

SUB COUNTY DIALOGUE MEETINGS IN BUNDIBUGYO DISTRICT



A participant making a presentation during one of the sub county dialogue meetings in the district

AN ANGRY COMMUNITY TRAPPED IN INTRACTABLE CONFLICTS AND AT THE BRINK OF ETHNO-POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Rwenzori Forum for Peace and Justice (RFPJ) organized four sub county level dialogue meetings in Bundibugyo District. The dialogue meetings were part of the emergency plan KRC and RFPJ developed following July 5th and 6th attacks in Bundibugyo and Kasese districts. Sub county dialogue meetings were meant to;

- 1) Provide a platform for politically, socially and culturally diverse individuals to discuss the prevailing conflict situation in their communities and district, as one way of starting a process of narrowing the social and cultural gap created by the most recent and past conflicts.
- 2) Facilitate individuals and communities' exploration of means and ways of furthering the culture of peaceful management of conflicts and reconciliation.
- 3) Identify and prioritize short-term and long-term peace building and conflict management issues to inform district and regional reconciliation, peace building and conflict management endeavors.

ORGANIZATION AND SCHEDULE OF DIALOGUE MEETINGS

Four dialogue meetings were conducted in the district on 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th August 2014 in the sub counties of Harugali, Bubukwanga, Ntotoro and Kirumya respectively. The security agencies, RFPJ partners and district level stakeholders guided RFPJ in selecting four sub counties most affected by the July 2014 conflicts. Harugali and Kirumya are located in the Bakonzo-dominated Bughendera County while Bubukwanga and Ntotoro are in Bamba-dominated Bwamba County. The dialogue meetings brought together sub country level elders, security agencies, opinion leaders, cultural leaders, political leaders, women and youth. During dialogue meetings, participants shared experiences, gave narrations and participated in group discussions.

ISSUES FOR URGENT ATTENTION

Bundimulondi mass grave: A peace building dilemma

Within communities are different narratives surrounding Bundimulondi village and bodies exhumed from the mass grave there. The narratives seem to take tribal lines with no middle ground arguments. These narratives, whether real, perceived or concocted for whatever reasons are glaringly threatening inter-cultural harmony. The dialogue meeting conducted in Kirumya Sub County generated a heated debate from both Bakonzo and Bamba/Babwisi participants. Some Bakonzo participants claimed that Bundimulondi had more mass graves which community members could have concealed. Some participants spoke with candid conviction that indeed mass graves were concealed.

The local council one leaders' information on the situation surrounding mass graves; including the permission from the commander of Kanyamwirima barracks to bury the dead is not believed, largely by some Bakonzo community members. Some participants claim the bodies were secretly buried and the number of bodies' exhumed was less than the number of bodies that could have been buried. Local council one leaders contend that three times, searches in Bundimulondi village were done. The searches followed claims, largely by some Bakonzo elders of the existence of more mass graves in the villages. No graves were however discovered after the searches.

Another narrative compounds anger largely from the Bakonzo community on the justification for mob killing of attackers who were retreating. The retreating attackers, allegedly killed within the Bamba/Babwisi community happened to be Bakonzo. Participants in Harugali and Kirumya dialogue meetings regarded the mob killing of attackers within the Bamba/Babwisi community an act of aggression by Bamba/Babwisi against Bakonzo since the attackers had not attacked the Bamba/Babwisi but the government. On the other hand, the Bamba/Babwisi believed the mob that killed the attackers did not kill Bakonzo but individuals believed to be rebels and a threat to the entire community. In Kirumya Sub County, participants in the dialogue meeting called upon government to re-investigate the Bundibulondi mass grave saga and broaden investigations to capture as much information as possible.

During the Kirumya sub county dialogue meeting, some Bakonzo elders tasked Bamba/Babwisi to declare the remaining mass graves and the details of persons killed. On the other hand, nobody has come up to claim any of the bodies exhumed from Bundimulondi (now buried in Bundibugyo town). Participants in the dialogue meeting claim that perhaps, claiming bodies could place the claimants in danger and possibly associate them with the attack on government. Even though nobody has claimed any dead body, some participants in the dialogue meeting noted the brewing communal anger among the Bakonzo over the indecent burial of some Bakonzo caught up in the July attacks.

Some Bakonzo participants in the dialogue meeting decried the reluctance of government to thoroughly investigate those who perpetrated the killing of attackers in Bundimulondi. Participants quickly noted the rush by government to institute court martial proceedings against suspected attackers while doing less to bring to justice those who took the law into their own hands by killing retreating attackers.

Peace building insights: Bundimulondi mass grave and the narratives surrounding the grave remains a thorny peace building issue. For whatever reasons, constructing narratives along tribal lines remains a threat to peace. The fact that many community members rely on their leaders for information and guidance, leaders' narratives, whether true or not, will shape the nature and direction of peace and reconciliation that the district desperately aspires to have. At this point in time, the government needs to listen to all affected parties and be open to hearing all information (no matter the type) as one way of moving towards more understanding the situation, clarifying

misconceptions and diluting distortions. Peace building organizations need to cascade peace building activities to grassroots level BUT also have a closer focus on the elite and community leaders who are acting as community information gate keepers and constructing different narratives around the mass grave subject.



An elder in Kirumya Sub County that hosted a mass grave, participating in the dialogue meeting

Functioning of OBR in Bundibugyo district

The functioning of Obusinga Bwa Rwenzururu (OBR) in Bundibugyo District remains a matter of contention. The contestation reflects the broader challenge regarding the interpretation of Article 246 of the Uganda constitution. The said Article does not give legislative, executive and administrative powers to cultural institutions. Further, every citizen has a right to enjoy his/her culture wherever he/she is, and loyalty to any cultural institution is voluntary. Legally speaking therefore, cultural institutions restored after 1993 cannot claim ownership of a district or any territory in Uganda. Cultural institutions are thus virtual and not territorial.

In Bundibugyo however, participants in the dialogue meetings that subscribe to Obudingya Bwa Bwamba (OBB) vehemently argue that Bundibugyo district is a geo-cultural space of OBB meaning that;

- Any other cultural leader must ask for permission from the OBB cultural leader before visiting this geo-cultural space. In the Bubukwanga dialogue meeting, some participants demanded that OBB be informed of the places a visiting cultural leader intends to visit

and possibly be introduced to these places by the host leader. Specifically for the Omusinga, participants in the dialogue meetings of Bubukwanga and Ntotoro believed the Omusinga is born in Bundibugyo and that he is free to visit, but only as a private citizen and not as a cultural leader.

- Participants in both Bubukwanga and Ntotoro sub counties referred to H.E, the President who allegedly informed the Omusinga at the time of his coronation that the centre of gravity for OBR is in Kasese. This reference remains a source of conviction to many adherents of OBB that Bundibugyo was not given to OBR and that OBR should not conduct its cultural business in Bundibugyo district.
- Some Bamba/Babwisi participants defined OBR as an institution whose goals and objectives are not merely cultural but political and partly linked to the desire to create the Bayiira state.
- On the other hand, Participants in Harugali Sub County and other OBR adherents in Kirumya Sub County expressed discontent over the disrespect of OBR cultural institution by both central government and non-adherents of OBR in Bundibugyo district. The main argument raised was the failure of government to let OBR function. The adherents of OBR do not find any reasons why the Omusinga should not visit Bundibugyo district as a cultural leader to meet those who voluntarily want to meet him. Participants in Harugali sub county in particular claimed denial of cultural rights by both local and central government
- In all dialogue meetings, participants called upon government to urgently clarify on the territorial boundaries of cultural institutions, inter-cultural institutions and leaders' relations and creating a platform for cultural leaders to meet and resolve the contemporary impasse within cultural institutions in the region

Inter-cultural respect

Mutual respect was mentioned in all dialogue meetings as an ingredient that is missing in relations between and among diverse cultural groups and peoples. In Ntotoro and Bubukwanga sub counties, participants in the dialogue meetings noted lack of respect by OBR for the Bamba/Babwisi cultural group. Participants also noted attempts by the OBR to impose itself on and subjugate the Bamba/Babwisi. The Bamba/Babwisi expressed fear that the Bakonzo in Bundibugyo have developed an alliance with the Bakonzo in Kasese to capture Bundibugyo as their cultural space. The Bakonzo on the other hand claim the Bamba/Babwisi, who are the majority in the district have no regard and respect for Bakonzo and are threatening to chase them out of the district.



A religious leader stressing a point during the Ntoto sub county dialogue meeting

Peace building insights: The central government needs to urgently make a legal clarity on Article 246 of the 1995 Uganda Constitution and on the 2011 Institution of Traditional or Cultural Leaders Act. Beyond clarifications, the government needs to devise means of enforcing these laws to guarantee every citizen's right to culture, mutual respect, and harmony. The clarity that is urgently needed is the territorial space of cultural institutions and relations between cultural institutions. Using its mandate, the government should create platforms for cultural leaders and selected inner most officials to frequently interact and explore ways of furthering peace and stability in the region.

The government and peace building organizations need to simultaneously undertake both grassroots and hybrid peace building activities as communities progressively struggle to construct positive relations. Hybrid peace building endeavors should entail direct engagement with cultural leaders and their innermost adherents as well as with top regional religious and political leaders.

Discontent with local and central government

The Bakonzo in Harugali and Ntoto sub counties claimed high level marginalization by both central and local governments. Marginalization claimed included;

- The district discriminating Bakonzo and denying them access to jobs and other opportunities
- Central government and H.E the President siding with the Bamba/Babwisi and denying the Bakonzo space and time

- Government generally branding the Bakonzo cultural group as responsible for the July attacks on government

Participants in dialogue meetings expressed disappointment that many local and national leaders were reluctant to address themselves to local conflict situations for fear of “*annoying some voters.*” In Kirumya Sub County, communities castigated their leaders for failure to organize community meetings as platforms for inter and intra community dialogue. In Ntotoro dialogue meeting, locals accused local and national political leaders of instigating and sustaining current ethno-political conflicts engulfing the district and Rwenzori region. In all dialogue meetings, participants noted high levels of unemployment among young people, making them vulnerable to selfish political, economic and cultural schemes hatched by political and cultural leaders. In Bubukwanga, participants in the dialogue meeting decried land scarcity amidst a growing population. In Harugali and Kirumya sub counties, the Bakonzo community leaders recommended that H.E the president grants them audience to enable them express their grievances directly to him.

Peace building insights:

“The enemies of people are the very sons and daughters we educated. They start their conflicts. They gain and we lose.”(An old woman during the meeting of eminent persons in Ntoroko district on August 28th 2014)

Central and local governments need to be conscious of and carefully handle cultural diversity in a manner that guarantees equal opportunity. Diversity in Bundibugyo district and in the Rwenzori region is an inevitable phenomenon. The earlier all actors embraced diversity the better for all people. Local leaders should desist from invoking tribal sentiments for political leverage and stop committing the “*crime of silence*” amidst cultural turbulence. Leaders, especially, Members of Parliament, Sub County and district leaders, religious and cultural leaders need to act in unison in condemning acts of lawlessness and tribal divisions. RFPJ is convinced that the current ethno-political conflicts in Bundibugyo and in the region are more planned and perpetuated by the elite than by local grassroots communities. Convinced and lured into conflict schemes, grassroots communities end up becoming victims of violence and intercultural hatred.

In the dialogue meeting of Kirumya, participants noted a considerable effort to include Bakonzo in the running and management of Bundibugyo district. Members noted that key positions occupied by Bakonzo, including;

- The district speaker
- Two out of five district council standing committees are headed by Bakonzo including; the social services and finance committees
- The district land board chairperson

- The District service commission has two members who are Bakonzo by tribe.
- Six sub county chiefs out of fifteen chiefs and town clerks are Bakonzo
- A bigger percentage of Bakonzo within the medical department of the district (estimated by participants in the Kirumya dialogue meetings to be above 60% of all staff in the department)

These positions may not on their own, approve or disapprove marginalization of Bakonzo in the district. Further, marginalization of the Bakonzo may be real or perceived. Thus, the district leadership needs to continuously provide information to citizens on the state of service delivery and current efforts to guarantee equity and justice for all peoples in the district. This constant information flow will deflate creations and exaggerations of marginalization (if any) and/or bolster efforts towards equity and justice for all.

Both central and local governments need to strategically address the economic question of grassroots citizens. Poor service delivery evident in Bundibugyo district in form of; inaccessible mountain areas due to poor road network, high levels of youth unemployment mentioned during dialogue meetings among others, create a fertile ground for conflicts to surge. If citizens lose hope and trust in their government or perceive it to be less dependable, the risk of these citizens desperately finding an equilibrium and allying with other actors, including those that may be subversive, becomes more appealing.



A photo taken a few Kms from the international Uganda-DRC Boarder. Conflicts are prevailing in such a beautiful locality with a newly constructed and yet under-utilized road, and in a region with a promising tourism industry

Night meetings

Participants in the Ntotoro dialogue meeting expressed concern that exclusive Bakonzo night meetings continue to take place unabated. Though participants could not substantiate the purpose of these meetings, they expressed fear that such meetings could be platforms meant to plan illegal activities.

Peace building insights: The government needs to investigate night meeting claims and whether they are a threat to peace. However, both government and communities should be careful and avoid blanket attribution of crime to a cultural group. Those suspected of committing crimes should individually face the law.

Media and hate speech

Some participants in the Harugali sub county dialogue meeting noted the indecent use of language to instigate hatred. The Bakonzo claim that UBC radio in particular is biased against them and is being used by Bamba/Babwisi to insult and dehumanize them.

Peace building insights: UBC is a state radio. Perceived or real usage of the state-owned radio as a platform to dehumanize another cultural group risks exasperating inter-cultural tensions and hatred. Further, the Bakonzo may construe the radio usage as a joint plan by government and Bamba/Babwisi to marginalize them. RFPJ and other peace building actors should craft short-term and long-term peace building strategies that seek to target media houses in Bundibugyo district and in the region. These strategies should include orienting media workers on conflict sensitive reporting and integrating peace building activism in their work.

Bughendera district

In Harugali Sub County, participants expressed dissatisfaction with central government delay to approve the formation of Bughendera district. To many participants, the creation of this district will negate the current marginalization of Bakonzo in Bundibugyo district but also help improve service delivery.

Peace building insights: The central government needs to listen to the demands of Bughendera community and pronounce itself on the request for a district status. However, communities in Bughendera should not see the mere creation of the district as a remedy for social, political and economic challenges they face today. Remedies will be in the extent to which both central and local governments will invest in improving standards of living of local communities, extending services to people, and squarely addressing the governance question, corruption and the thorny matter of cultural institutions.