



# **Civil Society in a Changing Political Context**

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**Reflections from Uganda**

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# 1. Introduction

*On the onset, I want to assert that I make a difference between civil society organisations and a civil society. The latter is an outcome of the efforts of the former and the former in turn strengthens and aids the work of the latter. At the risk of being branded an academic theorist (in itself not a bad thing), I contend that to be able to cover any ground in understanding ‘the role of civil society in a changing political environment in Uganda’, which is the topic I was asked to write on, with a bias on Uganda, one must be clear on a number of issues: a) who and what groups comprise civil society in Uganda, what, why and how do they do what they do? b) attempt to understand the political environment and what is changing in it, if anything; c) what civil society desires to see in the country and what obstacles lie in the way to realising this dream; d) what our role is in overcoming the obstacles and realising this vision; and finally e) what it takes for civil society to play that role. Accordingly, this brief paper is structured in response to the five points above.*

Immediately following this introduction is a theoretical and then practical discussion of civil society and civil society organisations - I attempt to answer the who, the what, the why and the how questions about civil society in Uganda. This is followed with an examination of what is changing in the political context in Uganda, if at all, as this is a key assumption made in framing the topic. In Section 4, I draw on at least two important processes, works and outputs to define ‘the Uganda we desire’ from the perspective of civil society organisations and touch on what I see as obstacles to attaining this vision and therefore set the agenda for what we need to be doing. In Section 5, I then layout the role of civil society organisations *which essentially is to nurture a civil society in Uganda that is able to oversee the performance of government, protect gains from citizen struggles by reigning on autocratic regimes and finally contribute to the development of a strong state.*

In other words, the key thesis in this paper is that you and I working for diverse civil society organisations have as our cardinal role, creating the conditions for the emergence of a civil society which will be the vanguard steering citizen struggles and safeguarding its outcomes.

# 2. Civil Society in Uganda

The concept civil society remains notoriously slippery in theory, but it practice civil society is much easier to fathom. In this section I present a bit of the theory and then the practice. First to the theory -- today, various definitions vaguely describe civil society as the whole of humanity left over once government and for-profit firms are excised, covering all those organisations that fill in the spaces between the family, the state and the market. A common reference point in contemporary literature is provided by Gordon White who in the 90’s defined civil society, as ‘an associational realm between the state and the family populated by organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values’. In reality however, the

boundaries of civil society are fuzzy and in a country like Uganda it is common to find multiple identities of people wearing different hats at the same time -- government, private sector or business and civil society. All this has implications on relationship, values and behaviour of civil society.

In practice when we talk about civil society in Uganda, we make a prompt error to equate it to NGOs who are only but one actor in the civil society space. Other important players in the civil society space include; trade unions operating under a very constrained neo-liberal environment where capital is favoured over labour and the latter is exploited, often with the aid of government; churches and faith organisations; professional organisations such as medical associations, the law society, think tanks; business and traders' associations; community based organisations operating around self interest; burial and other self help groups such as cooperatives and credit associations; some sections of the media and their associations; the academia and related institutions; youth and women's movements, among others.

These organisations are engaged in varied activities ranging from providing services to those in need (including themselves) - in this category you will find the type of NGOs often referred to as service delivery; they compliment and supplement government. Other NGOs have taken up the duty of advocacy for public interest issues proactively or reactively, in policy and judicial spaces and in some other public spaces especially in reaction to excesses of the state. Majority of civil society are working towards self-interest and mobilize for industrial action as a bargaining tool for their members' interests; traders, teachers unions, academic staff associations and business associations who have more recently taken to the streets in Uganda are driven by this agenda and not necessarily that of the public good.

The modus operandi of several civil society organisations oscillate between needs based to rights based approaches, with some having a combination of the two. Needs when interventions respond to needs of particular target groups or society such as the need for education, the need for health services, the need for food, the need for humanitarian assistance in the face of disaster, the need for agricultural inputs and more. In responding to needs, civil society organisations often directly provide the services needed - the government is usually (though not always) very happy with this group. On the other hand, rights work is targeted at defending constitutional and 'universally accepted' common rights issues. Many governance, rights and public interest civil society groups target the public and struggle to have the media attend their function. Their activity isn't complete without media coverage. Others negotiate quietly with government or state institutions on issues they are uncomfortable with.

The moral of all the above is a call on us to appreciate the diversity of actors within civil society and caution us from the mistake we often make in thinking that civil society is always working for the same purpose and the problem is only mobilization and coordination. It is important to build pan-civil society alliances but it is crucial to identify common interest issues first and agree on mutual accountability issues when alliances are built across civil society.

### 3. A Changing Political Environment?

The current upheavals and challenges Uganda faces are a symptom of historical as well more recent reversals in politics and governance. Accordingly, any attempts to think of a way out must be located, not only in a focus on the current bliss, but in an honest engagement with developments in the last decade or so and historical misnomers in Uganda's nation building project. Uganda, like many post colonial states has a structural problem with its politics.

The character of the Ugandan State has and still is fundamentally a predatory one. Right from the exploitative Colonial Administration, through various presidencies, the structural make up of Uganda's politics, governance and institutions militates against transformation that will benefit all equitably. This character built up by the British had two key features: a) highly centralized power structures; and b) an upward exploitative chain. From the onset, it was intended to exploit Uganda's national and natural resources, earthly and human to enrich Britain. All manner of public good; railways, roads, schools were constructed to aid Uganda's *exploitation* for the crown and *control* of citizen action seen in several colonial laws, post colonial policies and decrees and several contemporary legislations.

*For as long as we do not transform the above structure which in large part remains intact, by meaningfully redistributing power from the centre, change of guard will not mean change of fortune.* In this regard our leaders, past, present and possibly future are and will remain responsible to the extent that under their leadership, we have failed to transform the predatory state infrastructure in a meaningful way. They are driven by the same logic as their former colonial masters were - enrich themselves, close allies, tribes-mates and supporters at the expense of the majority. Going by this thesis, it therefore follows that Uganda's problems - economic, social or wellbeing are fundamentally political and governance. The hope for transformation in our economy, politics and society to unlock equitable opportunity for Ugandans is under siege by a political and governance structure.

In other words, the typical Ugandan president is a dictator by design because the constitution and our laws accord the presidency so much power that when combined with the inherent human desire of self preservation and fear, reinforces autocratic behaviour.

#### The Governance Dilemma for Uganda Today

Uganda's current predicament is a direct off-shoot from the departure from important governance fundamentals (democracy, rights, freedoms and rule of law), ironically spelt out by the NRM, first in its 10-Point Programme for the 'liberation' of Uganda and later the 1995 Constitution, both of which are being systematically undone. *It is like building a good foundation for a house and then constructing the house away from the foundation.* The hope that President Museveni and the NRM 'bush war heroes' ushered begun to fall apart *in the public eye* the moment the 1995 Constitution was adulterated (some say much earlier).

It must be recalled that while the 1995 Constitution itself did not deal decisively with some

historical political questions especially around the ideal governance system for Uganda, it at least represented a level consensus and put in place fairly commendable governance, institutional and policy frameworks.

Sadly, today our politics is characterized, by among others: intolerance and emergence of bi-popular stances between opposition and the ruling party; disrespect for institutions; patronage, nepotism and cronyism; governmental corruption and miss-allocation of financial resources including through the budget; impunity whether with regards to human rights violations or corruption; and more recently the re-emergence of *rule by law*, rather than *of law*. The spirit and letter of the constitution is being rewritten through some provisions in subsidiary legislations like the NGO Act, Anti-terrorism Act, Police Act, the Traditional and Cultural Leaders Act, and lately the proposed Press & Journalism (Amendment) Bill, Anti-Homosexuality Bill, Public Order Management Bill, among others. *In other words, a dictatorship is being legally established and protected by law*, in much the same way as it was/is in Libya, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and other countries.

Today there are a new set of priorities/fundamentals that pay little regard to the governance fundamentals above which were not consolidated and are instead being undone. The new fundamentals being touted today include: infrastructure (roads & railway), energy, agriculture, education, science and technology. All these, well articulated in the NRM Manifesto are important and must be supported, but they shouldn't and in fact do not have to be at the expense of the governance fundamentals outlined earlier. A strong opposition, a free and responsible media, a vibrant and publically accountable civil society organizations and inclusive policy processes are in no way opposed to the fundamentals that the NRM emphasizes today.

From the historical recollection and present day analysis, I suggest that nothing much has changed in our politics. At all points in our history, the common denominator has been a state whose institutions function to protect self or at best narrow group interests rather than broader citizen interests. The architecture of **a predatory colonial tax state** has largely remained intact. The difference between various regimes since independence is the intensity with which they have exploited, suppressed or violated the rights of citizens. Some negative trends in the last decade in our politics include:

- Narrowing space for democratic engagements through bad laws, verbal threats, spraying pepper on journalists and activists who are often bundled and put in prison. The streets have become a theatre of contestations between the state security apparatus and angry citizen activists mainly mobilized by political parties especially in the opposition.
- Diluted separation of powers especially between the executive and the judiciary. Apparent use of patronage (including outright bribery and sometimes rewards through enterprises like the creation of new districts to either silence dissenting voices or reward loyalists), caucuses rather than formal institutions.
- Failure by the government to deliver the promised public goods or that which is expected by citizens ranging from health care to quality education and agricultural inputs. In many ways the state is in retreat from delivering public services and in instead busy channelling resources to quell public dissent and alternative voices.

## 4. A Vision of the Uganda we Desire

Before engaging with some thoughts about the role of civil society organisations in shaping political discourses, it is important to be clear on what the engagement is expected to achieve. Civil Society Organisations have championed visioning processes in the past, and two very important ones have been the development of a Minimum Agenda for Peace and Development in 2006 under the leadership of 4 civil society organisations: Community Development and Resource Network (CDRN), Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC), Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Organisations (DENIVA) and the Uganda National NGO Forum, with several other NGOs and CSOs taking part.

The second process was a more ambitious citizen manifesto process that aimed to define 'the Uganda' ordinary citizens desire and organize citizens politically to demand elected leaders and institutions to deliver it when into office. Under the auspices of the Uganda Governance Monitoring Platform (UGMP) coordinates, a robust citizen manifesto was developed in 2010 and used for engagement in the run up to the 2011 elections and is now being used as an accountability tool in the post election.

A deeper analysis of outcomes from the two processes point towards a social, economic and political dispensation that guarantees good governance with the following important parameters:

- a) **Participation** - the involvement all people in society including the most vulnerable in decision making. This could be either *directly* or through legitimate intermediate institutions or *representatives* (participatory or representative democracy).
- b) **Rule of law** - the existence of fair legal frameworks that are enforced impartially.
- c) **Transparency** - decisions taken and their enforcement are done in a manner that follows rules and regulations. In addition, that information is freely available and directly accessible in easily understood forms and media by those who will be affected by such decision and their enforcement.
- d) **Responsiveness** - institutions and processes try to serve all stakeholders within a reasonable timeframe.
- e) **Consensus orientation** - several actors and many view points in a given society. Good governance requires mediation of different interests in society to reach a broad consensus.
- f) **Equity and inclusive** - ensuring that all members feel that they have a stake in it and do not feel excluded from the mainstream of society. This requires that all groups, particularly most vulnerable have opportunities to improve and maintain their wellbeing.
- g) **Effectiveness and efficiency** - processes and institutions produce results that meet the needs of society while making the best use of resources at their disposal. It ensures that there is sustainable use of resources and protection of the environment.

**h) Accountability** - institutions are answerable to those affected by its decisions or actions. Accountability can't be enforced without transparency & rule of law.

Civil Society Organisations in Uganda have outlined some important standards they would like to see of Uganda. In 2006, after a series of reflections, a minimum agenda was developed which among other things espoused the following:

- Effective distribution of resources
- Effective sharing & separation of power
- Active citizen participation
- Transparent decision-making
- Openness to change/willingness to negotiate
- Integrity and accountability
- Peaceful coexistence, tolerance, reconciliation

In 2010, after a country wide consultation involving over 60,000 Ugandans, a Citizens Manifesto was developed whose highlights were:

**Vision of Uganda:** A Peaceful and Prosperous Uganda with Happy People

**Eight National Values:** God Fearing; Hard Work; Equity; Moral Uprightness; Tolerance; National Solidarity; Constitutionalism and Discipline

**Six National Interests:** Peace and Security; Promotion and preservation of cultural heritage and diversity; preservation of the dignity of every Ugandan; promoting national economic interests in the region and globally; protection of Uganda's national and natural resources from unfair exploitation; and finally high quality human capital for transformation

**Specific Demands in Politics, Economy, Society and Policy:** Several, from Restoration of term limits in politics to revival of producer cooperatives in economy and promotion of unity through adoption of Swahili, among others.

### **Obstacles in the way of attaining the Uganda we Desire!**

Most have been touched on in Section 3 - to reiterate: structurally, there is predatory state infrastructure which leads to state institutions serving and defending self or narrow group interests rather than broader citizen interests. Secondly, there is a political impasse between those running the state and those aspiring to do so - this contestation is potentially useful, but again narrowly defined around a power struggle to control the predatory state with no compelling debate about how to restructure the state. From a lay person's perspective, the interface is more destructive than constructive, at least for now. Finally, there is generally a *weak civil society* unable to reign on and bring to order, actors in the bi-polar political situation. It is also unable to defend the gains from past peoples struggles.

The preoccupation with survival in the face of the indignity of poverty pushes majority to avoid, rather than engage with the state.



Collectively and building on still low-sounding but increasingly consistent voices and views around transforming status quo, all actors keen to make a difference should focus on (dis)enabling the pillars of repression, inequality and stagnation, including:

- a) primitive commercialization of politics and patronage that has co-opted key alternative power centres such as the church, the opposition, civil society, private sector and rural elite and opinion shapers;
- b) the use of violence and suppression to demobilize citizens and the need for us to use non-violent means as violent confrontation will reinforce and perhaps justify more repression;
- c) deceit, misinformation and propaganda; and finally
- d) breaking the reality of extreme poverty and deprivation, most of it policy and programme induced.

In the next sections, I focus on some strategies and tactics to overcome the above and further the quest for the Uganda we desire.

## 5. The Role of Civil Society and CSOs

I make a slight distinction from what I consider the role of civil society and that of civil society organisations. As already mentioned, the former is an outcome of efforts of the latter and its cardinal role is to exercise effective oversight over government and state institutions directly or through representative bodies. The other role is to pursue non violent action (apart from self protection) to defend and protect the gains from past citizen struggles: independence struggles, liberation movements and or outcomes negotiated through consultative processes like constitution making processes, among others. In whole, civil society should be able to define, defend and ensure an effective state that guarantees freedom and equitable opportunity for citizens irrespective of socioeconomic, political and other socially constructed differences. Civil society organisations on their part ought to nurture and support citizens to participate and reinforce civil society action in a 2-part, but neither exclusive nor necessarily chronologically defined strategy, each with its own approach.

The first part is one **of Internal Preparedness or Soft Struggles** and the other is what I call **Public Engagement**. In both cases we must be fully cognizant and aware of the building blocks and tactics of the status quo we would like to overthrow as explained under the obstacles preventing us from realising the Uganda we desire.

### Option and Strategy I:

#### Internal Preparedness and the Path of Least Resistance

In this first part, the key message is that civil society organisations need to make investments

to develop citizen resilience to all manner of challenges faced, mainly *economic emancipation and political conscientization*. In this strategy, I make a case for the application of an approach and understanding that Robert Fritz in the 70's and 80's defined as the path of least resistance. *This principle is based on the laws of natural order which suggests that energy always moves in the path of least resistance.* So if you are confronted with the task of climbing to the top of a steep hill, you can chose to take the vertical attempt or like a cow, choose to take the path of least resistance and go round the hill slowly progressing to the top. The point here is that the underlying structure of the challenge before us determines the path of least resistance and that failure to understand this structure (in our case the regime type described above) makes us take options that are often more costly and *arguably* less rewarding than those of least resistance.

Many will argue that, the path of least resistance is a weapon of the weak and delays the change process. In some respects they are right, but on closer inspection, most of the things we have achieved in life is because we have consciously or unconsciously opted for the path of least resistance. Critics will argue that conversely, all that we haven't achieved is because we have chosen the path of least resistance and have been less daring. This debate can be inconclusive, but in the present configuration in Uganda, not least the approach the mainstream opposition has taken, my view is that civil society may add value, not by directly joining the running battles with the police but by engaging more consciously with the political question in a different manner. This option should not be read as cowardice, but rather pursuing a path that will enable them manoeuvre and work towards weakening or undermining the salient pillars of an increasingly repressive and intolerant regime. The specific roles are outlined below.

### **a) Economic Emancipation: A Response to patronage and poverty!**

The argument here is that while in theory it is in vogue to talk about mobilizing citizens to hold leaders accountable and exert their rights, in practice, we all know that hungry, vulnerable and poor people have more near term survival priorities to deal with. This category is very vulnerable to being recruited into a patronage network and their immediate survival needs must be taken care of before they are able to meaningfully and sustainably engage in public spaces and attempt to redress repressive power structures. In such a situation civil society organisations ought to do the following:

- Invest in poverty and vulnerability analysis and design interventions that ameliorate the immediate needs of communities. This requires responding to immediate needs to reduce vulnerability and dependency and instil a sense of self worth in people.
- In rural areas of Uganda peasant agriculture is the main source of livelihood and supporting the people access necessary inputs to increase productivity and marketing of their produce is an important way of economically relieving them from destitution. One particularly important way of supporting communities is *by encouraging collectives and the idea of cooperatives, dismantled by the state in 80's and 90's aided by neoliberal policy agenda.* It is important that civil society organisations spearhead the revival of the cooperative movement, especially producer cooperatives as a step towards collective bargaining, solidarity and insulation from agents of neo-liberalism and the individualistic culture that underpins its survival.

- We also can organise the urban elite into cooperative societies that will fundamentally change how we look at ourselves and placing in society. *We, like many Ugandans are vulnerable to shocks should we lose our jobs, we worry about our children and their education and thus fear to take risks. We must find alternative sources of livelihoods other than borrowing from extortionist banks - cooperative societies can help us as much.* Thus beyond peasant and agricultural communities, civil society organisations should also encourage the middle class to join cooperative societies where they can save, collectively invest and pool resources that can be borrowed from the pool at less exploitative interest rates than commercial banks.

In short, securing economic independence of citizens across the board is an important step in their quest for emancipation from patronage, their freedom and ability to choose.

### **b) Political Conscientization: A Response to Suppression, Mis-information and Populist Rhetoric**

As mentioned earlier, a key weapon regimes thrive is the ignorance of the population, sometimes fuelled by mis-information and populist rhetoric. As is known, the right type of information, delivered in accessible formats can be empowering.

- *Civil society organisations, working with the media must invest in increasing political literacy* by providing regular and timely information to citizens. The people in Karamoja, one of the most remote areas in Uganda ought to know that valuable resources such as lime continue to be extracted out of their region without adequate resource sharing mechanisms and while poverty remains high in the region, shrewd businessmen that own Tororo Cement make billions every day -- the people of Karamoja could get a deal under a more empowering governance regime where they have greater authority than in the reconstructed decentralization system currently in operation. If 10 million Ugandans knew of the fact that a high profile Minister used his influence to get a Ministry out of rented property at Ushs 19 million to occupy his own at a rate of Ushs 90 million per month, they could use this information to demand better treatment. In all regions of Uganda, citizens continue to be betrayed by irresponsible leaders and self interested elite who continue to make the most from a factionalized state at their expense.
- *Promoting neighbourhood assemblies and public discussions everywhere.* It is important to note that providing information alone is not an enough trigger for citizen action. As a matter of fact, the media is awash with information and in addition to the fact outreach is not as high, too much information about corruption everyday could in fact lead to greater disillusionment and isolation by the citizenry. It is critical that civil society organisations provide space for debate and discussion about common strategies to take. Facilitating regular citizen assemblies oriented towards action will help foment collective imagination preparing them for action. It is important that such citizen spaces are protected from hijack as it has been done by government when popular citizen platforms for debate such as *bimeeza* were banned and replaced by government controlled prototypes called *barazas* controlled by state factionaries. Such spaces are used more for propaganda than anything else.
- *As part of the conscientization agenda, civil society must invest in deliberately building*

*alternative transformative leadership* that citizens can respect and juxtapose against the transactional leaders that are the most dominant in Uganda at the moment. The key difference between the two is on the type of relationship they create with citizens. Transformative leaders look at opportunities amongst ordinary citizens, mobilize them to transform their lives while transactional leaders look at citizens as a target for patronage.

- *Finally under conscientization, civil society must lead the debate about the form and substance of a governance establishment* that gives real power and control in the hands of citizens for as argued in section 3, for as long as the infrastructure of the state is not transformed from the highly centralized and exploitative nature that it is today, change of leadership alone will not guarantee fundamental change. Breaking this debate into simple and digestible ways should be a role that civil society organisations lead on.

## Option and Strategy II:

### **Citizen Mobilization and Public Engagement: Defiance against suppression and a strategy to counter individual isolation**

The second option is more public engagement oriented than the first. In typical development discourse, option one is about creating awareness and *creating a civil society*. It is about creating the necessary ground for citizen mobilization to exert pressure for reform in public spaces through demonstrations, public protests and petitioning. We have learnt from history and from other countries that massive citizen mobilization for action is a major weapon that if well planned can have remarkable impact. We have seen these work, albeit with some costs in countries like Egypt and Tunisia against unemployment, state repression and corruption, in Nigeria against the removal of fuel subsidies, in Malawi against soaring food prices and even in smaller upcountry towns against bad roads and other common interest issues. The key lessons in organising public protests include: a good understanding and articulation of the purpose of the protest or demonstration, with clear demands and messages, reasonable strategizing for it, including planning for possible counter action like violent suppression and victimization. Civil society organisations can in this option, play the following roles:

- ***Direct participation in the demonstrations and protests.*** This requires personnel working in civil society organisations to relate with the issues as citizens, rather than as workers of NGOs or any other civil society organisations.
- ***Formulating demands and coining messages*** that resonate with the purpose of the protest, including offering concrete solutions where possible and depending on the issue at hand. This requires evidence gathering, research and analysis and translating possible options into simple but positive action oriented messages that citizens can relate with.
- ***Preparing for counter actions*** by repressive state institutions such as the police or the military. Pan civil society organisation solidarity as demonstrated in Egypt and Nigeria where the Bar Association provided free legal support for those victimized, the medical association and humanitarian agencies offering medical aid for those caught up in violence, research and academic institutions providing regular analysis to counter propaganda that may be provided by the state.
- ***Documentation and timely communication*** is critical to build momentum and also prepare ground for any post protest legal action against victims of violence.

- **Building alternative leadership, including in transition** - finally, if protests are as mammoth and on broader regime change issues as we saw in Egypt and to an extent in Libya, it is critical that civil society work with other players on leadership transition steps to prevent leadership vacuums that could emerge in the aftermath of citizen struggles for a key lesson from those countries is that citizen struggles can be hijacked by political opportunists. Advance planning can prevent perpetual cycles of costly protests.

## Are we able to play that role? What we need to overcome!

All the above appear and sound rosy, but a major question remains about whether in the present construct; civil society organisations can lead this change agenda. Stating it more positively, what can civil society organisations do to be able to play the roles outlined above? There are a number of internal and external considerations civil society must work on to be able to play their role effectively:

### Internally:

- Civil Society Organisations must dare be different and present themselves as legitimate avenues through which citizen energy can be channelled through for change. Very critical in this sense is how civil society organisations themselves demonstrate their ability to handle the very social ills that undermine the state; lack of transparency and accountability in the way they conduct business, corruption and discrimination along social constructions such as gender, tribe, region and religion, among others.
- Secondly, civil society organisations must be internally clear on what change they desire to see in society and what it takes to achieve it. Very often, we are weak in analysis and present shallow options for change. Connected to this is the important point about our belief systems and convictions. Civil Society Organisations have been accused of being careerists, lacking conviction and just workers.
- Finally civil society organisation should work to improve internal cooperation and solidarity rather than harmful competition amongst themselves for funding and publicity. Unless civil society organisations unite around values and common interest, collective efforts, very much needed in the face of dwindling financing and more sophisticated and suppressive state responses, they stand no chance of standing the heat and withering the storm. Value based relations are therefore key.

### Externally:

- Invest in understanding the specific character of the society they work in and the citizenry they hope to mobilize for while we can all be inspired by what happens in other countries and learn lessons, there are no typical blue prints. Important contextual realities count, including the nature of the state, demographic factors, settlement patterns the most effective communication mediums in different societies.
- Civil society organisations must invest in building relationships with other actors, including institutions of the state who when engaged with regularly and are educated on why certain actions are necessary for their own betterment will progressively side with citizens rather

than **'orders from above'**. They should see something in it for them and then the country. This requires coining messages that build support rather than exclude or breed dissent. Respected figures, artists and other influential personalities, including elder statesmen and women must be mobilized to use their influence to support broader citizen causes.

## 6. Conclusion

Without the express permission of the organizers of this important seminar, I have turned the question to suit my capacity and then answered it in the way I understand it. I was asked to talk about the role of civil society in a changing political context in Uganda. I assumed that they meant civil society organisations as defined in section two. I then examined the nature of the political landscape in Uganda and defined the Uganda we desire from the perspective of actors working in various civil society organisations and the obstacles to the attainment of that vision and within this context shared thoughts on the role civil society organisations can play. I am cautious though on the present state of civil society and make a case for the reconfiguration of civil society organisations if they are to play the role of building a vibrant civil society.

After performing all the aforementioned gymnastic and swaying the topic to suit my capacity, my main conclusion is that you and I have a duty to create the conditions necessary for a civil society to emerge as opposed to just the proliferation of civil society organisations. It is this civil society which will exercise oversight on government, pull down autocratic regimes and contribute to the building of a strong state - the embodiment of all actors (including civil society organisations) and their individual and collective actions in a particular territorial scope, often referred to as a country. Finally, it is this civil society that will provide a strong social base for strong civil society organisations.

## About ActionAid Uganda

ActionAid Uganda is a national organisation registered under the laws of Uganda. It is an Affiliate member of ActionAid International, a Global Federation working in over 40 countries with poor, excluded and vulnerable people, their organisations and other players to overcome poverty and injustice.

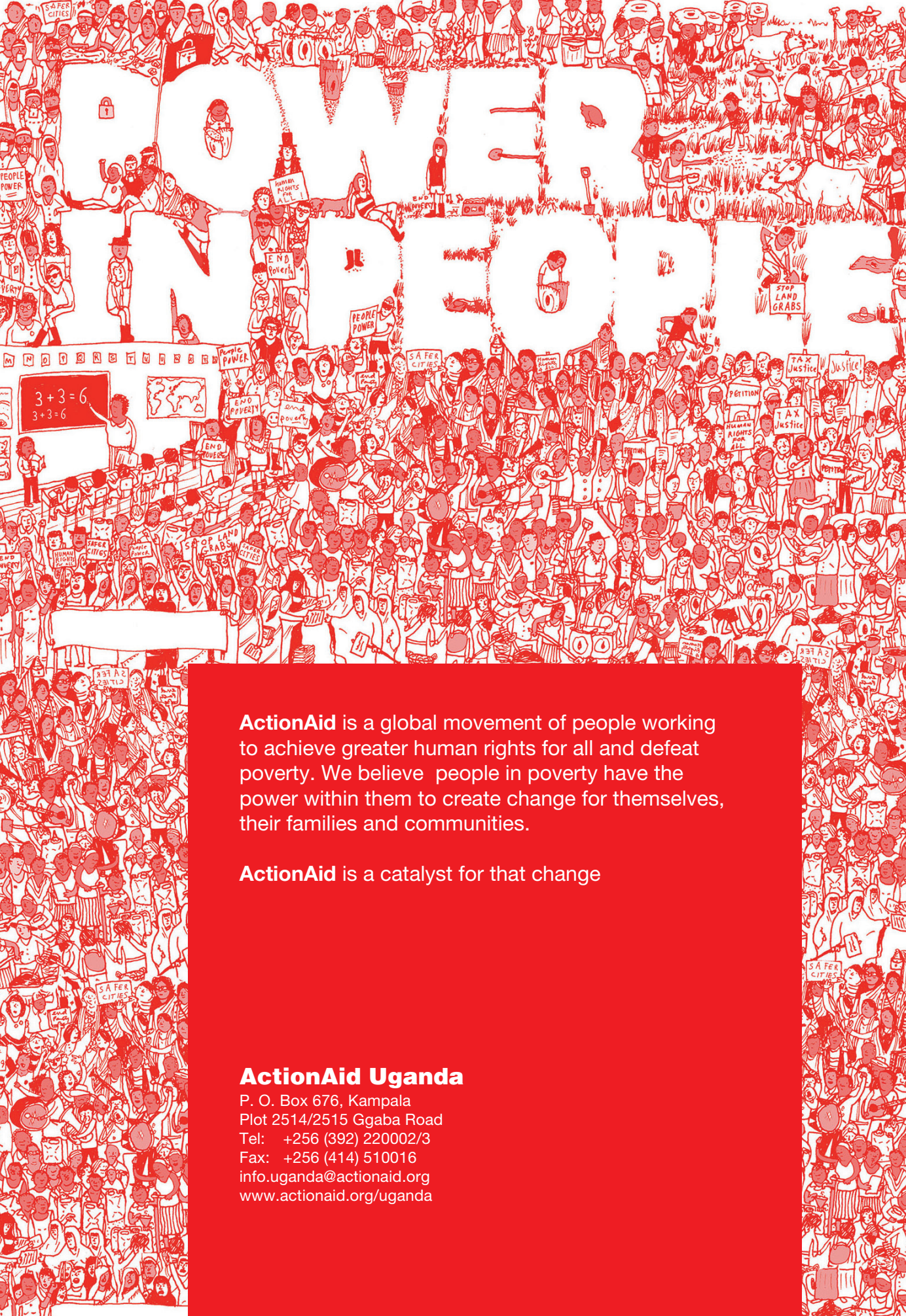
ActionAid believes that the indignity of poverty is an injustice and a violation of rights arising from unequal power relations right from the family, to global institutions. Further, we believe that an end to poverty and injustice is possible through purposeful individual and collective actions driven by the agency of people, including the poor and often excluded.

The organisation's interventions in its Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) is guided by a twin-logic and intent of seeking to transform the condition in which people live and their position in the decision making process and power structure.

### **Our Values:**

**Mutual Respect; Equity and Justice; Honesty and Transparency  
Solidarity with the Poor; Courage of Conviction; Independence; Humility**

More on ActionAid - [www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org)



ActionAid is a global movement of people working to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities.

ActionAid is a catalyst for that change

### **ActionAid Uganda**

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