking at these issues. Instead, too many governments, even in the poorest of sub Saharan Africa, put precious resources elsewhere like, say, into those multi-billion-dollar fighter jets that storm over your home, so low sometimes, drowning out any

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semblance of coherent thinking.

It looks like the only hope you really have is the simple, everyday goodwill of people, the ancient biblical sense of being one's brother's keeper. African culture is deeply religious, after all.

But even at religious institutions, people are people. You know of one large Christian school that has paid its casual workers, despite their earnest pleas for more help, virtually the same daily sh5,000 for close to 10 years. And it's hardly alone.

So those poignant words of Christ, that "What you have done for the least of these, you have also done to me," are left as words only. Yes, there may be a new world coming, a new future order when, in some strange tidal turn, the last will be first and the first will be last. But you can't yet see that long tomorrow from here.

For you, today, this tired old earth just keeps spinning in the indifferent way that it so easily does.

The writer is a Canadian journalist based in Mukono

1977

BRITAIN CUTS TIES

On October 29, Britain broke diplomatic relations with Uganda, after President Idi Amin declared he had defeated the British. He named himself, 'Conqueror of the British Empire, adding it to his titles. The British also accused Amin of human rights abuse and killing his opponents. Radio Uganda later announced that the President had got a new title in addition to other 10 titles.



2000

EBOLA BREAKS OUT

On October 28, a deadly disease started to spread in the Gulu district, following the death of three nursing students and Dr. Matthew Lukwiya in Lacor Hospital. Government immediately instituted control measures by setting up a special isolation ward and dedicated ambulance services. Lukwiya contacted the Ministry of Health, which led to a rapid involvement of WHO and CDC Atlanta.

2005

BESIGYE RETURNS

On 26 October, Dr. Kiiza Besigye, returned to Uganda from South Africa, where he had been living for five years. Thousands of his supporters thronged the streets to welcome him. Besigye was later arrested, accused of treason and rape prompting riots in Kampala and other towns. The protesters believed the charges were designed to stop Besigye from challenging the president in 2006 elections.

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