

The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda

# **DEVELOPMENT FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE IN A CULTURALLY DIVERSE AFRICAN COUNTRY:**

## **Understanding culture and development in Uganda**

### **Abstract**

*Incorporating culture as an essential dimension of the development process is a relatively new preoccupation, both from a cultural rights and diversity perspective and from the perspective of a tool to achieve sustainable results. While culture in and for development is a message recently - but increasingly - heard at the international level, this has yet to permeate development practice and its discourse in Uganda.*

*This paper, written by the Cross Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU), a local NGO, explores the reasons for this relative lack of interest and suggests what implications this might present for development practitioners.*

*CCFU is currently developing training approaches to reflect these preoccupations and is documenting best practice in the adoption of a “culture in development” approach in Uganda.*

*While the paper focuses on Uganda, it may apply to a number of other ethnically diverse, post-colonial African countries with a history of ethnic conflict and an experience of dominance by Western-oriented aid messages and prescriptions.*

The Cross-cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) is a Non-Governmental Organisation that promotes culture as vital for *sustainable* development that responds to the country’s national diversity, identity and creativity.

CCFU was established on the premise that development practice in Uganda currently does not take existing cultural values, principles, and systems into account and therefore rarely leads to sustained change. We therefore consider identifying, understanding and using positive aspects of our culture in development work as essential.

This paper has been written as a basis for discussions on issues related to culture in development and

- Provides a brief background on the ‘culture and development’ debate both internationally and in Uganda (Sections 1 and 2)
- Summarises the views elicited from over 40 prominent Ugandans with an interest in culture in development issues, from all regions of Uganda (Section 3).
- Suggests discussion points and implications for CCFU and other stakeholders from the foregoing (Section 4).

## **1. The evolution of ‘culture in development’ in Uganda**

As is the case in other parts of the African continent, Uganda is a culturally diverse country, with many ethnic groups of distinct culture, often with their very own language and traditions. Some of the 65 constitutionally recognised ethnic groups have a long history of centralised political institutions headed by a monarch, while others adopted a more decentralised system of governance, with prominent chiefs and clan leaders.

As a colonial creation, Uganda’s international boundaries respect ethnic boundaries in only a few places. Within this culturally divided colonial ‘protectorate’, some ethnic groups served the colonial rulers to ease control and administration of the country, thus sowing the seeds of future ethnic conflicts. It was also a time when culture was branded

as 'backward': important cultural rites and rituals were characterised as pagan or as witchcraft, to be discarded as 'uncivilised'.

Since independence in 1962, 'development' has been perceived and measured through Western lenses. Government and other actors have continued to view development as a 'modernising' force, with little integration and harnessing of pre-existing local ideologies, knowledge and worldviews.

Such negative perception of culture was reinforced by the laws of the land. At independence, achieving oneness in our divided country became an important political pre-occupation. Soon after, a new Constitution gave the country a unitary character and the traditional kingdoms were done away with altogether.

The natural growth and assimilation processes associated with cultural development were thus disrupted, with a negative perception of culture deeply ingrained in the minds of Ugandans, although a new Constitution pointed to restoring culture values in 1995. Traditional kingdoms were resurrected as "cultural entities" and a *right to culture* enshrined, stipulating that "Every person has a right to belong to, enjoy, practice, profess, maintain and promote any culture, cultural institution, language, tradition, creed or religion in community with others".

## **2. International perceptions on 'culture in development'**

This evolution reflects global thought on the place of culture in development processes: since the 1950s, economists have shaped modernisation perspectives, emphasising the dominance of western ideologies and interests, out of which the notion of a 'Third World' was created. With modernisation perceived as a necessary but rather simplistic 'transfer' of Western ideas and technologies to this Third World, 'modern' development principles were rarely owned, adequately internalised or retained by local communities. At the same time, valuable traditional principles and norms that could provide a basis for sustainable solutions to development challenges have continued to be disregarded as negative and backward.

With time, however, a more positive understanding of culture in development has started to emerge at international level. There is a growing recognition of culture as an essential dimension of effective and equitable development. Amartya Sen, the well-known Indian economist, has for instance defined development, in addition to material well-being, to include the aspect of human capacity and potential which, though not directly making 'economic sense', needs to be taken into account. Other authors increasingly view culture as being about relationships among individuals within groups, among groups, and between ideas and perspectives, and even as an end in itself – a factor which has the ability to inspire, express and symbolize collective memory and identity. Perceptions such as these place culture in a positive light as an essential factor in development - to be harnessed to bring about social and economic transformation. Such perceptions can also

be found in UNDP's *World Development Report* for 2004, and the World Bank inspired volume on *Culture and Public Action*.

### **3. Culture in development: current challenges in Uganda**

Such new understanding is as yet of little currency in Uganda, where development is largely understood to translate into direct 'economic benefit'. Substantial external resources have been invested in 'modern' development programmes, yet one third of the country's population still lives in extreme poverty (below US\$ 1 per day) and Uganda remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

Strengthening culture as part of human potential thus tends to be given low priority, in preference to western prescriptions that seem to provide ready answers to present day challenges. Our current policy environment, with a few exceptions, indeed largely ignores the cultural dimension of development. Thus, the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP), the country's overarching policy document makes little reference in its last edition (2004/5 to 2007/8) to culture as positively relevant to the fight against poverty.

In an effort to better understand this context, to ascertain evolving perceptions; and ascertain the existence of initiatives where culture is being considered in a positive light in development work, we approached 40 key resource persons. They exchanged views on a 'culture in development' approach, and commented on its feasibility in our current context. Key areas in our discussions included attitudes and perceptions of culture; issues of culture and poverty, the economic measurement of culture, and the politics and policy framework within which cultural processes take place. Other responses concerned the restoration of monarchs and cultural institutions and their ability to influence change.

**A. Perceptions of culture** – Four key elements appear to contribute to local perceptions of culture. As a result of Uganda's ethnic diversity, perceptions of culture tend to be fragmented and 'ethnic culture' prevails, as opposed to a national notion. In the absence of a single common language, national identity, or unified cultural thinking, dealing with issues of culture was perceived as a sensitive and mammoth task by some respondents.

Secondly, many of our respondents reported that culture is still perceived as primitive; a hindrance to development; and irrelevant to the current context. 'Culture' is narrowly defined in terms of traditional rituals and practices, especially those that are considered oppressive and negative, such as female genital mutilation, witchcraft, and widow cleansing and inheritance. Positive aspects of culture such as community labour, the spirit of communal responsibility and accountability, conflict resolution, informal moral education, (inculcating values such as honesty, industriousness, or value of virginity and abstinence before marriage) are rarely recognised, utilised or documented by development actors.

Third, in Government circles, where 'development' is equated to economic development, culture is increasingly measured in terms of its contribution to economic product. According to the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, efforts are being

made to monetise the benefits of cultural industries, by itemising and calculating income generated by cultural activities, creative cultural groups, cultural tourism, crafts, and art. Partly because of the current absence of such quantitative information, culture is given low priority.

Four, is the legal framework. Some of the laws in force during the colonial era have not been revised, including banning local cultural practices that were branded as witchcraft. This contributes to the negative perception that not only is the local culture evil and primitive, but it is also unlawful. Some interest groups are however beginning to review the relevance of existing laws and make amendments: performing artists have for instance formed associations to ensure issues of intellectual property rights and copyright are addressed.

**B. Culture and poverty and development policy** – With more than a third of the Ugandan population living in extreme poverty, creative energies are geared towards meeting basic needs such as food, medical care, shelter and security. Poverty is linked to vulnerability, including vulnerability to manipulation by internal and external forces. Developing cultural human potential through experimentation with local innovative thinking, science and technology is thus not given high priority, by both Government and the population in general. Turning a blind eye to the implications of culture on development (population growth, environment management and protection, health (and specifically HIV/AIDS), social discrimination (gender, age, disability), our respondents argued, will only abet marginalisation of productive members of society and their contribution to the nation.

It was pointed out that that the significance of culture as an important factor in national development and politics has actually diminished in recent years. This is illustrated by the ‘downgrading’ of the Ministry of Culture from a fully-fledged Ministry in the 1960s, to a Directorate under the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development today.

While efforts have been made to develop a national policy on culture, political will and resources are vital for its implementation. We have seen that culture is not significantly reflected in the PEAP, nor is it mentioned substantively in the incumbent President’s manifesto. This lack of recognition has implications on sustained budget support for culture related programmes, although the Ministry is attempting to raise funds from sources other than Government to support various initiatives. Hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting (CHOGM) in Uganda in 2007 has also triggered a desire for Uganda to showcase its culture in various creative ways, including organising a workshop on culture in development. The sustainability of such action is however yet to be verified.

The **education policy** previously encouraged crisscrossing of students from different regions to gain exposure and learning from districts other than their own, in a bid to foster mutual tolerance and respect. The opposite happens nowadays, with students and public servants selected and posted to their districts of origin. As a result, individuals

have a narrow worldview, often prejudiced and biased against other ethnic groups, in favour of a narrower ethnic allegiance.

Nevertheless, education is one sector where a deliberate effort has been made to incorporate culture in development, with the recent introduction of selected local languages as media of instructions in primary schools. At higher levels of education, however, there is limited use of indigenous knowledge. Traditional medicine, for instance, is not given much consideration in the training curriculum of doctors and hence often dismissed. While little has been done to utilise education to advance oral tradition and indigenous knowledge, the new policy on using local languages as media of instruction in lower primary school classes may nevertheless provide an entry point to re-introduce these in a manner that is relevant to the current context and that will serve as a point of reference for future generations.

**Language** is an important mode of communication through which culture is transmitted and developed. A society can be unified or divided by it. Our respondents felt that Uganda suffers from the lack of national language(s); domination of certain languages as well as the use of language to discriminate against others (e.g. using derogative terms to undermine the dignity of marginalised groups) sometimes causes division. Yet attempts to introduce Kiswahili as a national language have met resistance, in part because it is not indigenous and is therefore perceived as another imposition, in addition to English.

While using local languages in primary schools is likely to lead to the development of literature for educational and entertainment purposes, some parents have been opposed to this new policy, as formal education and the written word in English are still generally glorified. Similarly, an educational qualification, such as a PhD or Diploma, is considered a source of wisdom, while local oral culture is perceived as backward.

In **health care**, we see signs that traditional healers and herbal medicine are increasingly recognized as effective alternatives to western-inspired services and medicine, including in the provision of mental health care. Some traditional healers have formed associations that are supported by development organisations to establish herbal gardens, improve on their practice and implement income generating projects to serve their respective communities. The Ministry of Health has set up a laboratory to research and test herbal prescriptions. A draft policy on the use of herbal medicine has been submitted to the Ministry of Health for consideration.

The national **investment policy** was also mentioned: this is largely to the benefit of foreign investors who give little attention to the promotion of local products or culture. Thus Coca-Cola, bottled in Mbarara, a region that produces nutritious and cheap soft drinks (milk and *obushera*, a local millet drink), has out-competed the local products and yet has no nutritional value. Other investors, such as telecommunications companies, reap enormous profits from their operations, without making substantial contribution to the promotion of Uganda's culture.

**C. Culture and politics** – *Political processes* in the past enhanced a nationalistic outlook. Thus, a few years after independence Members of Parliament had to stand in 4 constituencies, 3 of which were not their own, to deepen their national outlook and legitimacy. In addition, it was proposed that districts be named after towns rather than tribes, to reduce ethnic differences and foster national representation. Today, MPs are required to stand in only one district, usually their district of origin, contributing to politic processes often propelled by patronage. Uganda has an ever-growing number of cabinet members, MPs and districts which also contribute to an inward looking perception of development that demands self-representation rather than national representation. Elitist politicians exploit ethnic differences to canvas for votes and remain in power. In return for votes, politicians lobby for resource allocation to develop their constituencies, fostering a form of development that is fragmented along ethnic lines.

Respondents attributed *corruption and nepotism* to a breakdown in the country's social fabric. By adopting a westernised culture, it was assumed that traditional values of integrity and sincerity would automatically be assimilated. This has proved elusive: in the absence of mechanisms and controls that affect people where it matters most (clan and family identity, a sense of belonging/security, fear of banishment or other cultural punitive measures), individuals have abused power and resources in their charge. Success has become increasingly defined by one's ability to be shrewd ('beat the system') and amass wealth. The media fuel this view by turning wealthy members of society into heroes, despite their ill-gotten wealth, and the less affluent look up to the wealthy as 'bakulu' (chiefs). Unfortunately, these are the same individuals who are likely to be re-elected into political positions. With the exception of conflict resolution processes being tentatively used in northern Uganda, little has been done to document and utilise traditional justice practices which could be incorporated into the western-inspired justice system adopted by the country.

*With regard to cultural institutions*, monarchs and cultural institutions were banned for much of the post-colonial period, until their restoration in 1995. In some cases, this has allowed kingdoms to re-organise and regain a measure of authority. In others, the restoration of monarchs has been resisted, as in Ankole, where the monarchy is seen as oppressive, especially by one section of the population. Internal wrangles then predominate, at the expense of promoting culture as a means for collective development. There is also a widespread tendency for monarchs and cultural institutions to rely heavily on Government for recognition, legitimacy, and financial resources, thus circumscribing their effectiveness as autonomous entities.

The authority of cultural leaders has also been adversely affected when they find themselves in war-torn areas, in exile or in one of the many camps for internally displaced people in Northern Uganda. With the loss of dignity, authority, wealth, ability to protect and effectively support others materially and spiritually, some leaders have found the challenge of preserving cultural values and norms overwhelming. In some cases, returnee leaders even have had to be 're-educated' on their roles and responsibilities by peers and external facilitators to restore lost traditional structures, systems, principles, and values. In some cases, they have been supported to reflect on the

root causes of ethnic conflict; possible resolution mechanisms and how to establish new relationships to address present day challenges.

Despite these constraints, cultural leaders are still influential in determining community responses to change. There is therefore a growing (but still limited) trend by Government and other development organisations of involving cultural leaders as arbitrators in ethnic conflict and civil strife; in seeking alternative justice resolution; in tackling issues related to HIV/AIDS, orphan care, and girl child education. In addition, where cultural leaders have not been very active, a few individuals have taken the initiative to promote their respective local cultures by compiling information, collecting artefacts, conducting research, producing literature, initiating traditional music competitions, community drama, and sports.

#### **4. Implications for development practice**

CCFU seeks to promote an understanding of development, as seen through ‘cultural lenses’, and reflecting our wealth of cultural diversity. The discussions held and experiences shared by representatives from development organisations, local government, cultural institutions, religious institutions, traditional healers and individual promoters of culture in development, as well as many challenges, do illustrate the existence of development initiatives that have taken the positive aspects of culture into account. These are however often isolated and with limited reference to enabling policies. We therefore see a need to:

- Support cultural institutions and promoters to reflect upon and reconstruct positive aspects of traditional culture as a starting point of learning.
- Support the creation of linkages and sustained learning mechanisms amongst various cultural initiatives and with other development institutions.
- To the extent possible, solicit strategic and sustained support for cultural institutions from relevant ministries and other players in development processes.
- Target cultural leaders in capacity building programmes to cause reflection and repositioning of their role in development, while enhancing a more self-motivated response to current development challenges.
- Continue searching for good examples that clearly illustrate the significance of culture in development work with the aim of improving development practice and gradually changing negative perceptions of culture in development, through (among others) new training curricula for development practitioners.

Emily Drani, Executive Director,  
CCFU, August 2007.