

Peace Building and Inclusion for All in the Rwenzori Region



European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)
Country Based Support Scheme (CBSS)- Uganda



Youth with disabilities promote peace, defend rights in Rwenzori Region.

Inclusive approach, dialogue and focus on development urged to overcome ethnic and political conflicts.

Twenty-one-year-old Peninah Twongyirwe is about to finish senior school, and seems set to do well. Nothing so unusual in that. Except that Peninah, who comes from Kasese District's cattle-keeping Basongora ethnic minority, is visually impaired and had previously dropped out of school at a level of S-4.

She is now back on track thanks to a European Union conflict prevention project that links peace, rights and inclusion of young people with disabilities.

The project found her while reaching out to minority groups, in an effort to break down inter-community barriers, alongside the political rivalries and land conflicts that often divide groups, clans and even families. Now Peninah is herself serving as a volunteer 'human rights defender' and peace ambassador in her own village and beyond.

Conflict analysis

"We are not leaving anybody behind—looking at different ethnic groups, youth, and people with disabilities—bringing everybody on board and talking together to champion peace," says Yasin Tumwine, who heads the National Youth Development Organisation (NAYODE), which leads project implementation.

"In the Rwenzori region we have major conflicts," he explains. "Firstly, every time we have an election there is a conflict. People disagree, and they end up fighting.

"Another problem is the cultural institutions. We have the Toro Kingdom, the Omusinga wa Rwenzururu, and Omusinga wa Bamba, and they are competing. Three more groups, the Basongora, Banyavindi and Bagisu, are demanding recognition of their own cultural institutions, because they have seen the resources that the others get." Shortage of land and jobs sharpens conflict within and between communities.

NAYODE is trying to ease tensions through community dialogues, 'edutainment' by dance, drama and music groups, and peace clubs established in schools.

Inclusion

The Kasese District Union of Persons with Disabilities (KADUPEDI), a second implementing partner in the 18-month-old project, has moved well beyond its majority, Bakonjo base. It has appointed a representative of minority ethnic groups to its Executive Committee,

and recruited volunteer rights defenders from the Basongora, Bachingwe and Banyavindi communities.

A grant from a private donor has allowed several young people with disabilities, including Peninah, to continue their education.

As a rights defender, she has identified a deaf girl and a physically disabled girl in her community who, she says, "were always left at home, and locked in." After speaking many times to their parents, and asking the support of the LC I, she is seeing gradual change in treatment of the children. "At times we now see them brought to church and they now let them play with others," Peninah reports. Another rights defender, Rachel Kisogho, is 27 and has cerebral palsy. She makes house-to-house visits looking for children with disabilities who are out of school. She says she has so far persuaded two families to enrol their children.

Rights defenders have also intervened in cases of sexual violence against girls with disabilities, and helped to reunite families where youngsters with disabilities had run away from home.

Whilst KADUPEDI emphasises disability rights, it joins with NAYODE in community dialogues and other activities, where participation of people with disability is a practical example of inclusion.

Mediation

As well as sensitisation and dialogue meetings, NAYODE intervenes to mediate in disputes revealed on radio phone-in programmes or discovered by volunteer 'peace mentors.'

Many such cases are individual. They have included couples from different backgrounds who want to marry, where religious leaders were mobilised to obtain the agreement of reluctant families. Other cases involve land disputes. "Land in Kasese has been a major cause where people have died," says Sarah Muhindo, a NAYODE Field Officer. "People get *pangas* and fight each other, irrespective of whether you are from the same tribe or even a relative: a brother can fight a brother because of land. We are trying, and some people have signed some agreements about land issues."

The project also tries to relieve the bitterness left behind by political violence. NAYODE staff are in regular contact with a group of five widows whose husbands died in violent clashes after the 2016 elections. "We tell them not to focus on the dead but struggle to make sure that your kids go to school, eat, and then do some small thing to survive," notes Sarah Muhindo. "There is nothing big we can give someone to take away their anger, but the information you give that person tells her 'I need to leave this thing.'"

Palace clash

NAYODE has also stepped in to calm situations where fresh violence threatens or occurs.

Recently, peace monitors say, they encountered armed youths gathering in a trading centre, apparently intent on attacking a police station. NAYODE leader, Yasin Tumwine, was called to the scene and persuaded the young men to disperse, with the promise that NAYODE would help them form a legitimate group that can look for funds to kick start income generation.

After the UPDF stormed the Rwenzururu palace in 2016, NAYODE worked to dissuade the Police from indiscriminately arresting all known 'royal guards.' NAYODE staff accompanied youths who were ordered to report to the Police, ensuring that they were released after statements were taken.

Work with disaffected youths is helped by a former Bakonjo militant, who the project has managed to recruit as a peace mentor. He says he "knows who the troublemakers are in every community," and now encourages them to focus on development and livelihoods rather than grievances.

Disability dimension

NAYODE and NUDIPI are in the front line of the Peacebuilding and Inclusion in the Rwenzori Region project, but it is funded by an EU grant to ADD International and NUDIPI (National Union of Disabled Persons in Uganda).

Joseph Walugembe, ADD's Uganda Country Director, explains the involvement of the disability movement. "People with disabilities have experienced years of discrimination and social exclusion but have managed to get some recognition," he says. "So, we thought they might have something to teach others about advocacy that avoids violent confrontation."

Recognising the achievements so far, he hopes that this lesson will be fully integrated over the next 18 months.

This project is implemented with the financial Assistance of the European Union. The content of this document are the sole responsibility of the partners and can under no circumstance be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.



'Edutainment' using drama to sensitize on peace building.



Kibito Youth with disabilities-Kibito Youth Network.



Deaf Drama Group performing in Kasese.

