

“Fostering Unity in Diversity in Uganda”

Discussion paper presented at

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Managing ethnic diversity in Uganda

1.0 Background on CCFU

The Cross-cultural Foundation is dedicated to promoting the recognition of culture as vital for human development that responds to Uganda’s national identity and diversity.

In 2008, CCFU in collaboration with 7 partners in academia and civil society (Gulu University, Uganda Martyrs’ University, and DENIVA, NGO Forum, HURINET, NGO Forum in Gulu and Mpigi) embarked on a programme to enhance the understanding of pluralism in relation to fundamentalism and develop civil society based strategies to increase spaces for pluralism in practice. The Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme began by commissioning 5 mapping studies based on existing literature, including a review of NEPAD’s Country reports in respect to managing diversity. The studies led to the implementation of research related activities to “domesticate” the concept of pluralism in Gulu and Mpigi – to better understand diversity and how we manage it in the local context.

The words “pluralism” and “managing diversity” may not echo much in the local context but appreciating, managing and engaging with difference is very much a lived reality in Uganda. The past history reveals both values of tolerance and intolerance towards “foreigners”. Diversity, particularly ethnic and religious diversity, has for much of our recent history been used as a tool to manipulate allegiances to meet political ends. This has led to the common perception that diversity represents exclusion or inclusion, to the detriment of collective public good.

2.0 Response – additional comments and gaps

What constitutes civil society?

Its leadership and the relationship this leadership has with the state influences to a large extent its ability of civil society to hold the state accountable. The assumption is that civil society is neutral and a homogeneous force with a common agenda while in fact it is not. The behavior of Civil society, just as that of the state, is also influenced by many factors, of which ethnicity is one. According to our research to date, ethnic identity manifests itself in access to resources, opportunities, political position, and employment opportunities which all ultimately influence the legitimacy to hold the state or leadership within civil society accountable. This, and related factors such as patronage and sub-contracting civil society by government influence civil society’s ability to hold government to account.

Managing Diversity

Diversity is healthy because it creates opportunities to present alternatives and enhances competition for excellence. Differences in terms of ethnicity, religious ideology, political affiliation, gender, social status are often a given and tension between differences is therefore expected. However, how these tensions are managed determines whether relationships will be productive, unproductive or escalate into outright violence. Therefore, managing diversity requires effort – effort to engage with difference, to be tolerant, respectful, committed and free from fear of losing our distinct identities. The question therefore is *“Are we ready to engage with difference on an equal footing?”* *“Are we ready for unity in diversity?”*

The PKKP researchers in Uganda define pluralism as “building on diversity for equitable and peaceful co-existence.” Pluralism, therefore is recognized, not only as diversity alone, but engaging with it. Pluralism is an active process. Pluralism or the positive engagement between differences is linked to mutual benefit. If people do not see a benefit from being united, there is no motivation to make the much needed effort and commitment towards achieving it.

Managing Diversity: An Africa-wide problem

While it is true that Africa and indeed Uganda is a colonial construction, ethnic diversity is pre-colonial and tensions between ethnic groups are historical – for instance between the Baganda and Bunyoro, the Karamojong and their neighbours. Mechanisms were devised at the time to manage tensions and conflicts between warring tribes, which included communication and meetings between councils of elders. In some parts of Uganda, for instance between the Pokot and the Karamojong (as our recent research on governance shows) these mechanisms are still used to diffuse conflict.

Colonialism and the introduction of conventional religions created new and artificial forms of difference between borders, between rulers and the ruled, religious beliefs and competition within and between ethnic groups, all contributing to new triggers for tension and conflict. However the perpetuation of differences along ethnic lines and exploitation of these differences falls squarely into the hands of Ugandan politicians.

While the war in the north may have had its roots in our colonial history and perpetuated post-colonial strategy of divide and rule, the limited concern by the rest of the country for suffering in northern Uganda and the lack of a sense of common public good is very much linked to a lack of national unity and reflects the fragmentation of Uganda along ethnic lines. While there may be programmes that target development in ‘marginalized’ parts of the country, these mainly focus on economic development and not necessarily on fostering unity or managing diversity.

We therefore need to take responsibility for the situation we find ourselves in. During the post colonial era, Ugandans did not stop to reflect sufficiently on the rationale for the approaches that

had been employed or policies pursued by the colonial authority. Instead we “inherited” and perpetuated conflicts and negative attitudes towards each other, uncritically. The result is a nation without a common national identity - which makes the currently desired unity difficult to attain. Understanding that Uganda is a colonial construction, it is clear that “unity in diversity” will not be organically grown but rather will require deliberate effort on the part of the State and various stakeholders to put in place policies and programmes that enhance a sense of national unity – which must reflect tolerance, respect for all, and equal opportunity.

Diversity and Multiparty Politics

The concept of multiparty politics is new and Ugandans are yet to appreciate that ideally all political parties have the same goal – to have a dignified and prosperous Uganda – it is the approach to this goal that varies: there is therefore no need for violent animosity. Unfortunately it is the “ethnic card” that is often played to manipulate political allegiance and this triggers conflict and violence, as opposed to having a different political ideology. It is the politics of exclusion and inclusion that is central to conflict and violence – resulting from a sense of injustice and marginalization which breed resentment.

With ethnic identity being a strong defining factor, the state becomes fragmented along lines of ethnicity. Unity in a society as ethnically diverse as Uganda cannot be forced – it has to be perceived as desirable by all who will then make an effort to sustain it. Fragmentation of identity along ethnic lines is reflected in the demand for political representation by every ethnic group as opposed to national representation to cater for national concerns. The result is the current huge number of districts, members of parliament and equally large expenditure on public administration. Thus unequal distribution of resources is not only between the north and southern parts of the country as a result of colonial policies of labour recruitment (among others) but also between the large organized ethnic groups and medium to small not so well organized groups.

Decentralisation

This brings us to decentralization which may have the potential of being used to manage diversity. The initial research findings of the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme in Gulu and Mpigi indicate that the availability of public services and goods which are perceived as neutral resources because people of all backgrounds are able to access these services - are a source of pluralism. However the degree of decentralization in terms of the number of districts, especially when establishment of districts is linked to gaining political mileage - eventually becomes counterproductive as the management of the many splintered districts becomes difficult and results in centralization around personalities, not only at national level but at district levels as well.

3.0 Suggestions on managing ethnic diversity in Uganda

Factors of diversity such as religion, social and economic status, and political affiliation (which Ugandans will soon discover is the same song in different tunes) are changeable - but ethnicity is not. Ethnicity is deep-seated, determining our worldviews, how we relate to each other, how we perceive authority, share power and resources. It is therefore imperative that managing ethnic diversity in Uganda and Africa as a whole is given priority. Deliberate effort to address inequalities must be taken to avert further division and future conflicts.

We need for instance, to integrate the element of pluralism in training curricula of various institutions – primary and secondary school education, tertiary, military and political training (*Muchaka muchaka*).

We need to provide opportunities for Ugandans to develop other forms of common identity through exposure to different cultures through civic education, recruitment and employment policies that encourage cross-placement and learning.

Ethnic diversity as a source of wealth presents potential to provide alternative ways of dealing with challenges in society. Effort should therefore be made to study and utilize principles and systems (governance, conflict resolution, peace building, accountability, collective responsibility etc) that may provide lasting solutions to our current challenges.

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