

[Country profile: Uganda]

Spotlight on Uganda

Country overview

With an area of about 240,000 sq km, Uganda is a relatively small country by African standards, but it is very diverse. Straddling the equator, its territory includes the semi-desert of Karamoja close to Sudan and Kenya, tropical forests, large tract of savannah land, and the snow-capped Rwenzori mountains (the fabled 'Mountains of the Moon') bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo. One-sixth of Uganda's territory is water, including a section of Lake Victoria, the second largest lake in the world, from which the Nile starts its long journey to Egypt.

After years of civil strife and political upheavals since its independence from the United Kingdom in 1962, its 29 million inhabitants are now enjoying a measure of stability and peace, within a recently-introduced multiparty parliamentary system. There are hopes that a long-standing civil conflict in northern Uganda will soon come to a peaceful conclusion.

With one of the lowest urbanisation rates in the world, the great majority of Ugandans depend on the land, often as subsistence farmers. The economy has been growing in recent years (at about 6 per cent per annum), with the industrial and service sectors expanding, but Uganda continues to mostly depend on agricultural exports and remittances from abroad. Thirty per cent of the population lives in extreme poverty and donors fund about 45 per cent of the national budget. The rate of population growth is high and it is estimated that 56 per cent of Ugandans are below 18 years of age.

Fast facts

- **Full name:** Republic of Uganda
- **Population:** 29.9 million
- **Capital:** Kampala
- **Area:** 236,040 sq km
- **Major languages:** English, Kiswahili, Luganda, various Bantu languages
- **Ethnic groups:** Acholi, Alur, Baganda, Bagisu, Bagwere, Bakiga, Bakonjo, Banyankole, Banyoro, Basoga, Batoro, Itesot, Jopodhola, Karamojong, Langi, Lugbara, Other, Non-African (European, Asian, Arab)
- **Major religions:** Christianity 70% (mainly Roman Catholic and Protestant) and Islam 15%, with most of the rest holding traditional beliefs often coexisting with other religions
- **Life expectancy:** 50 years (men), 52 years (women)
- **Monetary unit:** Uganda shilling
- **Main exports:** coffee, fish and fish products, tea, tobacco, cotton, corn, beans, sesame, gold
- **GNI per capita:** US\$300 (*World Bank*)
- **Independence:** 9 October 1962

Culture in Uganda

Culture overview

- **Diversity**

Uganda has 65 constitutionally recognised ethnic groups, many with their own languages, traditions, arts and social practices. There are also some non-indigenous communities as a result of migration, refugee influx, and intermarriages.

- **Access and participation**

A culture of political participation is emerging, after years of dictatorship and negation of political rights. Gender inequities and authoritarian social customs persist, however, especially in rural areas.

- **Encouragement of the industry**

Arts and culture do not tend to be priority areas for government expenditure (whether at national or district level), but some support is given to cultural activities and institutions. These include the National Theatre, the Nommo Gallery and the Uganda Museum in Kampala, which were established to support and showcase local talent. Officially recognised cultural institutions - such as the ancient monarchies - also receive a modest government grant.

Traditional artistic skills, such as bark-cloth making, beadwork, pottery, making musical instruments (drums, flutes, harps), and weaving mats and baskets, are being developed to meet current market demands, including growing numbers of tourists.

- **The policy context**

Reflecting the constitutional right to culture enshrined in the 1995 Constitution, the National Poverty Eradication Action Plan acknowledges culture as an important dimension of identity and a form of capital with the potential to alleviate income poverty. More recently, a National Cultural policy aimed at promoting culture and enhancing its contribution to community empowerment was launched in 2006.

Heritage

- **Cultural identity**

Ugandans find points of reference, identity and a sense of belonging in their respective ethnic and language groups. National consciousness, however, expresses itself too in international sports, in some schools, and among young professionals. The national media, growing inter-regional economic exchanges and urban population growth contribute to increasing national cultural identity.

- **History**

Until 1966, Ugandans lived in communities largely governed by political institutions that reflected ethnic roots (kingdoms, chiefdoms and clans). Kingdoms were then abolished to reinforce a unitary state. In 1995, cultural institutions were reinstated: while this stimulated an initial sense of pride, cultural institutions with limited political and economic power have found themselves struggling to redefine their roles in the current development arena.

- **Tradition and customs**

Many traditions reflect Uganda's ethnic diversity, including customs to mark the birth of a child or twins, initiation into manhood, courtship, introduction and marriage, cleansing, healing and

funeral rites. Spiritualists, storytellers, musicians, drama-actors and dancers occupy important roles in Ugandans' cultural identities.

- **Heritage sites**

The country boasts unique natural and man-made heritage sites. These include cultural landmarks, such as the Nyero Rock paintings, Kasubi tombs, the King's (Kabaka) Lake in Kampala, Mparo tombs, Kings' palaces, as well as churches and mosques. Natural heritage sites include the Nile Delta, Murchison Falls, Bwindi Forest, and other national parks.

- **Tourism**

Years of political upheaval had for long prevented the rebirth of the tourism industry after the 'golden age' of the 1960s. In the last decade, however, Uganda has seen its tourism infrastructure expand, and the numbers of tourists increased to 468,000 in 2006.

The arts and creativity

- **Performing arts**

Theatre and community performances have historically been popular as a medium for subtle political opposition when freedom of expression was restricted and, more recently, as a way to express the challenges of daily life. Theatres are currently limited to urban areas and are threatened by video halls and TV programmes, especially the very popular Nigerian movies and international football programmes.

- **Music industry**

The music industry is growing, partly building on the tradition of the 'Kadongo kamu' (solo street guitarist who narrates the challenges of day-to-day life outside bars), on Congolese influence and on local jazz bands, of which the best known is probably the Afrigo Band, with its distinctive sound and popular songs. Few local musicians have attended formal music school but many have emerged and compete favourably at national and regional level for the much sought after Pearl of Africa Music Awards and KORA awards.

In addition, traditional music troupes offer services for hire at important occasions. Most ethnic groups have well developed and distinctive music and dance traditions that are also increasingly used to disseminate development messages.

- **Film and television industry**

Uganda has recently seen the development of a local film and television industry, the latter with a growing market made possible by legislation allowing for private radio and TV stations. Television stations mostly show imported programmes, but the proportion of material with local content is growing.

Access to improved and affordable technology has also resulted in the production of music videos and films by local artists, as well as documentaries by government and other development organisations. Makeshift video halls to entertain suburban and rural communities have become widespread and provide a source of income for operators.

- **Fine art**

Painting and sculpture have for long been confined to art schools, with outputs mostly destined for a few well-to-do foreigners. In recent years, however, a number of fine artists have emerged and held exhibitions that draw both foreign and local crowds. A few artists have gained national and international recognition and are able to earn a living from their art. The Nommo Gallery and a handful of private galleries provide the necessary space.

Crafts have traditionally been confined to those of a utilitarian - rather than solely artistic - value (tools, mats, baskets, bark cloth). The growing number of tourists in the last decade has, however, provided new avenues for craftsmen and women, who can sell at hotels, craft villages, or even export their products.

- **Festivals and events**

Uganda celebrates World Culture Day, Music Day and religious festivals such as Martyrs' Day. A School Performing Arts festival is also held annually. Cultural institutions occasionally organise galas, food exhibitions, and other events.

More common are cultural occasions linked to family events such as births, marriage introductions, funerals and funeral rites, which are often attended by many people.

Language and literacy

- **Languages**

English and Kiswahili are Uganda's official languages. There are also 45 main indigenous languages. English has been the medium of instruction and much of the local literature is therefore in English. In 2007, however, local languages have been introduced as media of instruction in lower classes in primary schools. This has led to a rapid production of the necessary orthographies, dictionaries and literature.

- **Literature and publishing**

Since independence, Uganda has produced a number of renowned authors, such as Okot p'Bitek and Robert Serumaga. On the non-fiction scene, Mahmood Mamdani and other academics have written well-known works. Of note has been the recent rise of women authors, including Mary Karoro Okurut, Goretti Kyomuhendo, and Monica Arac de Nyeko, laureate of the FEMRITE training programme and the 2007 winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing. In addition, in 2006, Doreen Baingana won the Best First Book award in the Africa region of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for her collection of short stories, *Tropical Fish: Stories out of Entebbe*.

Fountain Publishers is a vibrant local publishing house. Other publishing houses mainly focus on educational titles. The newspaper industry is dominated by two national dailies, one of which also produces editions in local languages. Cover prices restrict circulation numbers, but individual issues are often read by several readers.

- **Literate environment**

Some 68 per cent of Ugandans aged 10 years and above are literate. Universal primary education was introduced in 1996 and the Government of Uganda in 2006 also launched universal secondary education, although quality of service remains challenging. The number of universities (and their student intake) is expanding fast. A national adult functional literacy programme is also under way.

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