Access to information key in local participation

By Wilson Manishimwe

Access to information key in local participation

Experts have expressed concern about low access to procurement and bidding information by local firms, which they say is hampering their participation in the processes. For almost five financial years, the Government has allocated significant amounts of money towards the establishment of roads, dams and electricity connections. However, experts say most of these projects are done by foreign firms, notably Chinese, with less local participation.

They say in the number of local firms that participate in these projects increases, the money repatriated by foreign firms would be channeled into different sectors of the economy and spur transformation.

"Of course, if they lack information, the quality of bids is affected and consequently, the person/company lose out. Access to information helps to build confidence of bidders while responding. For instance, there is local content which has been established to help many local firms to benefit from the projects, but some people do not know about it," Gilbert Sendugwa, an open contracting expert, said.

While speaking to journalists last week, Sendugwa said: "Even those who know may find themselves ineligible because of procurement requirements. Many firms have not developed the necessary capacity to do procurement. It is common to find that when bids are advertised, few respond because of lack of capacity."

Sendugwa, who is also the executive director of Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC), noted that there were two bidders on average in every contract when the law required three.

"The law says three firms and because of the low turn-up of bidders, sometimes bids have to be re-advertised. If it is not lack of capacity, then it will be lack of trust in the local firms because for a long time, relationships are valued in the award of contracts," he said.

Charity Kyomujjuizi, the programme manager at Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC), said some individuals do not know that it is their right to always inquire about information from the concerned government agencies, hence their knowledge about activities in the pipeline is limited.

"It affects local firms' participation because they could get the information late. There are also cases of some public officials not disclosing information at all. They hide under the Secrecy Act and treat it as private," she said.

Even those who know may find themselves ineligible because of procurement requirements. Many firms have not developed the necessary capacity to do procurement.

"Only 40.8% compared to 59% of the respondents from the different public institutions reported to be having a designated information officer. Without formal delegation of powers to the appointed information officers, they would need authorisation to effectively function in terms of access to information," the report notes.

LOCAL CONTRACTORS
Joseph Sewawa Mukasa, the chairperson of General Building and Engineering Local Contractors' Association, said bidding requirements such as bid security and bank guarantees, limit local firms to participate.

He said there should be a special consideration to small firms so that they can also benefit from the contracts.

"They talk about bid security and bank guarantees, which are a challenge to many small companies. You find foreign firms taking contracts because they have the money. Local companies cannot compete with these big multinational companies because of their financial muscle," Sewawa said.

BUREAUCRACY

Kyomujjuizi, said bureaucracy in public offices was cumbersome. She said people were required to fill out forms and wait for 21 days before they get the information. At times they do not get the information.

THE SURVEY

A study carried out by AFIC in northern Uganda last year, indicated that most of the public agencies (52.1%) had no designated information officials.

The study indicated that only 16.9% of the public agencies had trained their staff on information precepts while the majority (83.1%) had not received any training.