



CIVIC REASON AND CULTURAL LEGITIMACY

PROMOTING A CULTURAL APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

SOURCE

ORGANISATION: CROSS-CULTURAL FOUNDATION OF UGANDA (CCFU) RESOURCE PERSONS:
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CONTEXT & BACKGROUND:

WHICH ISSUE IS BEING ADDRESSED?

'Western' ideologies have long dominated perspectives on development in developing countries. 'Modernisation' has often meant a rather simplistic transfer of western ideas and technologies. This may partly explain the fact that local communities rarely feel that they own, internalise and retain development initiatives. The *Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda* (CCFU) believes that valuable traditional knowledge, norms and principles have been disregarded as irrelevant, or even backward in the approach toward development challenges (see CCFU 2008). CCFU advocates the idea that local cultural resources are essential for sustainable and equitable development processes.

STRATEGY AND ACTIVITIES: HOW ARE YOU TRYING TO CHANGE THIS SITUATION?

CCFU promotes cultural perspectives on development. CCFU develops methodologies and conducts research to help identify cultural resources that may be relevant in addressing contemporary development challenges. A cultural approach creates spaces for positive engagement with communities and seeks to support exchange between different bodies of knowledge in reciprocal ways. *"A cultural approach to development seeks to modify development approaches to reflect culture. It explores the interface of bodies of knowledge and selects positive aspects from modern concepts of development, but also from traditional knowledge. This is a collective responsibility. One must seek openness toward alternative approaches to*

development, but one must also be open to oneself."

A cultural approach does not mean a relativistic attitude towards culture. *"It also analyses negative cultural practices. These should be discussed. But change cannot be imposed; it must come from within. Communities need time in order to reflect on necessary changes, and in order to value these themselves."*

An example of CCFU's work entails an empirical study that focuses on 'culture in governance' (see CCFU 2010). It examines whether cultural values, traditional governance systems and their current practices can find a way forward in dealing with the contemporary governance challenges that Uganda faces as a nation. The study examines four cases that illustrate the interface between forms of 'community governance', culture and the state. Each case deals with a different dimension of governance in various parts of Uganda: human rights and justice, accountability, access to resources and conflict resolution. These cases identify the opportunities that non-state spaces of governance offer for civic action. In their approach to these governance issues, CCFU highlights the power of individuals to tackle the situation independently. This cultural approach to governance is important, for instance, when dealing with accountability: *"Ideas of accountability are often introduced by NGOs. But most communities have their own understanding of accountability. In order to improve accountability of leaders and citizens within the public sphere, accountability mechanisms should be grounded in culture. Otherwise, the public sphere will remain the terrain of NGOs and other organisations (Drani)."*

SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES: WHAT HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED ALONG THE WAY?

Based on this study, CCFU argues that a cultural approach to governance is possible, relevant and needed. Their work indicates, for instance, that traditional mechanisms and values of governance are very relevant for the work of local communities in organising themselves and dealing with the problems

they face. 'Modern' state mechanisms of governance, on the other hand, may be perceived as commercialised, distant, alien and incapable of delivering fairness and justice. The study of CCFU reveals that 'traditional' and 'modern' systems of governance in Uganda often operate isolated from each other. There is a lack of guidance to demonstrate how both systems could be linked in a way that is consistent, efficient and fruitful. CCFU suggests that it would be productive to shift from an 'either/or' situation toward an effort that combines the positive aspects of both the 'traditional' and the 'modern' governance system. CCFU offers concrete advice to support this. One of the major challenges lies in the need for customary governance mechanisms to adapt to new influences and the changing world in order to remain relevant.

CIVIC REASON: IN WHAT WAYS COULD THIS EXAMPLE BE RELATED TO CIVIC REASON?

CCFU begins at the premise that governance *"is rooted in cultural values and defines what we consider 'the right way' to get things done. In a multi-cultural and artificial colonial creation such as Uganda, the definition of 'the right way' will be contested."* (CCFU 2010, 3). Civic reason is a means to identify overlapping concerns and reach agreements between different citizens and communities. The cultural approach of CCFU invests in the creating of bases for intercultural exchange and understanding. It forms, thus, important building blocks for the success of civic reason and cross-cultural dialogue.

CCFU's cultural approach and the study on culture in governance provides an example of how an approach through cultural legitimacy can take concrete forms in different contexts. Their research – as well as the course that might result from their advice to link traditional and modern governance mechanisms and values – is part of a process of internal discourse and cross-cultural dialogue necessary to achieve cultural legitimisation. This same process is also proposed by An-Na'im and applied to governance practices, systems

and values. Local values and practices can produce and redefine ideas about Ugandan governance in such a way that gives meaning and relevance to people's lives.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The study conducted by CCFU indicates there is a disjunction between 'traditional' and 'modern' governance systems in Uganda. Do you recognise a disjunction between governance systems in your own society? How does it affect your work? What would a cultural approach entail in the context of your work?
- *"Governance is (...) not culture-neutral. It is indeed rooted in our cultural values and defines what we consider 'the right way' to get things done. In a multi-cultural and artificial colonial creation such as Uganda, the definition of 'the right way' will be contested."* Likewise, the process of reaching nation-wide agreement to define the 'positive aspects' of each 'traditional' and 'modern' system will be challenging. Do you think that An-Na'im's proposed requirement of civic reason could assist in reaching agreement and bringing the different governance systems together in a way that is productive? What are the factors that might interfere with civic reason (like those related to relations of power and economic inequalities)?
- Do you believe that a cultural approach can further stimulate the process of cultural legitimisation of governance? Please design an activity which is relevant for your own organization and which draws on a cultural perspective. (For more information on CCFU's cultural approach in development please see the recommendations for further reading, CCFU 2010c)
- Some people argue that culture is not always respectful of internal differences within communities. Cultural norms and practices are claimed, for instance, to sustain gender inequalities. Please respond to the following statement: It is possible to address gender concerns by adopting a cultural approach.

