

Interview

New home to stabilize road fund, says Dr Naimanye

Recently, Finance minister Matia Kasaiija confirmed and appointed Dr Eng Andrew Naimanye as executive director of Uganda Road Fund (URF), which is tasked with financing routine and periodic maintenance of public roads in Uganda on a budget of about Shs 500bn annually. In an interview with David Lumu, Dr Naimanye says government needs to prioritise increasing the fund for optimum results.

You've already been serving in acting capacity for almost two years before the recent confirmation, what do you make of that period?

The two years have been a testament to what the Fund had set out to do in the last 10 years. I was consolidating the gains of the Fund's existence since its operationalization as well as looking at the new direction of the Fund. It was a time of strategic planning. On a personal note, I acknowledge the efforts of the new URF board and management, whose relations have greatly improved.

In general, there is need for national focus on road maintenance and to balance infrastructure development and maintenance. Asset preservation is fundamental in the existence of the Fund because our road network is worth \$7.5bn, therefore, it should be maintained well.

What are URF's biggest challenges and opportunities?

Our biggest challenge remains funding, the ever increasing agencies, vandalism of road furniture and scarcity of good marrum. Some agencies don't have equipment. So, we need to find alternative solutions.

We receive Shs 520 annually but proper road maintenance would need about Shs 1.2 trillion annually.

There is also lack of lack qualified engineers and skilled operators of equipment for district, urban and community access roads. Maintenance of the equipment is also a challenge due to the meagre resources.

Nonetheless, we still have opportunities in the ability to improve road user experience and goodwill from policy-makers. Mind you, URF being the only reliable fund for maintenance of roads in the country, we are making roads safe for road users.

The Fund has also embarked on special projects and these have gone a long way to improve interconnectivity,

decongestion and enhance pedestrian experience.

Last week, you released Shs 73bn in quarterly funds of which Shs 3.9bn went to KCCA while UNRA got Shs 47bn. What forms URF's priorities when allocating quarterly budgets?

All disbursements are informed by global allocations and quarterly workplans. These global allocations are informed by the allocation formula determinants or criteria of traffic, road condition and population, among others. Agency priorities approved by districts roads committee also feed in to these allocations.

Road maintenance contributes to more than 60 per cent of the KCCA budget and Shs 3.9bn for a quarter seems like a drop in the ocean.

It may seem little, indeed, but the fund experienced budget cuts this quarter but we are optimistic that there will be recovery in subsequent quarters and full budget restoration will be achieved.

What is your assessment of the funds you receive? Are they enough?

There is a gap in our funding requirements; we always encourage designated agencies to prioritise their road maintenance programmes.

To what extent are they put to proper use?

To a great extent, road maintenance funds have improved public roads especially community access roads, although challenges of misappropriation, absorption and poor accountability still exist but the gains out way the losses.

URF seems to have no punitive measures if the funds are not put to proper use by the agencies. What can be done to increase URF's monitoring to ensure every penny is used for the right work?

The Fund regularly monitors performance of designated agencies and this is



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done on a quarterly basis. The Fund also undertakes routine technical reviews and audits to ensure value for money and that the funds have been put to good use. The findings of these exercises are always shared with responsible ministries for punitive action in case of diversion of funds.

Districts road committees are often advised to exercise their rights to provide oversight of road maintenance funds to improve performance and impact.

We also undertake road user satisfaction surveys every after two years, this is a great feedback tool for us to inform policy direction.

Some critics claim URF is just a conduit of funds from government and donor agencies. What more does URF do beyond the disbursement and monitoring of these funds?

The Fund still operates outside its purview and as provided for in the URF Act 2008 under the 2G status. Globally, road funds operate independently from the consolidated fund.

The URF aspires to principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its operations. It also seeks to operate in a business-like manner, while remaining responsive to road user needs. These principles move the public roads away from the normal budgetary allocation process into a market domain that embraces paying for use of roads under a 'fee-for-service' arrangement.

The Fund's independence is still unachieved due to a lacuna in the URA law. An assessment of the Road Fund impact reflects the state of roads before the Fund was operationalized.

It's important to note that the

condition of public roads has greatly improved.

URF has just completed its new headquarters, how is this going to transform the Fund?

We are going to have a sense of stability and also having a permanent home relieves funds that would have been for rent to be directed to more pressing needs. The Fund will now concentrate on ensuring sustainability in road maintenance financing and we hope to recoup the investment in the new home within 15 years.

Your predecessor did not enjoy the last few years of his term with the URF board and there was a lot of infighting. How is your relationship with the board?

We have a new board and we are working well, good governance is crucial for any institution and it is in the best interest of the public.

There is a cordial relationship between management and the board that is why the board recommended my confirmation as the substantive executive director upon assessment for suitability of the position.

Lastly, what is your strategic plan for the next two years?

We have a new strategic plan aligned to the National Development Plant III. Our key priorities are increased funding for agencies, support to new cities, ensuring value for money, asset preservation- ensuring sustained efforts on axle load control, enhanced monitoring and advocacy for road safety. All these are geared to enhancing road user experience.