

# **AUTONOMY AND INDEPENDENCE, COPING OF OLDER PERSONS ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF DIGITAL DIVIDE**

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## **Introduction**

Globally, no ideal situation prepares older persons for ensuring their autonomy, independence; and the consequences of digital divide either strengthen or frustrate them. While the right to autonomy and independence is recognised in the international legal instruments, enshrined in the Uganda 1995 Constitution, and, the country is a signatory to the Madrid International Plan of Action (MIPA), digital divide is a reality; and response is required through policies, programs and activities that help older persons, individuals and communities to effectively cope with technological advancements of the digital era. Frameworks at the international and regional levels, and national contexts may shape the environment, either for older persons to positively cope or be condemned to total exclusion from everything in society. The focus of this submission is on electronic (e) means in the digital world, in as far as they bear consequences on older persons if not addressed. The question is, what mechanisms and strategies are necessary to enable older persons realise autonomy, independence and for them to cope with the already present digital era that is fast moving towards, for example, e-governance, e-banking, e-vouchers, and all other 'e-s' that augment their exclusion? This article examines the global and Uganda national contexts, older persons in the African and Ugandan society, state of autonomy and independence, digital divide and older persons in Uganda, challenges of autonomy and independence, and ends up with conclusions and recommendations.

## **Global context**

The population of people aged 60 years and above, will, by the year 2050, be around 200 million<sup>1</sup>; a projected unprecedented demographic shift that will have profound implications for society's social, economic and political lives. As of 2010, according to the UN DESA, 36 million elderly people aged 65 years and over constituted 3.6% of Africa's population, assessed as a population growing at a faster rate. Meanwhile, it is common to find older people suffering from long-term physical and mental disability, which is likely to increase personal care requirements. Otherwise, international efforts are focused on the UN Convention for the Rights of Older Persons, of which, the African Union (AU) countries, including Uganda, are in support.

## **National context**

Foremost, Uganda's 1995 Constitution affirmed making "reasonable provision for the welfare and maintenance of the aged", and issues affecting older people are included in the National Development Plan (NDP) II 2010-2020. The government has a department specifically for the elderly and persons with disability in the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD). Uganda is also a signatory to the 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing<sup>2</sup>, whose recommendations were on 3 priority areas, namely: 1) Older persons and development; 2) Advancing health and well-being into old age; and 3) Ensuring enabling and supportive environments (MIPA,2002). Otherwise, the population of

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<sup>1</sup> UN Population Division

<sup>2</sup> United Nations (2002). Second World Assembly on Ageing, Madrid, Spain, 8-12, April, 2002, New York, United Nations.

older people in Uganda was 4% of 34.6 million (UBOS,2016:8). Earlier, according to the 1991 Uganda Population and Housing Census, the population of older persons was 686,260 (4.1%) of the total population of 16,671,705; in 2002, the population had increased to 1,101,039 (4.6%) as per Uganda Population and Housing Census results of 2002, signifying a substantial population increase that demands effective legal and policy response.

Globally, exclusion of older men and women increases their vulnerability to poverty. In Uganda, where the majority of older people live in rural areas and depend on the informal sector, old age vulnerability is exacerbated by a range of factors including limited access to pensions; widespread chronic ill health and disabilities and the burden of caregiving responsibilities – particularly for grandchildren who have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS and other diseases or disasters. Earlier, the 2009/2010 Uganda National Household Survey (UNHS) showed that a larger percentage of older people remained highly vulnerable to poverty and 74% were considered insecure non-poor compared with a national average of 67.5%, 4.5% and 3.2% of the Ugandan population considered to be aged 60 years and 65 years or over respectively<sup>3</sup>. The vulnerable Ugandans that live in rural areas were primarily engaged in the informal agricultural sector and lacked income security.

### **Ugandan older person's autonomy, independence and digital divide**

#### *Older persons in the African and Ugandan society*

Rwezaura (1989) held the view that African social systems stressed the importance of age as a significant criterion for the attainment of 'authority, power, privilege, prestige and leadership position in the community'. In traditional Africa, age determined the chances for gaining upward mobility in the social hierarchy. The system of economic reciprocity was functional, since a person would use his/her wealth to attract additional dependants and to secure a greater degree of social security during old age<sup>4</sup>. However, the author noted that increasingly new forms of 'social and political control' threatened the dominant position of the elders' and old age became a disability as well as an economic risk. This position has further been aggravated by the various kinds of conflict in African countries that has currently led to 1.4 million refugees living in Uganda<sup>5</sup>. The consequences of this kind of conflict situations are the destruction of social fabric of families and communities, with many of the affected people experiencing exclusion.

Various authors also argue that, from the mid-twentieth century, the post-colonial era, various changes in Africa had profound effects on the elderly, as they weakened the social and economic arrangements which formerly had guaranteed social security, not only for the elderly, but also for the entire community<sup>6 7</sup>. The introduction of the monetary economy, new forms of social and political control further weakened the dominant position of the elderly in many parts of Africa, leading to their loss of authority, political power and economic security<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Uganda MGLSD – Synopsis for International Day for Older Persons (IDOP) 2017

<sup>4</sup> Rwezaura B. A., 'Changing community obligations to the elderly in contemporary Africa', *Journal of Social Development in Africa* (1989) 4,1, 5-24

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR Statistics, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Saul J. S. and Woods R (1971) "African Peasantries", in Shanin T (ed), *Peasant and Peasant Societies*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, pp 103- 104.

<sup>7</sup> Snyder F S (1981) *Capitalism and Legal Change*, Academic Press, New York.

<sup>8</sup> Moore S F (1978) "Old -Age in a Life-Term Arena: Some Chagga of Kilimanjaro in 1974", in Simic A (ed), *Life's Careers-Aging, Cultural Variations on Growing Old*, London, Sage Publications.

### *State of autonomy and independence'*

Autonomy is the ability to make choices and decisions, including with support if necessary, according to one's conscience, values, will and preferences. The exercise of autonomy is necessary for human dignity. Autonomy is both an underlying principle that governs every human right and a right in and of itself. The principle of autonomy presumes that individuals are able to make choices according to their own will and preferences. The WHO reinforced the importance of autonomy in its World Report as "*Retaining the ability and right to choose is closely linked to notions of agency and autonomy, which have been shown to have a powerful influence on an older person's dignity, integrity, freedom and independence*".<sup>9</sup> In order to make autonomous decisions, and for these decisions to be legally effective, the law requires that the individual has the legal capacity to do so. To enjoy their right to autonomy therefore, older persons must enjoy legal capacity on an equal basis with others. Where legal safeguards are not in place, it is possible for a relevant authority to presume an older person does not have legal capacity based on ageist notions and prejudices. This form of discrimination or 'benevolent prejudice' is deeply embedded in many societies. The exercise of autonomy applies to every aspect of life, including one's own life plans and well-being,<sup>10</sup> private and family life,<sup>11</sup> and participation in social, cultural, spiritual, public, political, educational, training and leisure activities.<sup>12</sup> It should not be assumed that older persons are not interested in, or do not want to participate in, wider community, social and political life.

On the other hand, independence is the ability to perform actions of daily living and participate in society in accordance with one's will, values and preferences. Independence does not necessarily mean living alone or doing all daily activities by or for oneself. Rather independence is having choice and control over decisions about one's own life, including control over decisions which lead to the execution of tasks that someone else carries out. Independence also means not being deprived of the opportunity of choice and control to make decisions, including when support or care is needed. Independence also requires that the environment is universally designed and barrier free. The recognition of the centrality of autonomy and independence does not negate the realization of inter-dependence of human existence and the nature of inter-relationships of care and dependence throughout the life course. It rather points to the over-arching values and principles which should govern these human interactions, especially in older age. In reference to weak social fabrics in society due to poverty and other adverse situations that are prevalent in post-conflict situations, older persons' autonomy and independence have been highly compromised; yet, the Ugandan elderly make various contributions to, for example, looking after orphans, HIV affected persons, and, specifically grandchildren who are left under their care, to enable their parents work and earn income. Unfortunately, high unemployment in the Uganda further compound the adverse conditions of living of older persons and the dependants in their households. The prevailing conditions of living dictate that older persons continue to share the meagre resources they had saved during their youth and early adult years, with their jobless children and grandchildren who continue to live in the traditional family home, as dependants.

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<sup>9</sup> WHO, *World Report on Ageing and Health*, 2015, page 35

<sup>10</sup> See Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons, 2015

Article 7, Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa, 2016, Article 5

<sup>11</sup> Council of Europe recommendation CM/Rec(2014)2, III. Autonomy and participation, paragraph 11

<sup>12</sup> See Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons, 2015, Article 7; Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa, 2016, Article 5.3; Council of Europe recommendation CM/Rec(2014)2, III. Autonomy and participation, paragraph 10

Even if Uganda has recorded some progress as evidenced from the 2014 National Population and Housing Census, whereby between 1991 and 2014, life expectancy rose from 48.1 to 63.3 years; orphan hood levels dropped from 11.6 to 8.0 per cent; literacy levels rose from 54.0 to 72.2 per cent; income poverty declined from 56 to 19 per cent; and the proportion of the national budget that is funded from domestic sources increased, from 64.7 per cent (FY 1991/92) to 82 per cent (FY 2014/15)<sup>13</sup>, older persons' autonomy and independence are undermined by poverty and inadequate basic needs, notwithstanding the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (1995), the Uganda Vision 2040 (2012) and the National Development Plans (NDPs 2010-2020) that guarantee the protection of older persons' human right.

### *Digital divide and older persons in Uganda*

According to the UN SDG 2017 report, legislation that calls for freedom of information has increased steadily, but slow or inefficient implementation of such laws remains a concern. More than 110 countries have adopted freedom of information legislation and policies. However, expert assessments suggest that 47 of those countries fall short of having clear legal provisions for exceptions to that right, while another 47 countries lack sufficient provisions for public education (SDG 16).

A *digital divide* is an economic and social inequality with regard to access to, use of, or impact of information and communication technologies (ICT). According to the Uganda National Information Technology Authority (NITA), the country was number 152 in the Global ICT Development Index (IDI), and had also improved its ranking regionally to 20<sup>th</sup> in Africa, and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the East African region<sup>14</sup>. The report was contained in the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), 2017 edition of the *Measuring the Information Society Report* that was launched during the World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Symposium (WTIS) 2017, in Hammamet, Tunisia, Uganda has made a slight improvement on the ICT index<sup>15</sup>. Otherwise, in 2015, NITA recognised that the number of mobile phone subscribers in Uganda grew from 780,000 in 2003 to approximately 21.6 million in 2014, representing 58% of the population; while around 14 million Ugandans used mobile money platforms in 2013, and that the number of mobile money users more than doubled the number of traditional bank account holders<sup>16</sup>. Further, a study on web accessibility in Uganda concluded that the proportion of people with disabilities in society had been increasing, and many websites remained inaccessible to them; although guidelines and tools for developing accessible websites exist in the public domain<sup>17</sup>.

In Uganda, older persons are among the category of vulnerable persons with various kinds of disability, thus, low use of ICTs by this category of the population constituted digital divide. Vulnerability refers to the conditions determined by physical, social, economic and

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<sup>13</sup> Republic of Uganda (2016). Review Report on Uganda's Readiness for Implementation of the 2030 Agenda, 'Ensuring that No One is Left Behind', Kampala, National Planning Authority. See: [www.npa.ug](http://www.npa.ug).

<sup>14</sup> National Information Technology Authority – Uganda. See: <https://www.nita.go.ug/media/uganda-improves-ict-development-index> (Accessed 7.4.2018)

<sup>15</sup> International Telecommunications Union (ITU). See: [https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/misr2017/MISR2017\\_Volume1.pdf](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/misr2017/MISR2017_Volume1.pdf) (Accessed 4.4.2018).

<sup>16</sup> National Information Technology Authority – Uganda (2015). Regional Communication Infrastructure Program (RCIP), 'Vulnerable and Marginalized Groups Framework for RCIP Project – Uganda', Kampala, NITA-U.

<sup>17</sup> Rehema Baguma, Tom Wanyama, Patrick van Bommel and Patrick Ogao 'Web Accessibility in Uganda: A study of Webmaster Perceptions. See: [http://www.cit.mak.ac.ug/iccir/downloads/SREC\\_07/Rehema%20Baguma,%20Tom%20Wanyama,%20Patrick%20van%20Bommel%20and%20Patrick%20Ogao\\_07.pdf](http://www.cit.mak.ac.ug/iccir/downloads/SREC_07/Rehema%20Baguma,%20Tom%20Wanyama,%20Patrick%20van%20Bommel%20and%20Patrick%20Ogao_07.pdf) (Accessed 4.4.2018).

environmental factors or processes, which increase the susceptibility of a community to the impact of hazards. According to the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, vulnerable groups include the elderly, the mentally and physically disabled, at-risk children and youth, ex-combatants, internally displaced people and returning refugees, HIV/AIDS-affected individuals and households, religious and ethnic minorities and, in some communities or societies, women.

### *Challenges of autonomy and independence*

Depending on where an older person lives in Uganda, rural or urban, they are faced with a myriad of challenges. Foremost, the majority of older persons in Uganda live in rural areas where poverty is rife, economic opportunities are limited, and many depend on crop farming, with no social security, rendering them totally vulnerable. Their economic situation is worsened by the burden of looking after orphans and other vulnerable children left by the youth who have succumbed to the HIV/AIDS pandemic; and the problem is compounded by a deterioration in traditional patterns of family support, due to rural-urban migration, increased urbanisation and the effects of HIV/Aids.

There is also the issue of ageism, prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age. A few older persons in Uganda have suffered discrimination including murders over their land property. Nonetheless, the Uganda Decentralisation Policy provides for bottom-up planning, in addition, the National Council for Older Persons Act, 2013 allows space for the participation of older persons in planning along the Local Government Framework; however, the issue of capacity limitations are constraints to their meaningful participation and effectiveness. Otherwise, where the formalities of planning are adhered to by older persons' representatives, there is respect of choice by the government and stakeholders.

On digital divide, the Access to Information Act, 2005<sup>18</sup> (Art.5) - Right of access - states that 'Every citizen has a right of access to information and records in the possession of the State or any public body, ..., and that, information and records to which a person is entitled to have access under this Act shall be accurate and up to date so far as is practicable'. The challenges are both ways, first, from the information providers, where the diversity of cultures and languages, as well as resource limitations make some older persons to miss and are unable to access information to which they are entitled. Second, on the part of users, illiteracy limit reading of printed materials, while the means of receiving communication – radios, internet, mobile phones are not possessed by all the Ugandan older persons, due to poverty.

Another challenge is the extent to which families, carers and social networks can be involved in supporting the independence and autonomy of older persons. The majority, often poor, are living with destroyed or in weak social networks, thus overwhelmed by constraints to ensure support to older persons; and these end up in poor trusts and relationships that affect autonomy of older persons and limited support by the care givers. Much as Uganda has the Older Persons Policy, the design of structure and facilities for older persons have limitations, mainly due to low budget resources allocated to the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, and Local Governments. Limited use of ICTs by older persons limit the extent

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<sup>18</sup> Republic of Uganda (2005). The Access to Information Act, 2005, Kampala.

to which they may advocate for their rights, given that social networks currently play significant roles in advocacy related actions.

While the Uganda cultures and traditions support older persons within families, in some environments, particularly in urban centres, issues of privacy and dignity are sometimes compromised. The poor urban population do not have the luxury of renting and allocating separate rooms befitting older persons' privacy and dignity. In effect, older persons have to surrender to loss of dignity and respect.

On risk minimisation, older persons, especially widows and widowers, are left to fend for themselves, in spite of dangers from errant members of community. Some lonely older persons have been murdered in the shelters they live in, much as the government tries its best to provide security to its citizens.

Another area of challenge is on equal access to appropriate resources and services, and this is common to nearly all older persons in Uganda. The extent to which older persons access services is unknown, since the National Service Delivery Assessment by the UBOS in 2015 did not disaggregate its data on older persons. This has a potential effect on the design of appropriate policy response as regards delivery of services to older persons.

Globally, e-health is ensuring reach to those in remote areas or in need of urgent healthcare services. Limited use of ICTs among older persons in Uganda is potentially contributing to deaths which could have been prevented among older persons, or they continue to miss out on health services they could have had access to, were they not among those experiencing digital divide. ICTs could be integrated into the Ugandan e-health services, a concern that should draw the attention of policy makers and implementers, as well as the monitoring and evaluation function.

As regards diverse cultures in Uganda, autonomy and independence demands integration of ICTs to increase cultural integration in the protection and response to the needs of older people in the country.

## **Conclusions**

Older persons' autonomy and independence are their human right. Uganda's Constitution and legal framework are supportive of older persons' autonomy and independence. However, digital mechanisms that should facilitate uptake and adoption of ICTs to increase access to and use of information at various levels, and in diverse cultures are lacking. The adverse situation is compounded by poverty, limitations in capacity, resources and strategies that promote and strengthen autonomy and independence among older persons. The country level ranking of digital position indicates a lot still needs to be done in terms on ICT infrastructures and strategies that improve ICT uptake and use by the population in general, and older persons in particular. As of the current situation, older persons are experiencing digital divide gaps, and full attainment of autonomy and independence is compromised. More is required in terms of ICT policy response.

## **Recommendations**

- Review of ICT policy and regulatory frameworks to consider increase and inclusion opportunities for older persons; as well as considerations on how to address procedures governing use and operation of ICTs for older persons.
- NITA-U to consider development of communication centers in various locations in the country in order to promote information access and narrow the digital exclusion gap
- NITA-U to create synergies by entering into partnership with the Rural Communication Development Fund to expand reach and spearheaded access to ICT by older persons in the urban and rural areas.
- Guide on content of the technology designed so that information relevant to older persons are in the public domain for all stakeholders' understanding and support.
- The ICT contents to ensure cultural values of older persons promote their participation; that is, preserving cultural diversity, local languages and traditional systems of communication in the face of global challenges is one way of the ICT promotion among older persons.
- Others recommendations are ensuring the appropriate hardware in place; training and continuously creating and building the capacity of 'digital elders'; providing secure connectivity; and ensuring the availability of older persons' facilitators that help their peers familiarise on ICTs.
- Older persons need to have ICT support to increase their access to services for education, health and legal assistance, that which enables them to exercise their right to autonomy and independence making it necessary for them communicate and participate in planning and decision making.
- Older persons living in shared residential settings are provided with specific and tailored support services to exercise their right to autonomy and independence in order to accommodate the cultural, spiritual, professional and environmental challenges of these facilities.
- Community services and facilities for the general population are available on an equal basis to older persons and are responsive to their needs.
- Mechanisms and strategies be designed to enable the exercise of older persons' right to autonomy and independence on an equal basis with others in all aspects of life.
- Support needs to be extended by the government to facilitate older persons' ownership and use of ICTs for them to access a range of services necessary for independent living and inclusion in society, and to prevent isolation or segregation from the community.