

Leading the Sector out of the Hole(s)! *An Open Letter from across the border to Civil Society Leaders in Uganda*

Dear Compatriots and Friends,

Greetings from Nairobi!

I write this letter from the relative (dis)comfort of my temporary place of abode in Kenya. Comfort because I do not have to wake up every day to the largely depressing picture of our country's mismanagement and institutional decay, and discomfort because I am yet to figure out a concrete role to play as a fellow comrade 'in the diaspora'. I miss the collective analysis and fellowships we shared when I was in the country but find some solace in thoughts about what is possible, and the modest solidarity support I occasionally send to those of you on the frontline of our struggle to mobilize, activate and connect various actions for a better Uganda.

*This letter is informed by our reflections over the years and more recently during my short visit home when we met and shared ideas about the ongoing struggle for **leadership change and political transition** to hopefully usher in a new reality of equal opportunity and shared prosperity for all citizens. We reflected on what our contribution as civic organizations should be in this struggle.*

As we all agree, our dear 'pearl of Africa' is in a state of peril seen in the increasing institutional decay caused in large part by the resurgence of an imperial president. The absence of or poor service delivery across the country, the 'death of rural Uganda' and the rise of what some have referred to as a 'boda-boda economy' that makes riding motorbikes or selling sugarcane and chewing gum on the streets of Kampala a better recourse for our burgeoning youth population, as opposed to farming or other productive enterprises to earn a living is a dilemma we need to contend with. As is, the progressive capture of state institutions by a mafia that is increasingly more powerful than those who enabled them to emerge. The economy is stagnating if not regressing, society is more divided as our people are forced to retreat to ethnic enclaves in false comfort and hope of making a better bargain with the state.

*The litany of lamentations could go on and on, but none of this is new to you, as is the main cause of this malaise - a leader whose expiry date was 2006. We continue to suffer consequences of a **ruler** whose survival is renewed through ritualistic elections in which 'consent is controlled'. We are consuming leadership equivalent to 'expired goods' and consequently the body politic and socioeconomic fabric is intoxicated with expired ideas, policies and programmes. The Emperor is naked and so are his 71 clowns dancing to his selfish tunes. One by one, a hitherto 'elected shepherd' turned beast is devouring its sheep. And rather than confront the beast, we appear to be scampering to the furthest corner, hoping to be devoured last or to be saved when the beast is either tired, too satisfied or weak.*

To be fair, we haven't just sat and watched our country unravel. In our diversity, we have pioneered interventions for those living in the margins, be it in education, health, HIV/AIDS response, agriculture and financial services. Inspired by the resilient women's movement, we have made a deliberate effort to reconnect with the population and with ordinary Ugandans, envisioned a peaceful country with happy people. This is the story of the women's manifesto, youth manifesto and citizens' manifesto. Those who understand the history and evolution of these manifestos appreciate their significant contribution in creating the vocal and vibrant political accountability movement that has sprouted in different shades across the country. We have supported women who face domestic violence, made attempts to influence local and national budgets in favor of investments in the sectors where most people living in poverty reside. We defended communities whose land and livelihoods are threatened by greedy leaders, elites and multinationals. We have mobilized citizens to save forests, defend artisanal miners, supported refugees and more.

Despite our interventions, we have fallen short of dismantling the shackles of patriarchy, corruption and impunity. Ultimately, we have not succeeded in shifting and transforming power in favor of most of our people who face injustice and oppression. At best, we have gotten our people to survive but not thrive.

Our major undoing appears to be our inability to marshal the leadership and courage needed to crystallize and connect our diverse struggles into a movement for political transition. We often find comfort in being apolitical as organizations and yet express strong political views as individuals. We have agonized instead of organizing. We have prepared for sprints when we should have readied for a marathon and so while some have run fast, collectively, we haven't gone far. We are comfortable ticking donor accountability boxes, instead pursuing the real struggles the country needs. As a result, a lot of our donor funded programmes are constructed apolitically to fulfil the expectations of the 'aid chain' which is not always in tune with what the country demands.

*As I conclude this letter, I should stress the need for us to have an opportunity mindset. In history, it is in moments of crisis that people all over the world have invented and innovated. So as our country teeters on the brink of becoming a 'failed state' and our people are at crossroads, so is the opportunity to take a big leap on the path to recreate a **country of equal opportunity and shared prosperity**. To do this we must accept that we are part of a society that is in peril reflected in all sectors. It behooves us to demonstrate that we are different or at least to own and commit to change our ways, for we are all in a hole, and 'when in a hole one must stop digging and instead figure out how to get out'. The six holes we need to get out of are:*

- a) **The 'apolitical' hole:** Many of us are in this hole either out of fear or ignorance. Fear because we do not want to rock the boat to alter privileges we have. In some sense we are comfortable being employed in organizations and on the other we show anxiety about the unknown. Bobi Wine captures this well in one his songs when he says, '... they fear what they don't know and don't know what they fear'. And ignorance because we do not see that what we do whether in service delivery, advocacy or human rights defense is deeply political, for a lot of the injustices we fight with our charity mindsets have political roots. As we quoted in the citizens*

manifesto framing paper, 'politics is too serious a matter to be left to politicians'. We must crack the political fear factor and engage in politics openly, for at the end of the day, it is 'the process of determining who gets what, why, how and how much...'. Politics is about (re)distribution and we must be part of that process.

- b) **The integrity deficiency hole:** In this hole are many religious, traditional, political, civic, private and public-sector individuals who despite being in positions of influence fail to provide the leadership required to create a cultural shift to more accountable and transparent system of governance. As we know that 'leadership shapes culture', we must have at the helm of our organizations (both management and governance) leaders with impeccable integrity, those who will not compromise on some values we often project. We must overcome the belief that survival instincts trump all ideals and good behavior, by being exemplary.
- c) **The isolation and destructive competition hole:** For various reasons, many civil society organizations and leaders have lately withdrawn or paid lukewarm attention to collective work. The isolation due to geography, frustration or harmful competition for dwindling donor resources has affected our ability to foster greater solidarity and, in some cases, even economies of scale for impact. We need leaders who will build bridges and get out of the increasingly apolitical NGO spaces and connect with other struggles of teachers, medical workers and other organic formations whose struggles we have at best only partially shown solidarity with.
- d) **The social media hole:** A hitherto celebrated means to advance causes, social media has increasingly become an end. We tweet, WhatsApp, forward, Facebook and imagine we have arrived. The psychological satisfaction gained by being on several social media platforms must not perpetuate, an accomplishment mentality that conflates the means with the end. Regardless of your 150k followers, if you cannot get them to act for social justice, then it's not yet "uhuru". Social media cannot and should not substitute for citizens' action in more visible spaces such as the 'Black Monday Movement' before its retreat and capture by NGO culture.
- e) **The donor dependency hole:** We need donors in the global north and south. And in some cases, donor aid has helped us achieve a lot. However, we need to challenge many constraints that come with aid money and deploy it in ways that deliver the change the country needs and not just fulfil donor accountability requirements. Most importantly however, we must find a pathway to 'exit aid dependency' by investing in enterprises that will generate money to resource our struggles. And finally, part of our strategy to exit dependency is to re-examine our business models and cost structures to wean off what is 'extra fat' and costs of delivering our mission. In the same way, we need to think about sharing some costs and functions across organizations.
- f) **The longevity hole:** This hole mirrors the very leadership crisis we have in the country and poses a big challenge to our quest for leadership change and political transition. NGO and civic leaders that stay longer than 10 years in an executive leadership position in the same organisation tend to crowd out the emergence of fresh ideas and new energy. The organizations they preside over begin to reflect their individual traits, including weaknesses. When they finally exit, the more likely result is the organizations 'go under' or suffer serious transition tensions that leave these organizations in a weaker position. Leadership transition is as important in civil society organizations as they are in the country, and organizational policies on this ought to be clear and respected.

The Leadership the sector yearns for...

To lead the sector out of these hole(s) requires transformative leadership - clear on political purpose, conscious of the negative forms of power and privilege within and around us that obscure our vision. We need a leadership that connects diverse groups: membership-based organizations, community-based organizations, NGOs, professional associations and some sections of the media who are essential to creating strong social movements and a vibrant civil society. We need leaders who lead from the front during times of crisis, and not from London, New York, Washington DC or Addis Ababa, Johannesburg, Nairobi, Dakar or other distant places we like to go around the globe. From the depths of the holes we are in, from the loud echoes that reverberate in those holes, the country yearns for a leadership that can marshal the courage to do what needs to be done, otherwise our credibility will continue to be questioned.

As for me, I do not have the credibility from the outside to be part of the authentic and frontline leadership we need, at least for the time I am out of the country. What I pledge to do is mobilize support in various shades to buttress the struggles of institutions and individuals in the frontline.

Solidarity,

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