

Support the Cultural Rights of the indigenous minority groups in the Ruwenzori Sub-Region!

a. Who are we and what are our key messages?

There are 9 minority ethnic communities in the Ruwenzori sub-region: the Batuku in Ntoroko District; the Basongora, Bagabo, Bakingwe and Banyabindi in Kasese District and the Batwa, Bavanuma, Bamba and Babwisi in Bundibugyo District. Based in part on the 2014 National Census, we number approximately 220,000 people.

We are the original indigenous occupants of Ruwenzori upper and lower lands. We share common features, but form distinct groups. Differences include languages, art forms, traditional cultural practices and sources of livelihood. Some groups have a formal cultural institutional leadership recognized by Government, such as the Obudhingiya Bwa Bwamba (OBB), which brings together the Babwisi, Bamba and Bavanuma). The Batwa, Banyabindi and Basongora are trying to have their traditional form of cultural leadership similarly recognised. The Bagabo, Bakingwe and Batuku have less centralised forms of leadership, based on clans.

We all suffer from several similar challenges, such as the declining use of our mother languages, eviction from ancestral lands, limited political representation, and poor

Our key messages

- *We appeal to local and national authorities to respect the cultural and other human rights of all IMGs*
- *Affirmative action for IMGs in the Ruwenzori region is needed by all stakeholders- with specific focus on education, heritage protection, language development, political representation and employment. Special consideration is sought for IMGs on government programmes, including the youth livelihood, women empowerment, SAGE and others.*
- *We appeal to the relevant Government organs, including the Ministry of Education, the National Curriculum Development Centre, the Equal Opportunities Commission, and the Department of Equity and Rights, the district authorities and the political heads to involve the IMG communities in the Ruwenzori region and to actively tackle the issues confronting them.*

access to our cultural sites. Our call is to have the freedom of exercising our human and cultural rights in conditions of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination to access, express and to enjoy our culture. This is in accordance with the various international instruments that Uganda has signed up to and that make it mandatory to protect and promote the rights of indigenous people. These instruments include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Prevention and

Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1951), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1966), the Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992), and various UNESCO Conventions



Map showing location of the Indigenous Minority Groups in the Ruwenzori sub-region

b. The current situation and our demands

1. Land – Access and Boundaries

Our communities share a history of having been evicted from their ancestral land, resulting into a grave loss of our tangible and

intangible heritage linked to physical spaces, which are now either government or privately owned. The communities in Bundibugyo for instance have no or impeded access to their cultural sites in gazetted areas (some of which are Nkalala, Mbika, Bombbolo, Mamilimili and Bukondo) or on private land (Bupomboli, Kiselimbe, Busenduwa and Bunyamwera among others). Further, some of these areas cannot be accessed because

of the current occupants' fear that the IMG communities are mapping the area with the intention to reclaim the land.

Lifestyle changes and the resulting loss of incomes and identity have also been forced on people: the Bagabo and Bakingwe, originally fishermen, for instance have had to resort to agriculture as access to some of their fishing sites was denied, while the Basongora who were pastoralists can no longer access all grazing pasture and thus saw their cattle numbers decrease. The Batwa who were living in Semuliki forest, are now found in an urban environment where they mostly live a destitute unhealthy life. The Bahombi, a clan of Babwisi, took people across the river on canoes and were fishing folk; when they were also evicted from Semuliki, their traditional form of livelihood changed to agriculture but lack adequate land to do so and are now living scattered throughout the district.

Our communities were neither consulted nor compensated, nor even formally resettled or helped in any way to adapt to new lifestyles. Examples are the Basongora, Banyabindi, Bakingwe and Bagabo in Kasese district and the Batwa and a few clans of the Bamba, Babwisi and Bavanuma in Bundibugyo District, who all lack stable household incomes.

Some steps have however been taken to address the issue of access to ancestral land in Bundibugyo: cultural sites have been mapped in both government gazetted areas and privately owned places; and MOUs between government and communities living near Semuliki National Parks that permit them to enter the forest weekly to collect herbal medicine, grass, clay for pots for promotion of cultural heritage have been developed. Some access has similarly been granted in Queen Elizabeth National

Land – our demands

- *Free up access to cultural sites (especially in protected areas managed by the Uganda Wildlife Authority), for positive traditional and cultural rituals.*
- *Sign up participatory Agreements between concerned communities and the Uganda Wildlife Authority to codify access to protected areas.*
- *Resettle displaced IMGs in defined locations appropriate to the social, cultural and economic profiling of the affected communities.*

Park, such as to provide water for the Basongoras' herds but there are restrictions on accessing some areas where special grass is found during the mating season.

2. Education and Language

Language is an important tool for cultural identity, but most of our languages are undervalued and not used as medium of instruction in schools, despite the education policy on the "Thematic Curriculum". As a result, some communities, including the Basongora, Banyabindi, Bagabo, Bakingwe and Batuku for instance use Runyakitara to communicate in public places, churches and at social gatherings. The language for the Batwa – Kusuwa - is at high risk of extinction, as is Livanuma. Literature is lacking in most cases.

With the mixing of ethnic groups in the region, some of the indigenous minority languages have changed and been distorted, while some have been suppressed, with a negative impact on the cultural identity of the concerned community. Languages are under

threat because of the history of domination by groups of different cultures. Kusuwa is for instance heavily influenced by other communities around them, while the Batwa also suffer a degree of dependence on the Bamba, Babwisi and Bavanuma. The attitude to the term “local language” often reflects “sub-standard” instead of “commonly used”. Some of our communities (Batwa, Bavanuma, Bachingwe, Bagabo) have not been considered for national education bursary awards.

Some languages (such as Lubwisi and Kwamba) have however produced orthographies. In addition, with support of NCDC, some materials have been translated in Lubwisi as guided by the Education policy on the Thematic Curriculum, but despite the availability of the materials, the books sent to the office of the District Education Office are not in that language and many of the teachers of P1-P3 are not knowledgeable with the Thematic approach.

3. Political Representation

We have limited influence because of our poor political representation at both district and national levels. If our communities are represented by people who do not clearly and vividly portray their identity, sharing of the “national cake” will never be achieved. Some of our communities do not have any political position even at LC I level, as is the case with the Batwa and Bavanuma in Bundibugyo; and the Bagabo and Bakingwe in Kasese district. Some of our IMGs also lack political representation at LC III level (as is the case with the Batwa, Banyabindi, Bakingwe, Bagabo and Bavanuma). This makes it difficult to contribute to the formulation and implementation of policies that affect the governance of our communities. It also weakens our capacity to advocate for our human and cultural

Education and language – our demands

- *Constitute functional District Language Boards with IMGs represented, to promote education in their languages as medium of instruction in lower primary classes, as provided by the Thematic Curriculum approach and to produce adequate literature in IMG languages through workshops at district and national levels, conducted by relevant language experts.*
- *Have more languages with produced orthographies (such as Kwamba) and translated materials to be used in schools.*
- *Support the formation of IMG language committees in the relevant communities to agree on standard orthography, develop and record materials, such as stories, lullabies, proverbs, riddles (districts and NCDC).*
- *Give support to communities that would like to develop their orthographies (Kusuwa, Rusongora, Runyabindi, Rukungwe, Rutuku) and especially the Batwa.*
- *District Education Departments to build capacity using resource persons through Continuous Professional Development (CPD) conducted at school/regional levels to handle the technical aspect of promoting local languages as medium of instruction in lower primary classes.*
- *Use available IMG language materials in schools and build the capacity for competent teachers to teach in the IMG languages.*
- *Local government and education authorities to support EAL education in communities.*
- *Media houses to provide airtime for IMG language programmes.*

rights, despite supportive laws, including the Uganda Constitution. Where persons from an IMG have attained a position of political or technical leadership, we are often discriminated against and not allowed to perform adequately. Thus, although the Basongora show confidence to stand for electoral positions, they are frequently undermined by political frustration and threats by the leadership at district and national levels due to their minority status. IMGs will then not benefit from government programmes because of our limited political voice at administrative planning levels. The absence of recognised leadership within most IMGs is also a clear manifestation of loss of confidence and assurance.

On the positive side, OBB has been gazetted by government and has brought together three ethnic communities – the Bamba, Babwisi and Bavanuma - a common cause based on cultural identity, unity, development and prosperity. Some IMGs, like the Babwisi and Batuku, are however now represented at all political levels, including as Members of Parliament. This nonetheless does not benefit all IMGs in the region and even when a member of parliament is elected, the person does not necessarily represent the interests of that community positively, let alone the broader IMGs in the region.

4. Safeguarding our Cultural Heritage

With changing modes of life, cultural knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and ways of life that reflect positive aspects of the rich and diverse heritage of our minority groups are at risk and require urgent interventions.

Political representation – our demands and what we need to do

- *Mobilise as IMG leaders so that we are represented at least at LC I level.*
- *Support civil society organisations to establish a national platform where IMGs in the Ruwenzori region and others can participate*
- *Improve inclusivity to ensure that IMGs are represented in all political organs, according to competence.*
- *Affirmative action for IMGs to be represented on District and Sub-County Councils, District Public Service Commissions, on Boards at District and Sub-County levels and have a Member of Parliament for the IMGs as our common voice in Uganda.*

These include language and literary arts, the performing arts, visual arts and handicrafts, indigenous knowledge, cultural beliefs, traditions and values, and cultural sites, monuments and antiquities.

Most of our cultural sites, medicinal herbs, traditional foods and raw materials to use for arts and handicrafts are found in privately owned and gazetted land. There is political discrimination in the recognition of cultural institutions, as evidenced by the complete lack of endorsement of any resolution in support of an IMG community at any

sub-county or district council in Kasese, as provided in the constitution of Uganda. At times, a “big brother attitude” leads to attack of traditional homes and cultural resources, such as the raid on Basongora at Muhokya that resulted in looting and destruction of traditional and cultural artefacts. There are also instances of restricting celebrations of cultural expressions, such as the annual cultural events of the Basongora and Banyabindi that have constantly been interfered with, using arrogant and provocative utterances of *‘there can never be two kingdoms in one location without my consent.’* Some radio stations adamantly refuse to allow IMGs to broadcast issues about their culture and other messages of concern to their communities.

Our cultural values are also under threat, for a variety of reasons. The OBB communities have thus changed their traditional practices to conform to modern health demands: circumcision for the Bamba have changed due to government influence on concerned families.

Previously circumcision was collectively done in a large community for cultural orientation and education. This induction into manhood is no longer given to the youth, as health workers have taken over circumcision and do not give the attention of cultural values, ethics and norms attached to the practice.

We however note that an OBB museum was established to mobilise our cultural artefacts and to document our historical and cultural heritage. Other cultural preservation events include annual festivals among the Basongora, Batuku and Banyabindi, to which other IMGs, Government CSOs and other stakeholders are invited.

Cultural Heritage – our demands and what we need to do

- *Each IMG to sensitise its community about the importance of their heritage through meetings and public places.*
- *Each IMG to organise annual festivals where stakeholders are all invited and the line ministry to provide facilitation.*
- *Each IMG to promote, safeguard and preserve our customs such as traditional dances, foods, herbs ornaments etc.*
- *Each Cultural community is encouraged to have a museum or centre to showcase their heritage.*

5. Identity and Recognition

We are what we are, not by our own will, but by God’s choice. Our different cultural norms, values, ethics, and etiquette need to be respected not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. A negative attitude leading to severe marginalisation of our IMGs is often perpetuated by surrounding majority communities that use their numbers to justify their actions.

Nicknames given to us (*Balibanda, Bafuruki, Babbulabbule*) and others illustrate this attitude and re-inforce stereotypes. Stereotyping reinforces low esteem. This is evident in the Batwa community in Bundibugyo who lack ambition and self-confidence. With such an inferiority complex, they do not take the courage to access public health facilities, and

this makes follow-up of their health status difficult. Some of the IMGs are also forced to act in ways that are not to their interest by stereotypes and negative attitudes. Even prices of items and medical services change depending on one's cultural identity: if one does not speak the dominant language, the costs are higher. This is quite common in places of business operated by the Konzo community. In some of the health facilities, if one's names do not reflect belonging to the dominant community, one is not quickly attended to or completely neglected. There is then a tendency to adopt the names of the majority community in order to access medical care. Some IMGs have two or more cards bearing different names for security, protection and for service delivery.

c. The Ruwenzori Platform of Indigenous Minority Groups

This policy was written up by the Ruwenzori IMG Platform. On 28th Feb. 2017, after realising the common challenges and issues affecting our IMG communities in the Ruwenzori region, we resolved to have an inclusive platform of all known IMG communities the sub-region (the Batuku, Basongora, Bagabo, Bakingwe, Banyabindi, Batwa, Bavanuma, Bamba and Babwisi) to advocate, promote, and protect our common interests. This meeting was held in Bundibugyo and was facilitated by the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU). A steering committee has been established, chaired by Rt. Hon. Mubulya Wilson. Other members on the committee include; Mr. Steady Daniel as secretary to the platform; M/s Rworoba Enid, Mr. Businge Peter, Mr. Kainta Wilson, Mr. Mutebi Ivan, M/s Nanganda Teopista, Mr. Nyakairu Janet and Mr. Rwabukonjo Cosmos.

Identity and recognition – our demands and what we need to do

- *Each IMG is advised to sensitise its community about the importance of their heritage through meetings and public places.*
- *We need to organise annual festivals where stakeholders are all invited and request the line ministry to give facilitation. We especially request District LG to apply affirmative action to support Annual festivals of IMGs and include them in their district plans.*
- *For purpose of unity we encourage intermarriages with exception of the Batwa due to fear of total extinction of their community.*
- *The Bagabo and Bakingwe who are not listed in the Constitution of Uganda should be included during the next constitutional amendment process.*
- *People should be sensitive when giving speeches in public places, especially the local authorities and religious leaders in their formal communications.*
- *Other civic, political religious and opinion leaders need to play their role to support and defend their relevant communities where they belong to any of the IMGs.*
- *We also ask other leaders to provide security to IMGs whenever and wherever necessary.*

Every IMG community representative was tasked by the Platform to consult their group members and generate issues that are pertinent and need to be addressed for positive living and promotion of development in a peaceful way as we continue to coexist. Meetings were conducted and reports collected. We have come up with an Action Plan to give us a sense of direction and to promote this policy brief.

An appeal is hereby made to all stakeholders to join us in this struggle. We especially request for support from the identified organisations (see box) through effective and positive listening and amplifying the voices of our IMGs on the issues that affect them.

We are grateful to CCFU for the continuous support in knowledge, skills, material and capacity building that they have rendered to us. For more information about our IMG communities in Ruwenzori Sub-region we refer you to the authors of this brief: Wilson Mubulya; Tel. 0772966094, 0705703805; Email mubulya@gmail.com; Stephen Mbera, 0772 950 879; 0701076498, and Ivan Mutebi 0778255573

This brief is addressed to:

- *Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Ministry of Education, Equal Opportunity Commission*
- *Local District Governments*
- *Local Councils III and Vs*
- *Area Members of Parliament*
- *Resident District Commissioners*
- *Uganda Wildlife Authority*
- *Civil Society Organisations: Defend Defenders (Human Rights Defenders); Community Development Resource Network; Initiative for Social Economic Rights; Minority Rights Group International; Uganda Women Network, Foundation for Human Rights Initiative, Coalition for the Rights of Indigenous Minority Groups in Uganda.*

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