

NGO VISIT TO NORTHERN UGANDA: 7TH – 8TH JUNE, 2007

I am sure you have all read the various articles in the media where various officials have threatened to deregister NGOs in Northern Uganda for all sorts of sins of commission and sins of omission. Consequently, the Steering Committee of Uganda Civil Society Capacity Building Programme saw it prudent to send some of its members to the North to meet the various leadership for consultations and hopefully for action.

I was privileged to lead that team which included officials from NGO Forum, UWONET, and KRC. The idea was that on the first day, we meet all the coordinators of the District NGO Networks/Fora from Pader, Kitgum, Gulu, Apac, Lira, and Dokolo. We then would discuss what the issues are and come up with a communiqué to present to the political leadership the next day. This we did. Unfortunately, only one Chairperson came – Chairman Mao. Pader was represented by an LC V official while Lira and Apac were represented by their respective CAOs. Also in attendance was the CAO of Gulu.

While awaiting the official report, please find some notes on the trip for your information:

ALLEGED SINS OF NGOS

1. Using the suffering of people in the North to get rich
2. Getting money by false pretence
3. Living luxurious lives at the expense of the poor
4. Cost of operation more than is spent on the poor
5. Rwakitura – Ministers said NGOs involved in partisan re: elections
6. NGOs refusal to reveal amount and sources of their funds
7. Do not pay their workers' salaries nor contribute to statutory bodies like NSSF
8. NGOs listened to by donors more than Local Government
9. People have more faith in NGOs than Government
10. NGOs help rebels
11. Refusal to contribute to BIG DAYS

COMMENTS/RESPONSES TO THE ACCUSATIONS

Acknowledged that there were NGOs that were a disgrace, hence the QUAM

Generalisation and blanket accusations tarnish the name of the sector

Why only Northern NGOs?

The threat to close NGOs was not a sign of good partnership with local Government, etc

The Local Government (officials) should also, in the spirit of partnership help NGOs to address the challenges they face.

The end of the war must find every one united against peoples' enemies. Measures should be put in place to prevent similar future conflicts. To get this unity of purpose requires regular dialogue among stake holders.

NGOs stood by Government in all these turbulent years of conflict

CHAIRMAN MAO'S RESPONSE – STRAIGHT TALK

1. Chairman Mao began by appreciating the importance of such a dialogue, which to him was in fact overdue.
2. While recognising the role of NGOs, he all the same stressed that there were many cheating the poor Northern people – and was beginning to investigate them. He gave several examples of such exploitation of the poor.
3. He also acknowledged that Local Government itself was weak, and its officials sometimes provided contradictory reports on NGOs. They too needed to be open, so that, should they need money from NGOs, they should do it officially.
4. He promised to write 3 articles in the media on the status of NGOs in Northern Uganda

His recommendations, which led to an exciting debate, included the following:

The need for a democratically arrived at MoU as a basis for meaningful LG/NGO partnerships

He advocated for regular dialogues between Local Government and NGOs so that whatever differences, are sorted out. Such dialogues should be frank, devoid of any intimidation or threat of arbitrary arrests. In this regard, he challenged the NGOs to distinguish between LEGITIMATE INVESTIGATION, AND PERSECUTION.

NGOs should sometimes donate to Local Governments especially at the sub county - this would ease tension and foster good working relationship

He advocated for NGO cohesiveness, and the implementation of QUAM as an exercise in self regulation. This would also improve on quality of their work.

He pointed out that NGOs had skills that Local Government did not have. These should be made available to Local Government, including skills in writing funding proposals, issues relating to land, etc.

He mentioned that NGOs should practice what they preach. This applies, for example, to sharing of information (including work plan and budgets) and being transparent. Having strong boards would enhance their status and legitimacy while NGOs took in some of these pronouncements fairly gracefully, there were some that later generated hot debate. These included the following;

1. The purpose of MoU – agreed that if it must be there, let it be done most democratically with NGOs involved.
2. Monitoring of NGOs should include NGOs, especially district NGO Networks/Fora and openly agree.
3. His suggestion that there should be affirmative action in employment did not go well. He was reminded that Employment Act allowed Ugandans to work anywhere in Uganda. There was no agreement on this.
4. His suggestion that NGOs be ranked, given prizes and recognition, did not sell well either amongst the NGOs.
5. The suggestion by representative of Pader LC V Chairperson that it was likely that Government was receiving less money because most of it goes to NGOs could not be proved by either party.

6. The accusations that some NGOs get a lot of money live in expensive hotels and lie by the swimming pool the whole day remained a very contentious and cantankerous issue. Some people even asked how one knew they were NGOs and others wondered whether they were local NGOs. What was the colour of skin?

Finally, Chairman Mao suggested that a meeting be organized between NGOs and Northern Uganda Local Government Association.

FINAL REMARKS

It is obvious that Local Government officials still feel envious of NGOs for what they are, what they have and what they do.

This attack of NGOs does not seem to be accidental. It could be related to the fact that so much money is going to the North and NGOs could be receiving quite a good amount of it. The attack by the politicians themselves as it appeared in papers recently could also be a part for the struggle of political power and resources in the area. It is common knowledge that of late, many leaders of NGOs have entered politics and won elections on the basis of what they do for the communities. With Northern war ending and many people getting into post conflict construction, the fear by MPs may be understandable.

What is going on therefore, presents a challenge on how NGOs can reposition themselves despite all this to work with politicians in the region and beyond. For them to be able to do this requires them to strengthen the district NGO networks and fora, to clean up their own houses and to embrace QUAM as a tool that shows that NGOs are very serious about accountability and transparency issues.

When the report comes out, it will be discussed widely and action taken where appropriate.

Yours sincerely,

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