

Civil Society and Media: Partnership Possibilities

By Newton Sibanda and Benedict Tembo

Cultural and religious intolerance have been responsible for conflicts and violence that have broken out in a number of countries. The article looks at how civil society can use the media to promote cultural diversity and religious tolerance.

The concept of civil society is controversial. Some scholars have written about the "conceptual confusion" surrounding the term in terms of theoretical clarity, analytical application and role in the production of ideology, a profoundly pluralist term that it is. The conceptualisation of civil society varies between Western and African countries, but for the sake of simplicity, "civil society" will be taken as referring to non-government organisations (NGO) and professional associations.

Civil society organisations come in many shapes and forms, and carry differing goals and activities. Some concern themselves directly or indirectly with policy, research, poverty, disaster rehabilitation, alleviation, election monitoring, and so on. But it is those organisations that concern themselves with human rights, civic education, and research and policy that are well poised to promote tolerance for cultural diversity.

Tolerance for the differences in people's ways of life or cultural systems is what is known as "cultural diversity." "Cultural relativism" or

"multiculturalism" refers to the contemporary view that people belonging to different social, especially ethnic and racial, groups should respect cultural diversity.

The premise of cultural relativism is that no culture is superior to another. The argument for cultural relativism is that since one's worldview or perceptions are a product of culture, there is no objective reason for asserting that one such worldview is superior to the other, or that one worldview can be used as a yardstick to measure another. For this reason, the significance of a given belief or behaviour must first be understood in its own cultural context. This relativism forms the base for what has come to be known as "multiculturalism," especially in countries with large populations of diverse ethnic backgrounds such as the United States of America and Britain. Multiculturalism implies a conscious attempt to promote tolerance for cultural diversity.

According to Francis Chigunta, a University of Zambia (UNZA) lecturer in Development Studies, in spite

of initiatives to promote cultural diversity in many countries, incidents of cultural intolerance are common. "In some of these, states have systematically sought to ethnically cleanse people that are seen as 'inferior' or members of a different ethnic or religious group. This has been the cause of many conflicts around the world, especially in countries with deep ethnic and/or religious differences and divisions."

As a consequence of cultural or religious intolerance, violence has erupted in a number of countries, including Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Uganda, Burma, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, Spain, Iraq, and Palestine/Israel. The scale of violence is huge. In Sri Lanka, for example, a guerrilla war, accompanied by indiscriminate violence, has been raging for over a decade. In the ongoing violence in Palestine/Israel, thousands of innocent civilians have lost their lives. In Rwanda, nearly a million Tutsis (minority) were massacred in a genocidal campaign by the majority Hutus. In many of these countries, entire societies are imploding, together with the wanton destruction of property.

The Task Ahead

Given the tragic consequences of cultural intolerance, says Chigunta, there is an urgent need for NGOs, especially civic associations, to do the following:



www.internationaljustice.org/Projects/Rwanda/rwanda.html

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- Identification of commonalities in cultures;
- Improve understanding of other cultures (This can be achieved through research, youth exchange programmes, seminars and other forms of exchange);
- Organise campaigns against ethnic chauvinism, racial intolerance, and xenophobia;
- Organise campaigns for the rights of minorities and other marginalised ethnic, religious groups; and,
- Organise campaigns for the accommodation or co-existence of people from other groups.

Civil society, notes Edem Djokotoe, a trainer in journalism at the Zambia Institute of Mass Communication (ZAMCOM Trust), an in-service school for mid-career journalists, does not even need “to use” the media but to “work with” the media to promote cultural diversity and reli-

gious tolerance.

“Firstly, I don’t think any one organisation that wants to ‘use’ the media can succeed in doing so because the media is comprised of men and women who want to be ‘worked with,’ not used in promoting cultural diversity and religious tolerance,” said Djokotoe, who is a respected media trainer, critic and columnist in his country. “We use toothbrushes, condoms and things like that, but we don’t use the media. That has always been my argument because organisations that want to work successfully with the media have to understand how the media (PLURAL) work and how they perceive that elusive phenomenon called ‘news,’ and above all, how they report it.”

For the media to be able to work with civil society to promote cultural diversity, he added, it will have to ac-

knowledge that cultural diversity is an issue of national concern for the simple reason that it concerns people. And where culture is concerned, people take this very personally and can will to war to safeguard their right to be culturally diverse (in the case of minority cultures) and their right to worship. The media can contribute to the overall effort by stimulating debate and providing the space to argue out these diversities, he notes. “I know that the government-owned *Times of Zambia* was uncomfortable with Mercutio’s (a columnist) atheistic views and his evolutionist ideas when Zambia was declared a Christian nation. The Born-Again (Charismatic Christians) lobby in the paper met and decided to eject him. My friend Kondwani Chirambo of the *Times* told me ahead of time and I told Bright Mwape, who was then editor at the *Post*, if they would be willing to take him on. That’s how Mercutio, who initially started out as a letter writer in the *Times*, became a columnist writing about religion from his own point of view,” recalls Djokotoe.

He explains his choice of an example. “The *Times* is not a Christian paper, [it’s] supposed to be a national paper that acknowledges that Zambia is religiously diverse—you have Hindus, Sikhs, Ba’hais, Hare Krishnas, Muslims, Christians, animists, etc.—all of whom are Zambian. But the political declaration of the country as a Christian nation and the involvement of media in championing that cause creates a dynamic that makes religious tolerance difficult. At any given time,

it will not be politically correct to highlight the fact that people believe in whatever god or tree they choose to believe in."

In another instance, *The Zambia Daily Mail*, another state-owned newspaper, was used by the State to demonise opposition leader Anderson Mazoka by constantly calling him a satanist. The diatribe with Mazoka's admission of membership with the Freemasons, a satanic cult, noted Djokotoe.

Asset, Rather than Threat

Media must acknowledge that every society is characterised by differences manifested in culture, language, customs, and behavioural patterns. Despite these differences, however, citizens are united by nationality and show ultimate allegiance to the same flag. Instead of treating these differences as obstacle, they should be seen as assets.

"However different people are, they share the common denominator of humanity, which is why even when a white man marries a black woman and a Ghanaian man like me marries a Zambian woman, they can live under the same roof and raise their children to uphold basic values of truth, honesty, hard work, respect for elders, honour for their parents, allegiance to their nation and so on," says Djokotoe. All in all, Djokotoe sees for media a strategic role in making people appreciate diversity, rather than incite them toward homogenisation.

Ken Makungu, a Mass Communications lecturer at UNZA, believes civil society can tap media to promote cultural diversity and religious tolerance by providing this with the necessary information. For example, he says, media could be persuaded to feature the significance of certain practices such as the celebrated Kuomboka ceremony of Zambia's Lozi people or their initiation ceremonies to foster better understanding of the Lozi. "Media can do the same for religious tolerance . . . it could show the positive aspects of different religions in a manner that makes followers of other beliefs appreciate these," said Makungu.

The Catholic Centre for Justice Development and Peace has likewise adopted an advocacy for tolerance via media. An example is Fr. Joe Komakoma's "Ruminations" column in the *Post*, said Chishimba Milonga, the centre's spokesperson. "The column is aimed at promoting Zambia's democratic cultural identity. Some time back, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace sponsored a programme that was aimed at soliciting public opinion on the death penalty, with the ultimate intention of exposing Zambians to the evil consequences of this practice." Zambians of diverse backgrounds and religious affiliation phoned in their opinions, he recalls.

The centre's development projects all over the country are in themselves proof of the organisation's commitment to religious tolerance and cultural diversity. Members at the

grassroots level benefit from Catholic-sourced funds, which finance activities designed to promote self-sustenance. "This is another example of Catholics working with everyone, whether Muslim, heathen or atheist," Milonga said.

The only criterion in the selection of beneficiaries is their membership in the particular community. Milonga cites the Oasis Forum, in which the Catholic Church works with other church organisations and civil society to oppose the "ill-fated" bid of former president Frederick Chiluba for a third term.

"The media, for its part, can help promote cultural diversity and religious tolerance by accepting the fact that all human beings were created by one God, and that this one God created human beings differently for his own purpose. So if human beings are created by one God, in his own image, then all are one despite the artificial differences in the colour of skin, religion or language," Milonga said.

If media approaches issues from such a perspective, media practitioners will treat opinions coming from different people with the same respect, he adds. "Media has to adopt a non-discriminatory stance in approaching issues. Then it promotes equality." ↻

Newton Sibanda, a senior reporter with the Zambia Daily Mail, also wrote the article, "Civil Society and Media: Partnership Possibilities," together with Benedict Tembo, a Zambia Daily Mail Assistant Production Editor.