

New Vision's first lead story

By Richard Wetaya

The year 1986 was a watershed moment in the tumultuous history of Uganda. The country was slowly and painstakingly warming up to the new and radical leadership of President Yoweri Museveni.

A new reality was upon the country and a silent majority of Ugandans were cautiously upbeat.

Many were convinced that the country was beginning on a new and improved slate in its political leadership.

In the eyes of many, the country's long drawn out years of turmoil were either subsiding or were completely over.

One of the few journalists privileged to work at *The New Vision*, at its threshold was Sam Serwanga. He was the New Vision first news editor. Together with James Tumusiime (CEO), Perez Owori (chief sub editor), Ikebesi Omoding (sub editor and features Editor), Godwin Rwankwenge (head of type-setting), Philip Kwesiga (head of pasting section), John Asipa (photographer) were indeed the trailblazers at *The New Vision*. Most of them had been out of job for a year and had failed in efforts to set up a newspaper during the UPC government.

Serwanga was tasked with writing the newspaper's first headline story entitled, *Government to curb inflation*. The heart of the well-written business story brought to light the new Government's economic blueprint, as elucidated by the then Minister of Finance,



Sam Serwanga, the first News Editor

Prof Pontiano Mulema, to stabilise the exchange rate of the weak Ugandan shilling and to contain the inflationary spiral that was afflicting the economy then.

The story's second paragraph provided substantial continuity, shedding light on the government contingencies to offset the 15-year-old year economic malaise policies of the Milton Obote and Tito Okello Lutwa regimes. The policies in the estimation of the Finance minister had fanned inflation, retarded rehabilitation efforts and had played havoc with the living standards of the Ugandan people.

Serwanga also went ahead to bring the reader to terms with the government's planned austerity measures. Ostensibly the government was planning on reducing its expenditure and on the money it borrows from international financial bodies, on account of the country's high indebtedness.

Uganda's debt from the previous government was to the tune of one billion shillings (USD), having borrowed money from the IMF, amongst other international bodies.

It was noted in the story that



A photo of the first New Vision lead page

the money was not utilized for development but for the importation of consumer goods.

The article further shed light on the government's other short term contingencies like the revision of interest rates, the reduction of money in circulation and the plans by the government to establish Bank of Uganda currency centres around the country and to rehabilitate the Uganda Commercial Bank.

Serwanga who is now the editorial manager of MK Publishers on Entebbe Road says he enjoyed writing the story and he recalls being cognizant of the fact that the story had to be good.

According to him doing the first headline story for the *New Vision* gave him a sense of pleasure and wishes he could re-live the experience. "At times you read some of the stories you write and wish you could input something fresh and new."

"I drafted the questions I would ask the minister in a few minutes and I was set for the interview. I did the interview and a few hours later the story was done," he says.

According to Serwanga they had no facilitation for going to the field. "I worked hard despite the challenges. Very often, I had to dig into my own pocket to go and get stories, but it was worthwhile," he says.

"It was hard moving around with no money, but I loved the profession, so I took the challenge in my stride. Within three months however, the financial issues were sorted and we were being provided with facilitation," he adds.

New Vision at the beginning was not as crowded as

it is now. There were limited facilities and resources, but the pioneers worked hard to carve a niche for the paper on the market.

At the beginning, the paper was a weekly. It took five days to finish the first edition of the paper.

"We would meet as a team every Monday for a brainstorm session. Once the ideas were concretized and agreed upon, we would assign the stories. Compared to today's newsroom, we had little in terms of desks and computers," he says.

Many people had misgivings about the *New Vision*. Owing to the uncertain and adverse times Uganda had been through; many people were cagey about buying into what they perceived as government propaganda. The paper was in many people's estimations, a government propaganda mouthpiece meant to indoctrinate them.

"As a consequence, our readership and sales were affected. The paper's editorial policy and coverage were, by and large, objective and independent. After a couple of years, however, the paper started gaining traction in terms of readership and sales," he adds.



The transformation of New Vision over the years