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Going in the Wrong Direction? Ugandans Report Declining Government Effectiveness

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Introduction

In the Round 5 Afrobarometer survey in Uganda, 74% of Ugandans said the country was headed in the wrong direction. This was a dramatic change from just one year earlier, when 28% said Uganda was headed in the wrong direction. Analysis of these findings suggests that this perception is fuelled by several factors, including dissatisfaction with prevailing economic conditions and declining personal living conditions (see Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 101). In the present paper, we explore another factor that may be driving this perception: concerns about declining government effectiveness in addressing citizen priorities.

We first examine trends in citizens' reported needs and priorities, then compare these to citizens' evaluations of government performance in addressing those needs.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is an African-led, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Wilsken Agencies Ltd., interviewed 2,400 adult Ugandans in December 2011-January 2012. A sample of this size yields results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, and 2008. In addition, two special pre-election surveys were conducted in 2010 and 2011.

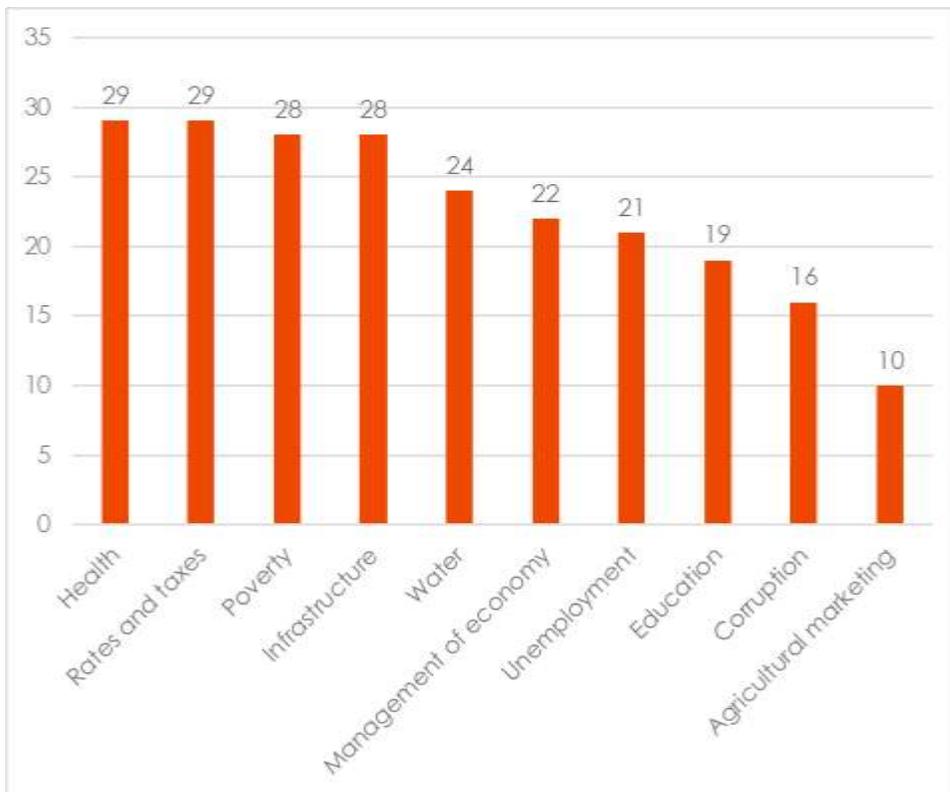
Popular priorities

Afrobarometer surveys regularly explore respondents' policy priorities, asking, "*In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this county that government should address?*" The question is open-ended, and respondents can give up to three responses. Ugandans have consistently ranked health, poverty, infrastructure, water, and unemployment among the

country's top 10 problems, with at least three out of every 10 Ugandans mentioning one of these issues as one of the three most important problems facing the country (Figure 1).

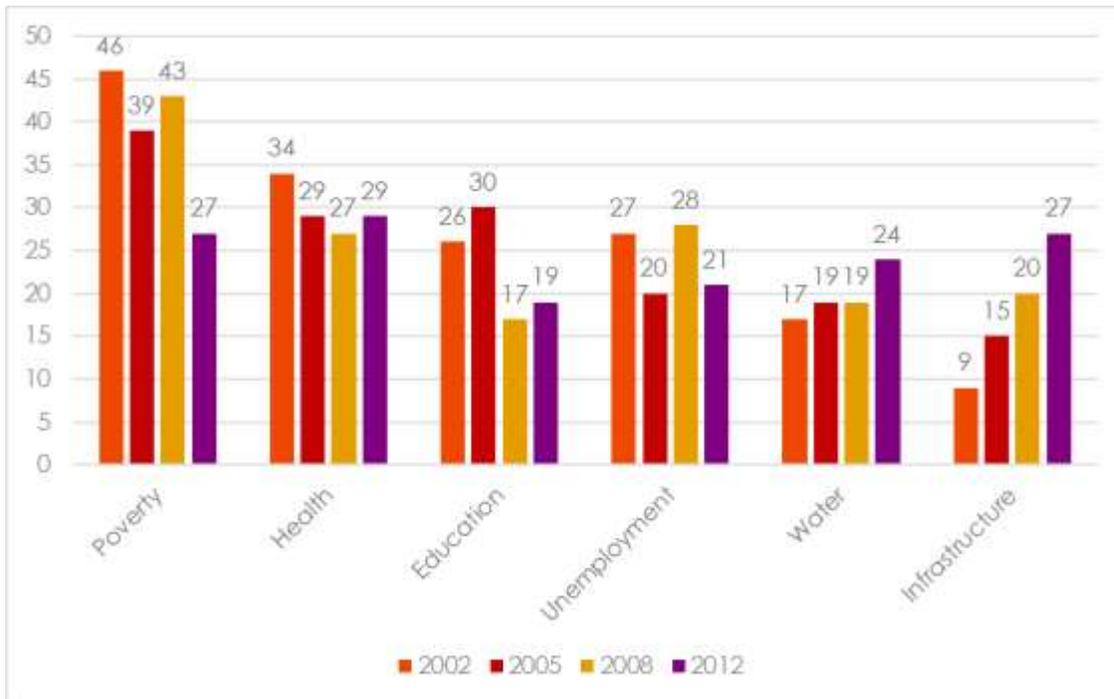
In the Round 5 survey, health and rates and taxes were each cited by 29% of Ugandans as top priorities, followed by poverty and infrastructure (28% each). Compared to previous surveys (Figure 2), it is evident that water and infrastructure were gaining in importance, perhaps as continued economic growth and the introduction of universal primary education contributed to reducing the earlier emphasis on poverty and education. Note that although poverty was still ranked as one of the top issues, it was down substantially from 46% who cited it in 2002. In previous survey rounds, Ugandans maintained mention of the same set of priorities (albeit with variations in ranking) that government should address, showing consistency in this regard over the past 10 years.

Figure 1: Top 10 public priorities that government should address | 2012



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. The figure shows % of substantive responses.)*

Figure 2: Public priorities that government should address | 2002-2012

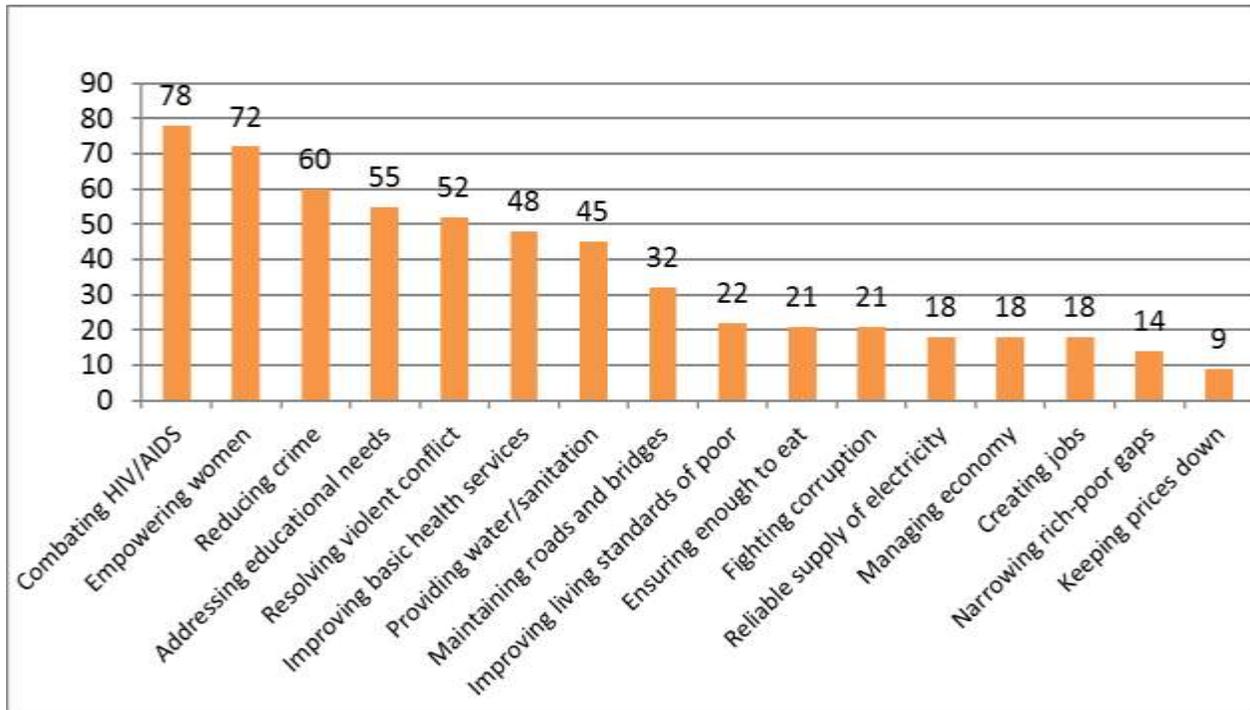


(% of substantive responses)

Ratings of government performance

Ratings of government performance in addressing these priority issues have, in most cases, been declining steadily over the past decade. In the 2012 survey, majorities approved of the government's handling of HIV/AIDS, empowering women, and, to a lesser extent, tackling crime and addressing educational needs. But at the other end of the spectrum, the government received exceptionally low approval ratings on a host of issues, especially various aspects of economic management (Figure 3).

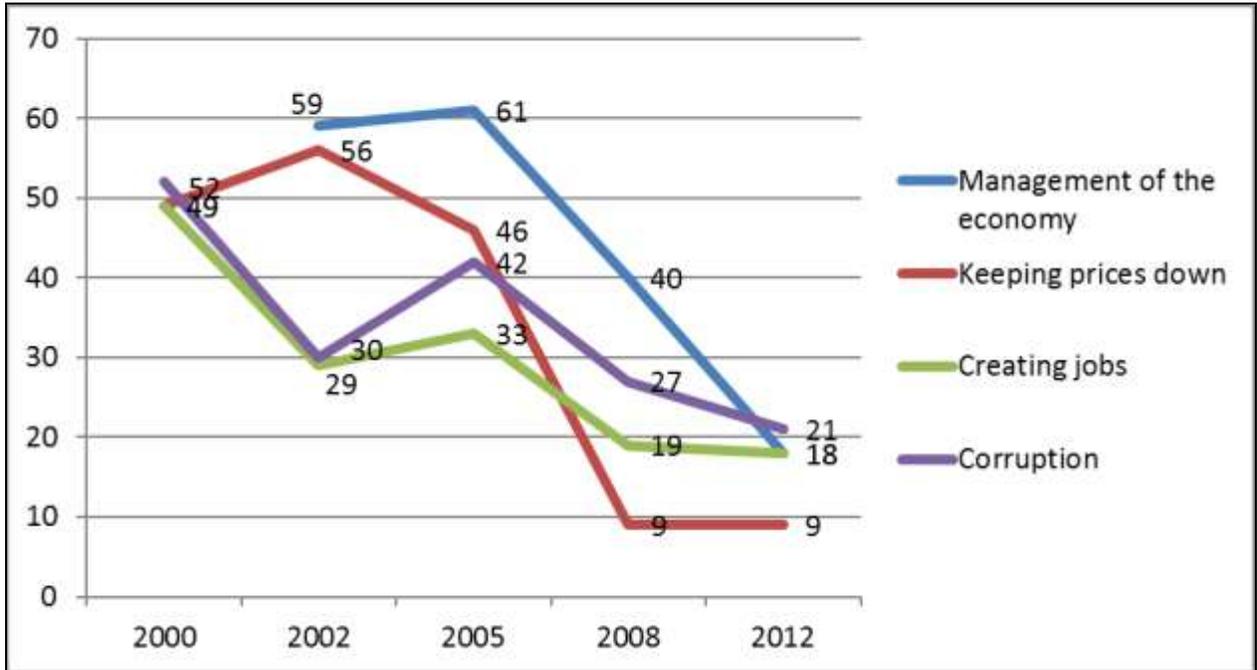
Figure 3: Popular approval of government performance | 2012



Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who said "fairly well" or "very well")*

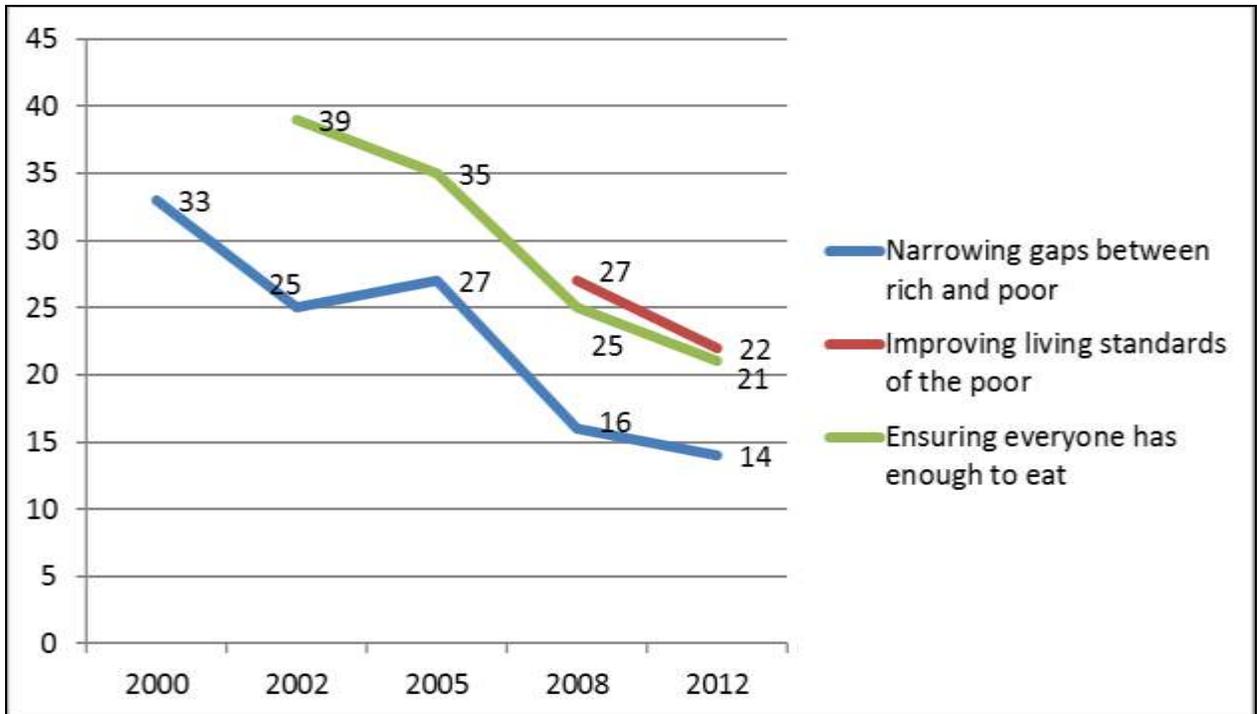
The government may try to explain some of these poor ratings as an outcome of factors beyond its control, such as changes in the global economic environment. However, the trend begins long before the global economic crisis. Ratings of government performance have been declining for years in almost every sector, including economic management (Figure 4), economic equality (Figure 5), social services (Figure 6), and infrastructure (Figure 7). Social services are generally rated most positively, and the pace of decline in popular perceptions has been slower there than on economic issues. But even there, for the first time, some sectors (e.g. health) were rated positively by less than half of the population (48%). The lone bright spot was the fight against HIV/AIDS, which was the only sector where more respondents expressed approval of government performance in 2012 than in 2008.

Figure 4: Ratings of government performance: Economic management | 2000-2012



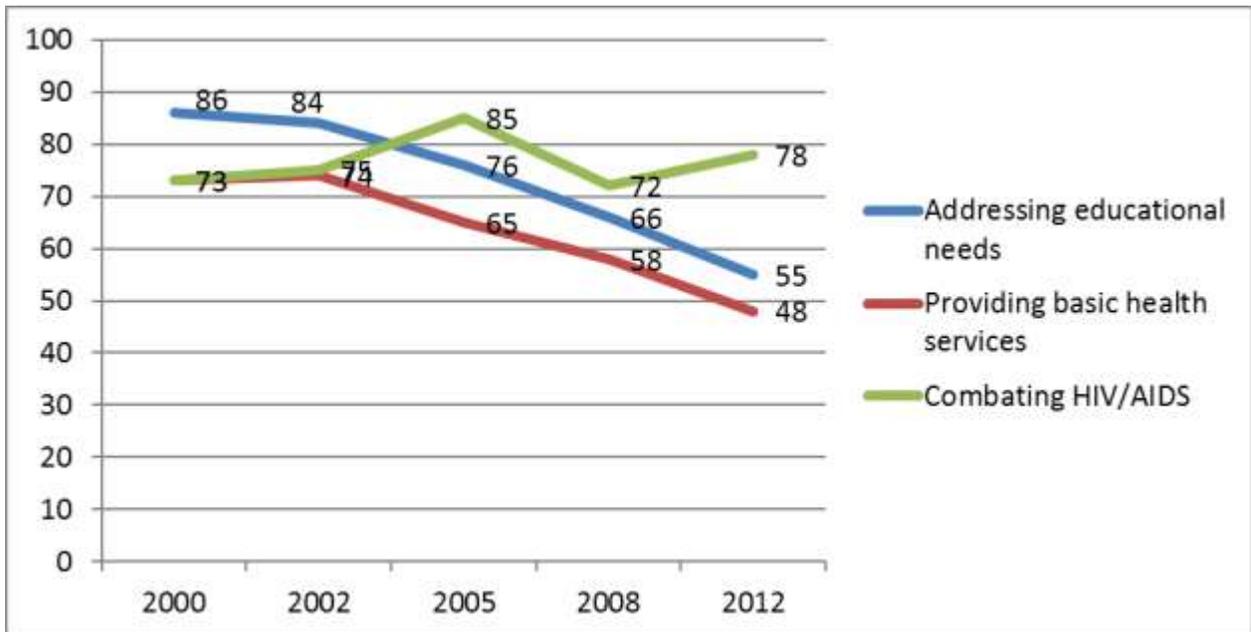
(% who said "fairly well" or "very well")

Figure 5: Ratings of government performance: Economic equality | 2000-2012



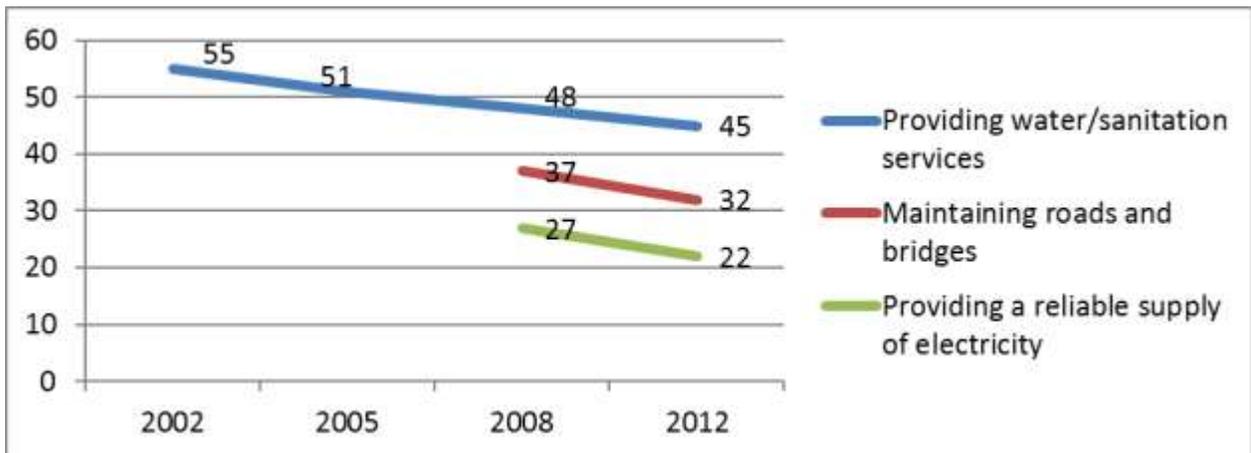
(% who said "fairly well" or "very well")

Figure 6: Ratings of government performance: Social services | 2000-2012



(% who said “fairly well” or “very well”)

Figure 7: Ratings of government performance: Infrastructure | 2002-2012



(% who said “fairly well” or “very well”)

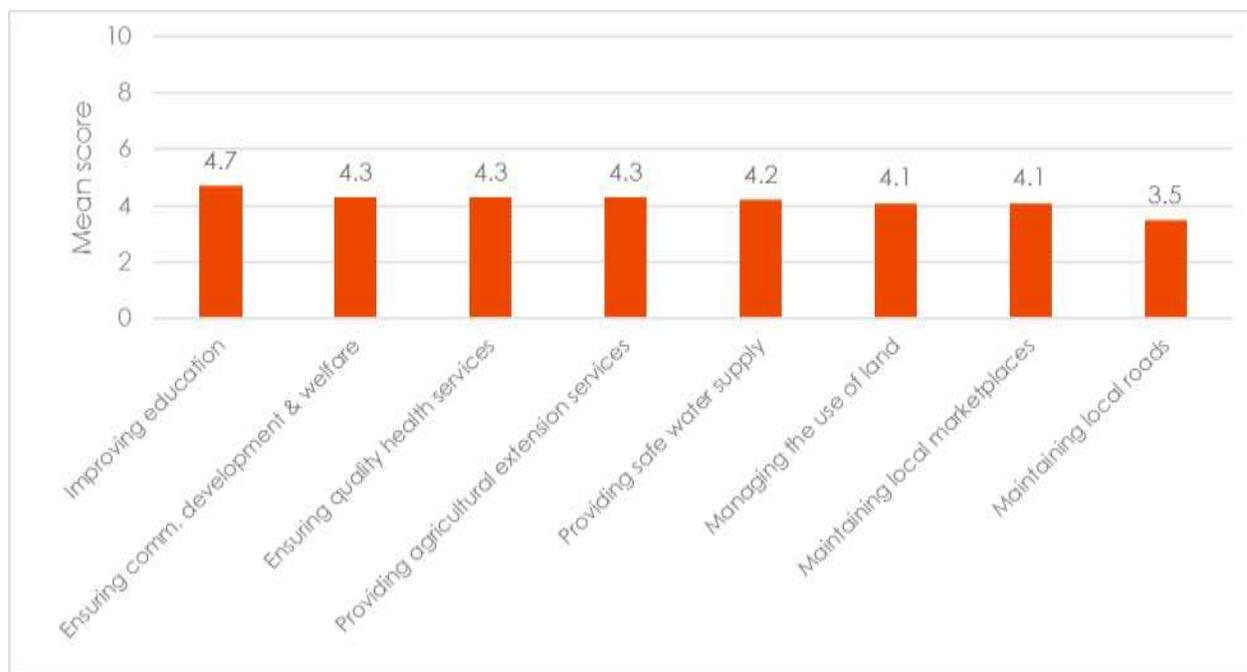
These declining ratings of government performance may lend some insight as to why there is a widespread perception that the country is headed in the wrong direction. We will first consider how ratings of central government performance relate to assessments of local governments, and then turn our attention to exploring several other factors that could also help explain this negative trend in perceptions.

Local government performance

Respondents were asked to grade the performance of their district governments on delivery of various local services, using a scale from 0 (very poor) to 10 (very good). In general, local

government performance was also rated relatively poorly: On no service was the mean performance score above the mid-point of 5 (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Ratings of local government service delivery | 2012



Respondents were asked: *On a scale between 0 and 10, where 0 means very poor and 10 means very good, how do you rate the performance of your district administration in the following areas? (Figures shown are mean score per service area.)*

This result suggests that popular perceptions of the delivery of local services by district governments are closely related to ratings of central government performance, which is confirmed by correlations tests (Table 1). The average ratings of local government performance are positively and significantly correlated with central government performance indicators. This could suggest that relatively negative perceptions of local government performance are driving the poor assessments of central government performance, or simply that perceptions of government performance at all levels is driven by a common set of factors.

Table 1: Correlations between local government and central government performance

	Central government performance					
	Managing the economy	Improving basic health services	Addressing educational needs	Providing water and sanitation services	Ensuring that everyone has enough to eat	Maintaining roads and bridges
Average rating of delivery of local services	0.214	0.295	0.285	0.370	0.274	0.327

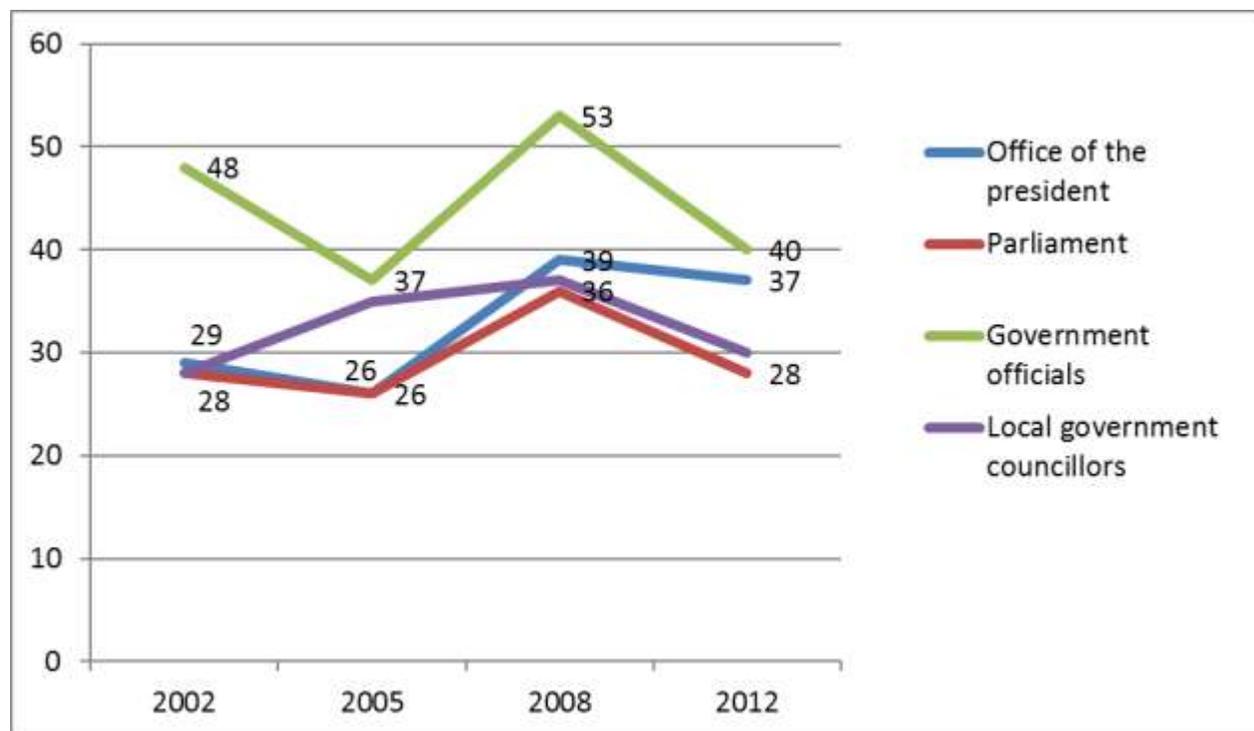
All correlations significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Corruption

One possible explanation for a decline in public ratings of government performance over time could be public perceptions of increased corruption in government institutions, if, for example, the public perceives that resources are being squandered through corruption. If this explanation is correct, we would expect perceptions of corruption in key institutions to increase as ratings of government performance decline.

However, while the results confirmed perception of relatively high levels of corruption among government officials, the general trend in reported corruption since 2008 has been downward, not upward. Although the long-term trend, comparing 2012 to 2002, is more mixed, the changes have been relatively small in either direction and do not appear to correspond directly to the changes in government performance ratings. Therefore the initial indication is that perceptions of corruption are unlikely to explain the declining ratings of government performance.

Figure 8: Perceptions of corruption in key government institutions | 2002-2012



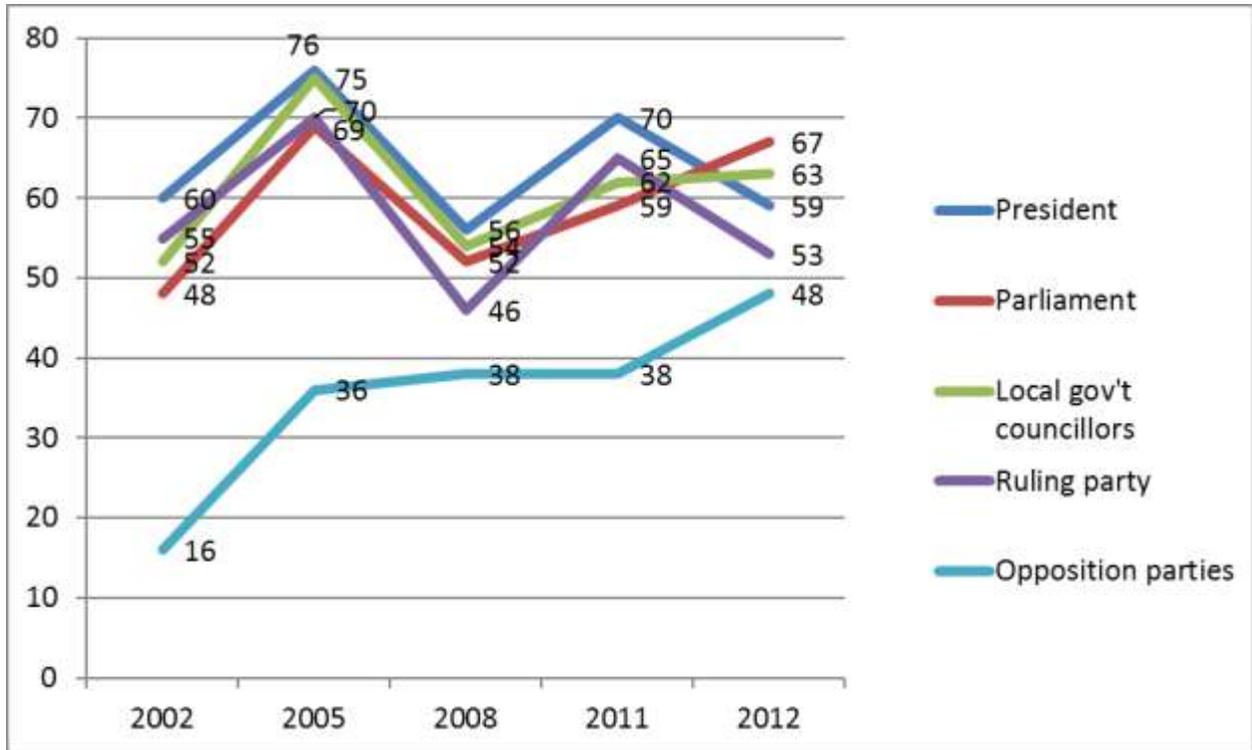
Respondents were asked: *How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who said "all of them" or "most of them")*

Trust in state institutions

Contrary to what we might expect in a situation where ratings of government performance are declining, trust in government institutions has not witnessed any significant decline over time. In fact, in the case of Parliament, local government councils, and opposition parties, public trust in institutions has risen, while holding steady in the case of the president and the ruling party (Figure 9). There are several possible interpretations of this data; one is that citizens do not hold these institutions directly responsible for their performance in delivering services in the areas of health, education, and the economy. Given that since 2008, trust has risen most notably among institutions, such as Parliament and opposition parties, that may challenge the executive branch,

it is possible that citizens may see these critical institutions as channelling their discontent with government policy performance, rather than as being responsible for that performance.

Figure 9: Trust in state institutions | 2000-2012



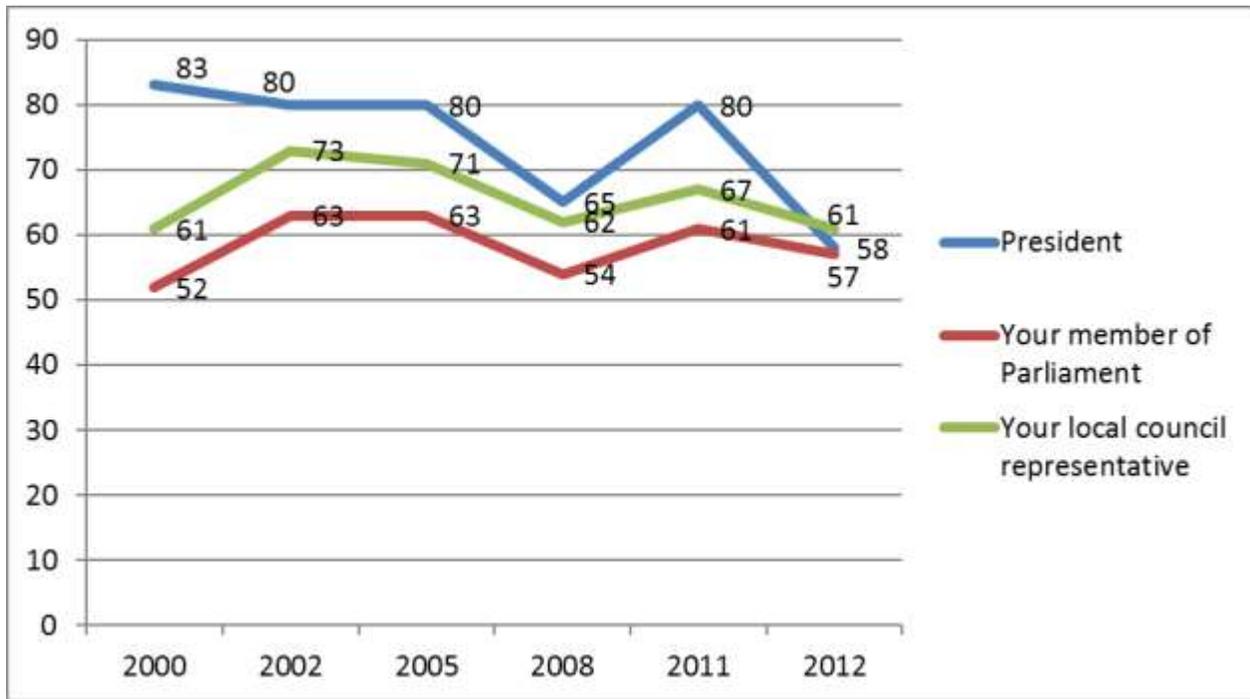
Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")*

Note that there were two pre-election surveys, one in December 2010 and another in January 2011. Because of the close proximity of the two, and the similarity of results from each, we only report the 2011 figures here to more accurately reflect long-term trends.

Leadership approval ratings

Like trust in institutions, approval ratings of key figures do not reflect the same trends as ratings of government performance. There is no discernible long-term trend in approval ratings for members of Parliament (MPs) and local government councillors (Figure 10). There has, however, been substantial fluctuation in ratings of the president's performance in recent years, and approval fell to its lowest recorded level in the most recent survey, although a solid majority of 58% was still satisfied with his efforts. Nonetheless, the overall pattern of ratings even for the president does not match the consistent downward trend in ratings of government performance noted above. This again suggests that the explanation for declining performance ratings is likely to be found elsewhere.

Figure 9: Leadership approval ratings |2000-2012

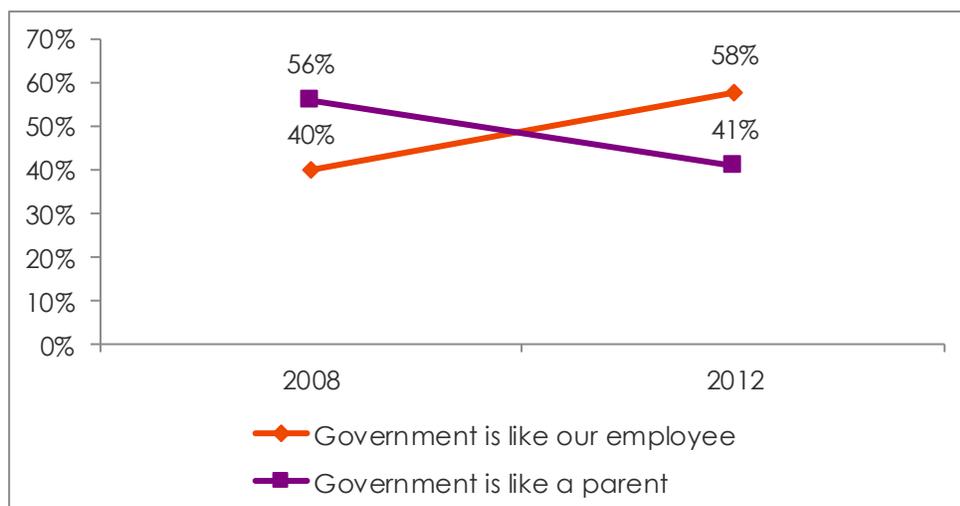


Respondents were asked: *Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who said "approve" or "strongly approve")*

Popular demand for accountability

Despite their apparent patience with government leaders and institutions, even amidst increasing public criticism of government performance, Ugandans are not giving government carte blanche to do what it wants. In fact, there is evidence that Ugandans are placing increasing demands and expectations on their leaders. A significant majority of Ugandans now subscribe to the opinion that government should be more like an employee of the public than like a parent, whereas in 2008, this position was taken by only 40% of respondents (Figure 11). This reflects a substantial shift in popular attitudes and suggests that Ugandans may increasingly be engaging with their government as active and demanding citizens. One possible explanation for the declining ratings of government performance, therefore, is that citizens are becoming more demanding and improvements in government performance have simply not kept pace with rising popular expectations.

Figure 10: Demand for government responsiveness/accountability | 2005-2012



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.

Statement 1: The government is like a parent. It should decide what is good for us.

Statement 2: The government is our employee. We are the bosses and should tell government what to do.

(% who “agree” or “very strongly agree”)

Conclusion

Ugandans’ declining ratings of government policy performance in almost every sector are consistent with the view, now held by a substantial majority, that the country is headed in the wrong direction. These negative ratings, however, are yet to translate into declining trust in government institutions or declining approval ratings, at least for MPs and local government councillors, so government still has a window of opportunity to turn things around. Rising public demands for an accountable and responsive government – one that behaves like an employee, rather than a parent – suggest that the government will have to work harder in the future to hang on to public support and to regain positive performance ratings.

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