



CENTRE for BASIC RESEARCH

Civic Education in Uganda



Mr. Robert Kalundi Serumaga giving a keynote speech during the seminar

Introduction

Centre for Basic Research (CBR) is implementing a three year project titled: 'Strengthening Evidence-based Democratic Governance Agenda Setting and Engagement by Civil Society in Uganda', which among others entails a nation-wide Comprehensive Review of Civic Education in Uganda. The project is supported by Democracy Governance Facility (DGF). The Comprehensive Review of Civic Education study is intended to analyze not only the impact of the various civic education initiatives and interventions by state and non-state actors in different parts of the country over the years, but also to identify areas for strengthening civil society engagement in civic education.

CBR is also conducting Monthly Expert Seminars on critical Civic Education issues to generate public discussions around selected thematic areas ranging from social, political, religious, cultural and economic perspectives on civic education. The Monthly Expert Seminars on Civic Education issues in Uganda are considered as an important avenue for the convergence between theories and the practices of civic education in Uganda in general. The Seminars provide opportunities for civic education practitioners for engaging with emerging issues from on-going researches to understand not only the contribution of the civic education that has been undertaken so far by state and non-state actors, its approaches, delivery mechanisms and impact, but also the intellectual debates on the appropriateness of the civic knowledge generated in which are embodied the country's core values and principles.

The Seminars are intended as an interactive platform for researchers, academics, policy makers and the general public to continue with the debates on the practical necessities of how civic education can become a better vehicle for providing citizens with skills and tools with which to enter the market place of ideas to engage in a deliberative process in which ideals of the democracy we desire as a country are discussed openly and candidly to generate a minimum consensus aimed at enhancing tolerance of divergent political views and promoting peaceful coexistence.

Through these Seminars, different categories of citizens are provided an opportunity to think beyond their current political, occupational, intellectual and cultural dispositions by engaging in critical inquiry of broader issues of democracy, citizenship and national building. They begin to raise questions on the conceptualization of civic education as well as the discourse on the structural constraints in civic education pedagogy, its practical approaches and strategies as a way to understand the various ways our young democracy can become an avenue for strengthening citizenship. In other words, the Seminars are aimed at influencing the democratic governance processes by enhancing on one hand, the responsiveness of government to needs of citizens through dialogue, and on the other, building a critical mass within the citizenry that understands the importance to listening and appreciating each other's opinions and perspectives.

The 1st Expert Seminar was held on 26 July 2018. The keynote address was delivered by the Chairperson of the Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) on the subject: 'The Challenges of Implementing Civic Education in Uganda'. The 2nd Monthly Expert Seminar was held on 20 September 2018 and focused on discussions on Political tolerance following the violence in parts of the country in the wake of events that happened in the aftermath of the hotly contested August 2018 Arua Municipality bye-elections titled: 'Condemn Bobi Wine's beating minus roughing up Bebe Cool: Civic education and Political Tolerance'. It was delivered by Mr. Bernard Tabaire, the Director of Programmes at the Africa Centre for Media Excellence. This policy brief presents key policy messages from the 3rd Monthly Expert Seminar on Civic Education organized by Centre for Basic Research which was held on 30th October 2018. The keynote speaker was Mr. Robert Kalundi-Serumaga, a media Consultant, Journalist, filmmaker and Cultural activist whose presentation was titled: 'Refashioning Uganda's Political Dispensations: Civic Education and Building a Democratic Tradition'.

Issues Emerging from the Seminar Discussions

It was revealed at the 3rd Expert Seminar that the political dispensation in the country called Uganda as we know it today had been shaped by two distinct but interconnected historical struggles that have been misrepresented in the writings on decolonization and the nationalist uprisings that characterized it. The first struggles that preceded the creation of independent Uganda had contradictory tendencies. On one hand, there was a group whose main agenda was the desire to replace their colonial masters as the new class of

rulers to partake of the privilege that came with the position. On the other hand, there were a group of unsung heroes whose main struggle was against the opportunists that had hijacked the nationalist movement.

The latter category sought to achieve independence on more favourable terms, and internally was constituted by both moderates and radicals. While the moderates were amenable to a political settlement, the more radical elements were fundamentally opposed to the creation of Uganda as a colonial project, as opposed to being a product of decolonization. There was a rather more conservative perspective that resisted becoming Uganda. Their main point of contention was a refusal to become Ugandans on terms that were defined by the oppressors.

Often, the history of Uganda has been written as if there was a consensus on the historical trajectories that shaped the country's transition from a protectorate to an independent country. The significance of resistance to colonialism, first marshalled by Omukama Kabalega of Bunyoro-Kitara, Kabaka Mwanga of Buganda, Rwot Awic of Acholi, among others, was followed by resistance Uganda as a colonial project in run-up to independence need to be properly contextualized as part of a concerted initiative to build civic knowledge and disposition of citizens.

The seminar heard that as a consequence, the Uganda of today was still struggling with the physical expression of western hegemony over its political and economic dispensation, which necessitated a second kind of struggle against coloniality of power, knowledge and being. This puts civic education at the heart of this struggle to counter antecedents of post-colonialism in its various manifestations. This was a clarion call for an engagement with the type of knowledge of the country's political and economic history, at the centre of which lies civic education.

In essence, the seminar participants acknowledged that a democratic tradition cannot be simply reduced to holding regular elections and talking about human rights issues without interrogating the foundational principles that inform the politics of the country and a nuanced understanding of its history. This implied that strengthening civic skills, consciousness, and competencies for civically engaging with those entrusted with the responsibility for leadership cannot be taken for granted. It is also a process of challenging and questioning the received knowledge in the form of history of the country.

It was noted that the history being taught in schools needs to be revisited to recognise the role that was played by unsung heroes in the struggle for Uganda's independence to avoid some of the mistakes which the country was facing. This struggle was characterized by political demands for self-government as well as economic demands for control over land and other economic resources which the British vested in Anglican warlords as rewards for their loyalty. The suppressions of the co-operative movement was a direct response to native demands for greater political representation and economic freedoms. Civic education can be both a language of resistance and as a well a tool for construction of political conformism.

In building a democratic tradition in which civic education takes centre stage, the seminar heard that it was critical to examine how, as citizens, we think about ourselves, about others, and about our country. There was need to the past of the relationship between civic education and whatever political dispensations existed then to understand how this relationship was manifesting in the present in order to re-imagine the future of the role of civic education in the political dispensation that we aspire for. What we have achieved with the civic education we have had, need to be redirected towards a specific democratic governance agenda aimed at enabling a responsive leadership and a responsible citizenry.

The seminar heard that 'civic education' generally implies formally teaching citizens about the formal construction and operation of their society. It supposes that it is necessary (it has to be) for people to learn the rights and duties, responsibility and powers how to engage with fellow citizens and with authority. However, the critical aspect of 'civic education' is that the 'civic' sphere was not consistent with the innateness (naturalness) and historicity of the adapted form of society. Hence the emergency and implementation of 'civic education' has to be understood against the background of why there is no involuntary 'civil socialization' in society.

It was observed that public virtue cannot exist where there are no public values. One cannot pass over values that one does not innately have. Besides, people learn better by emulating those around them, particularly their leaders. The positive and negative values that leaders manifest become contagious. Values can be taught but they are best absorbed from the environment around a person, which is the very reason why

contracting out this vital function of civic education can never on a best-tender basis. The one who may win such a tender may not necessarily be the best suited to conscientize Ugandans.

It was suggested that if there is a pedagogical justification of 'civic education', it is principally that the conventional construction and operation of society can be formally inculcated. It is possible that by some formal methodological processes to induct the knowledge and attendant values in the citizens. The initial condition was that for some reason or reasons the public/people are not always informed and do not know the basics of the civic establishment. This condition has always been problematic for Uganda, in that the reasons as to why the citizens are not educated about the 'civic' sphere have to be addressed before or as the 'civic education' programs are implemented. The latter implies that civic education may appear either as antithetical to the idea of a 'state' and those in positions of authority, or as an instrument of perpetuating particular political alignments.

Key Policy Messages

The following policy issues were identified as critical for consideration by key stakeholders involved in civic education:

1. In implementing 'civic education', the aspect of history must be reflected as an important tool for both national and local level community development. It should not be reduced to political education.
2. There is a need to interrogate and engage the received knowledge that has been passed on through history, including the history of Uganda that has been written and taught in schools because it many times had presented a one-sided view of those in positions of power.
3. The process of building and strengthening civic skills, consciousness, and competencies ought to start in our homes, schools, places of worship, places of work, entertainment places and all public spaces. Yet the experience seems to suggest that these are the very places where the opposite of that which we seek was being propagated.
4. Efforts needs to be made to reach a consensus on what the national values are, and how best these should be propagated at various levels in the country. Existing initiatives in this direction have largely been elitist.



Prof. Ahikire responding to remarks by the keynote speaker