

## **Silencing the past in Ugandan schools.**

### **The role of education in reconciliation processes.**

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#### **Abstract**

This article assesses how reconciliation in post-conflict Uganda is currently approached in the country's education sector. It highlights that education is in the main equated with economic development thereby side-lining the legacies of past conflicts and social injustices. In the view of Uganda's highly politicised reconciliation process, this may not come as a surprise. Interviewees pointed to a general fear, that addressing past conflicts in official curricula could revive tensions. However, fieldwork further revealed that a sheer absence of reconciliation through the education sector could be dangerous in two ways. First, silencing past conflicts in schools may have a depoliticising effect on a population as a whole. It deprives a society of constructing a social, cultural and national identity that is based on multiple understandings of a conflict. Second, the absence of a social truth based on different narratives of the conflict can in the long-term trigger new forms of structural violence if not conflict or violent unrest.

#### **Keywords**

Reconciliation, education, silencing, social truth, Uganda

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\* Our study reflects equal input and scholarly contribution of each of the two-authors irrespective of the alphabetical order in which names appear.

## ***Introduction***

Competing narratives and carefully calculated silences of the past are an integral part of transitions from conflict to peace. Such narratives and silences form the building blocks on which those, wielding power seek to construct cohesive communities.<sup>1</sup> This often entails producing a single, official narrative of the past at the expense of alternative versions. While these dynamics operate at different spheres and institutions of conflict-affected societies, they are particularly pertinent in educational settings.<sup>2</sup> Not only can educational settings affect everyday inter-group relations, but schools or any other educational institution also generate societal norms, ideas and worldviews. This grants education an important role in conflict-affected societies and in particular, in attempts to bring about changes in attitudes towards the ‘other’ and nurture processes of social cohesion.<sup>3</sup> By drawing on the case study of Uganda, this article investigates reconciliation in conflict-affected societies and the role education plays in such processes. An often-overlooked dimension of reconciliation in divided societies, we argue that the education-sector is an important mechanism through which communities can come to terms with the past, create and acknowledge multiple understandings and narratives of conflict/s and ultimately, social cohesion. Moreover, educational settings can support reconciliation processes through concrete measures such as reforms aimed at addressing past injustices and providing psychosocial support for learners, but also by creating space where different narratives of the past are studied, debated and understood. In this particular study we demonstrate, however, that the potential of education to overcome silences in conflict-affected Uganda is currently overshadowed by the striking tendency to embrace education primarily as a conflict prevention tool and means to improve individuals’ employment prospects. Against this backdrop, we address two broad questions. First, how and to what extent can educational settings undermine reconciliation and self-sustaining peace in the long run? Second, what are the wider implications of silencing the past in schools for a country transitioning from conflict to peace?

To answer these questions, the structure of this article is as follows: The first section briefly outlines our research methods followed by a discussion of theoretical debates on the role of education in post-conflict settings. The argument here is that education has generally been understood by peacebuilding scholars and practitioners to have a three-pronged effect on conflict-affected states: as an instrument for economic development, a conflict prevention tool and finally, as reconciliation mechanism. We then move onto the case study of Uganda and

provide a short background on the country's past conflicts and persisting social injustices. After a short overview of the country's reconciliation process, we show how in the Ugandan case education is largely seen as an instrument for income generation on the one hand and technical conflict prevention mechanism, on the other. To date, the potential for education to further reconciliation and broader societal transformation has been left unrealised. We conclude by discussing the wider implications of the selective use of education for peacebuilding in Uganda.

### **Methods**

Methodologically we build on data that was collected in the scope of extensive fieldwork conducted in Uganda between in 2015 (January – April) and early 2017 (February – May), in collaboration with local researchers from Gulu University and Makerere University. Research took place in a variety of sites in the country comprising rural and urban environments and diverse geographical regions, namely Kampala, Gulu, Adjumani, Moroto and Kotido. Qualitative methods of data collection involved in total 89 interviews (see Annex 1 for a detailed list of interviews) with a variety of actors from the government, civil society organisations (CSOs), community based organisations (CBOs), school officials, education planners, teaching professionals and local academics.

Interviews per district and region		
District	Region	Number of interviews
Kampala	Central	45
Gulu	North	14
Adjumani	North	9
Moroto	North-East	16
Kotido	North-East	5
<b>Total</b>		<b>89</b>

Out of the 89 interviews held, in total 44 interviews were conducted in regions affected by conflict. Interview questions were semi-structured, which allowed to seek clarification and elaboration on the answers given, probe beyond the response and enter into a dialogue with the interviewee. Notably, this paper is one, out of several research outputs, emerging from two larger research projects<sup>4</sup>, therefore, interview questions revolved around a wide range of themes which were all related to formal and non-formal education programmes, structures, policies and governance in the peacebuilding and development process of Uganda. In some

instances (in particular in the northern regions) interviews predominantly revolved around the theme education and reconciliation.

In addition, 13 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with student teachers and various youth in four regions of the country inform our findings. FGDs were facilitated by local researchers who were well reflected on the background of the participants, how they may perceive them, and able to translate into the local language in cases members were not fluent in English. Note-takers summarised the dynamics, core messages and overall findings of the FGDs. Semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. Given the political sensitivity of this research we will not reveal the identity of interviewees and only refer to their professional background or institutional affiliation when permission was granted. We synthesise general findings from all interviews and FGDs and selectively cite respondents.

### ***The role of education in post-conflict settings***

Education has been long treated as an area that is separate from post-conflict peacebuilding.<sup>5</sup> This trend has been accompanied by priority setting among peacebuilding actors towards security-related issues, particularly in the early to medium post conflict phase.<sup>6</sup> What is more, education in fragile environments remains severely underfunded.<sup>7</sup> Concretely, state fragility is on the rise, with 50 armed active conflicts in 2015 - the highest number of conflict since 1999.<sup>8</sup> At the same time funding for education in emergencies has almost halved since 2010, with less than 2 % of all humanitarian aid going to education in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

The 1992 *Agenda for Peace* defined for the first-time peacebuilding as the attempt to ‘identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse to conflict’.<sup>10</sup> To this end, it singles out ‘educational exchanges’ and ‘curriculum reform’ as some of the central measures through which to facilitate peacebuilding.<sup>11</sup> In response, scholars and practitioners have begun to examine the transformative peacebuilding potential of education over the past three decades. In doing so, experts point to both, the potential of education in post-conflict societies to reinforce existing divisions or conflicts (e.g. education as a political instrument of shrewd elites), as well as the transformative capacity of education in conflict-affected environments.<sup>12</sup> With regards to the latter, it is argued that the transformative potential of education in peacebuilding contexts stems from its ability to address both the symptoms and root causes of conflict. Yet, the argument is not that education is the sole magic bullet for achieving sustainable and positive peace. Instead, education is seen as an

important (yet not exclusive or stand-alone) ingredient in fostering social justice and transformation.<sup>13</sup> A sustainable approach to peacebuilding, it is argued, places more emphasis on social development and addresses underlying root causes of conflict such as political, economic and social inequalities and injustices. In this process, education is expected to contribute to greater security as well as political, economic, social and cultural transformations within conflict-affected societies.<sup>14</sup> From this perspective, we understand peacebuilding as a process encompassing a variety of institutional and socioeconomic transformations, from the local to the national level, aimed at ensuring social justice, equal opportunity and human security. In this light, peacebuilding is a long-term activity, which, in an ideal case, leads to sustainable and long-lasting development.

With that said, previous research found that existing policies and practice on the role of education in peacebuilding processes usually points towards three main dynamics.<sup>15</sup> These include: education as an instrument for economic development, education as a conflict prevention tool and finally, education as a vehicle for reconciliation. In explaining these three dynamics in more detail, we establish a broad theoretical framework for this article. This shall help us to develop and theoretically substantiate our central argument that in the Uganda case education is primarily embraced as a means of economic development and conflict prevention and not as a tool to address past and present grievances or social injustices.

#### *Education as an instrument for economic development*

One of the most prioritised tasks for peacebuilding actors in post-conflict societies is to stimulate economic growth and create opportunities for individuals to earn an income. This harks back to liberal ideas pertaining to the pacific effects of economic development.<sup>16</sup> A regular income or wealth creation opportunities, it is argued, gives a conflict-affected population and former combatants in particular a stake in the continued functioning of the economy, thereby dis-incentivising return to conflict.<sup>17</sup> In this attempt, the concept of 'human capital', pertaining to the knowledge and skills possessed by individuals, has emerged as a key ingredient towards peacebuilding and newly instituted liberal market economics. As a result, education has become closely intertwined with economic development and modernisation in the scope of larger peacebuilding interventions in conflict-affected environments. In economics, the acquisition of human capital is seen as an investment decision where individuals forego income for a period of time to undertake education or training, in order to

increase their future income.<sup>18</sup> Returns to investment in education or training can be private in the sense that they reaped by the individual or community benefiting the society as a whole. This is based on the assumption, that the private returns from investing in education entail increased opportunities for earning a wage. Investment in human capital is expected to increase the likelihood of getting a job but it is also positively associated with higher wages compared to those with no education. The social returns, on the other hand, include potential dissemination of knowledge with less-educated colleagues, increase in productivity as well as innovation and increased participation in the political life of the country.<sup>19</sup> This approach towards education is largely adapted by aid agencies, donors and governments in (post-) conflict settings. An extensive mapping of peacebuilding, development and education-sector plans in four country case studies (Myanmar, Pakistan, South Africa and Uganda) revealed that donors and governments primarily equate education with economic development and human capital.<sup>20</sup> Thus, education remains primarily seen as a tool that provides an opportunity for individuals to be active participants in the economy which, in turn, is expected to encourage the process of democratisation and sustainable peace.

In the case of Uganda, however, several research studies highlight that the level of education or vocational training attained did not increase employment during the country's peacebuilding process.<sup>21</sup> Even though secondary education and/or vocational training did affect the quality of work, there has been no impact on the quantity of work. Unemployment may even increase with the level of education attained as there are only few job opportunities based on the skills acquired.<sup>22</sup> The Chronic Poverty Research Centre further alludes to the fact that youth in conflict-affected northern Uganda who stopped school at the end of their primary education did not necessarily gain better employment opportunities than those who did not go to school at all, or who had only one or two years of schooling. Paid employment depended on individuals having a minimum of four years of secondary education.<sup>23</sup> Although Uganda's GNI (Gross National Income) increased significantly by about 125 % between 1985 and 2012, poverty and inequality persist as a result of uneven regional development, historical, socio-cultural, political and economic factors.<sup>24</sup> Thus, while few would deny the importance of education as an instrument for economic development in post-conflict societies, liberal accounts of peacebuilding have tended to overlook the fact that education cannot be detached from the political-economy context of a country as a whole.<sup>25</sup> For instance, issues of redistribution (including funding allocation and infrastructure development) in the education

sector can severely affect equity, social justice and consequently social cohesion of conflict-affected societies.<sup>26</sup>

### *Education as a mechanism of conflict prevention*

Preventing future conflicts is one of the central tasks of UN peacebuilding programs and intimately linked to education and learning. If schools as central social institutions reflect the prevailing values, ideas and power structures in a society<sup>27</sup>, then addressing the educational sector is a major concern for conflict prevention. In this regard, education can contribute to the prevention of future conflicts by increasing contact between groups and teaching skills necessary for non-violent conflict resolution.

With respect to the former, integrated schools provide opportunities for contact between groups. The contact hypothesis of inter-group relations suggests that increased contact between groups, under certain conditions, reduce inter-communal prejudice. More specifically, contact can take place either under ‘unfavourable conditions’ where contact has the opposite effect of reinforcing prejudices or alternatively under ‘favourable conditions’ where prejudices are more likely to decrease.<sup>28</sup> The latter entail, *inter alia*, regular contact in non-competitive environment where the group sizes are symmetric and groups are working toward a common aim.<sup>29</sup> Contact under the right conditions may thus reduce prevailing stereotypes of the ‘other’ and generate mutual understanding between groups which can ultimately result in an increase in inter-communal trust. Empirical evidence on the impact of contact in educational settings on group attitudes lends support to the contact hypothesis. Studies have found a positive correlation between certain types of educational systems – namely, integrated schools - and positive attitudes towards other groups.<sup>30</sup>

As far as teaching the necessary skills for non-violent conflict resolution is concerned, Degeys<sup>31</sup> argues that incorporating ‘humanism, tolerance, diversity, democracy and critical thinking’ into curriculums can facilitate the ‘unlearning’ of biases that foster conflict. Moreover, learning the practical skills of communication, expressing feelings and managing negative sentiments and resolving disagreements through compromise<sup>32</sup> can contribute to wider societal learning on conflict resolution. This aspect of education (namely as a tool towards conflict resolution or prevention) has become increasingly referred to as peace education in the literature. It is worth clarifying that in this article we understand peace

education as a mechanism to acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to live in harmony with oneself, others and the given environment. Although we regard peace education as an important mechanism towards conflict prevention, we also argue for a pressing need to move away from a sheer preventative ‘peace education’ approach, and instead use education also as a mechanism to come to terms with the root causes and dynamics of conflicts.<sup>33</sup>

### *Education as a tool for reconciliation*

An issue closely linked to conflict prevention through contact and attitude change at schools is reconciliation. Peacebuilding research suggests<sup>34</sup>, lack of mechanisms for dealing with the trauma of the conflict deprives the society from ‘collective closure’.<sup>35</sup> Reconciliation ultimately aims at ‘changing psychological orientation toward the other’<sup>36</sup>, which is arguably difficult to achieve without collective truth-telling and forgiveness. Whilst truth and reconciliation commissions and transitional justice processes have attracted much scholarly attention, education represents an often-overlooked dimension of reconciliation. As Smith<sup>37</sup> suggests, the conflict and its legacies can be addressed in educational contexts by learning – and thus improving understanding – about the bereavement, transitional and restorative justice, among other process conflict-affected states undergo.

Beyond the value of schools as sites of learning, schools and their curriculums occupy an important role in the social construction of national identities.<sup>38</sup> They transmit prevalent values and sense of belonging and common past through history teaching in particular.<sup>39</sup> At times the construction of collective identity is undertaken through a hegemonic narrative of national unity and national identity that is created by forgetting alternative communal loyalties and silencing the past.<sup>40</sup> A case in point is Rwanda where the official unifying narrative negates the existence of multiple communal identities.<sup>41</sup> This implies that schools play an important part in not only creating contact between communities and teaching non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms, but also in encouraging ‘multi-narrative’<sup>42</sup> accounts of the past. As McCully<sup>43</sup> suggests, ‘single-narrative’ accounts of the past and the conflict are not conducive towards creating future generations in divided societies ‘comfortable with complexity and debate’. Facing the past from the standpoint of critical historical enquiry, McCully argues, may facilitate the acceptance and, ultimately peaceful co-existence, of different communal

identities. Such critical enquiry may entail methods such as problematizing the common sensical nature of communal histories and rhetoric premised on binary opposites<sup>44</sup> and opening them for evidence-based assessment and analysis. Rather than silencing history and alternative perceptions of conflict, schools can provide a space where what Zembylas and Bekerman<sup>45</sup> call ‘dangerous memories’ can be articulated and discussed.

Alongside the identity-building function of educational settings, scholars further allude to the extent to which education policies, individual and institutional agency, and development programs among others, also promote reconciliation efforts.<sup>46</sup> Concretely, by linking Nancy Fraser’s<sup>47</sup> work on social justice with the peacebuilding and reconciliation work of Johan Galtung<sup>48</sup> and John Paul Lederach<sup>49</sup>, Novelli et.al. (2017) introduced a theoretical framework that explored what sustainable peacebuilding interventions might look like in conflict-affected environments. In making use of Fraser’s three-dimensional social justice approach, it is *inter alia* argued that the key transformations necessary to produce sustainable and “positive” peace involve *redistribution*, *recognition*, and *representation* through but also within educational settings. Strikingly, their framework expands Fraser’s approach in arguing that all three dimensions have an impact on processes of *reconciliation* in a conflict-affected society. This includes, among others, to take into account and address historic and present tensions, grievances and injustices in several areas affecting the education sector, ranging from governance to the role of teachers or curriculum development, - to name but a few.

Against this backdrop, we understand the role of education in reconciliation as a process that addresses historical and contemporary injustices that are linked to past and current conflicts. First of all, this may occur in the form of teachings about different narratives and experiences of the past, and their relevance to the present and the future, as suggested earlier. Secondly, processes of integration or segregation in education systems (e.g. common institutions) can have an effect on reconciliation through establishing trust in schools and education systems, and trust between identity-based groups. Third, and building on this point, the politics of education, meaning how the education-sector is governed, funded and the political and economic structures surrounding it, influences whether and how reconciliation through education takes place. While we acknowledge all three areas as equally important, in the course of our analysis we will predominantly focus on the first dimension (teaching and curricula) in the context of Uganda. Taking into account a wide range of context-specific factors alongside

socio-historical dynamics and processes, we commence our critical discussion with a short overview of Uganda's country background followed by a brief analysis of the country's reconciliation process.

### ***Uganda country background***

Uganda's history of state formation, as well as the conflict in the northern region, has created divisions within the country. Since 1986, Uganda has experienced at least seven civil wars, located mostly in the northern regions. More than 20 militant groups have thus far attempted to displace President Museveni's government both within and beyond the Ugandan borders. External diplomatic incidents and/or armed incursions occurred with Rwanda, (South) Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Somalia.<sup>50</sup> Probably the most prominently debated conflict in the media, but also in scholarship and policy practice, is the civil war in the north against Joseph Kony's LRA (Lord Resistance Army) since the 1990s. Between 1987-2007 Uganda resembled a "war with peace" model, suggesting that the government in power embraced the antagonisms of conflict (in the north) alongside peaceful coexistence and development (in the south), in one country at the same time.<sup>51</sup> Whereas southern Uganda emerged as a showpiece for Western donors to highlight remarkable successes in combating HIV/AIDS rates or fostering economic growth and development, conversely, northern Uganda's developmental progress has been challenged by two decades of war.<sup>52</sup> In 2017, Uganda still ranks 24<sup>th</sup> amongst the world's most fragile states. Regional instability within the country persists, driven by factors such as: economic disparities and unequal distribution of wealth, resource competition, land-disputes, cattle riding, poor governance and democratic deficits, human rights abuses and erosion of civil liberties, lack of truth, reconciliation and transitional justice, the politicisation of ethnic identity, corruption and tensions between cultural institutions and the government.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Uganda's reconciliation process***

The one challenge that we have never addressed is to actually reconcile a divided nation. Currently there are so many levels of division, especially the North and the South. The whole process is politicised. But because of the nature of historic conflicts that we have had, it would have been really good if we had reconciliation, a national reconciliation process.<sup>54</sup>

Ugandans have been subjected to extensive human rights abuses under successive regimes, yet no systematic or effective efforts have been made to prosecute the perpetrators.<sup>55</sup> Overall, the country has a poor track record of reconciliation and truth seeking at the national level, and whether or not Uganda should have (had) a national truth and reconciliation commission remains a debated point. First attempts towards a nationwide reconciliation process were made in 1974 under Idi Amin, who established the Commission of Inquiry into the Disappearances of People in Uganda. However political interference and intimidation prevented the implementation of the recommendations contained in the commission's report.<sup>56</sup> During the first stages of his presidency, incumbent president Museveni was praised by the international community as indicative of a new generation of African leaders. With the aim to improve Uganda's reputation he arrested and convicted several soldiers and civilians for crimes committed under the two previous regimes. Among other institutions, he set up a Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights (CIVHR) in 1986. The commission's mandate was to investigate "all aspects of human rights abuses" committed under the previous governments from the time of independence on October 9, 1962.<sup>57</sup> One of the many recommendations made by the CIVHR also concerned the incorporation of human rights education into the curricula of schools and universities as well as into the training programmes of the army and security forces.<sup>58</sup> Yet, only very few of the Commission's recommendations have ever been implemented.<sup>59</sup> In 1994 a report was released but the majority of Ugandans know little or nothing about the report, which is not widely available – neither within nor outside the country.<sup>60</sup> In many ways, the CIVHR has been critiqued as being a political strategy by President Museveni to legitimise the new government (*ibid*). Ironically, soon after taking power, President Museveni's party, the NRA was accused of human rights abuses as well. The ethnicization of politics continued under his rule and his track record in building peace (nationally and regionally) over the past 25 years has been mixed at best.<sup>61</sup>

Against the backdrop of the war against the LRA, the GoU enacted an Amnesty Act in 2000. Together with later established Amnesty Commission, both instruments embraced several important functions such as: providing amnesty to rebels who renounce rebellion and give up their arms, promoting dialogue, sensitisation or reintegration programmes for former ex-combatants.<sup>62</sup> These efforts ran in parallel with local and traditional approaches towards reconciliation, including *mato oput* ceremonies<sup>63</sup> or individual cleansing rituals routinely taking place when former LRA members returned their communities. However, in 2012 the

Declaration of Amnesty was removed by the Minister of Internal Affairs, in response to pressure from donor countries that claimed it is incompatible with norms of international justice. This strategic and political decision has been critiqued on the grounds that reparation and reconciliation should be more important than retributive justice. Besides, the removal of amnesty created a new fear of prosecution among current and former LRA combatants, most of which have been victims of forceful recruitment by the LRA.<sup>64</sup>

Following a cessation of hostilities in 2006 the GoU and the LRA entered peace negotiations which led to the signing of a number of agreements. Among others, an agreement on Accountability and Reconciliation was signed, recognising the need to promote reconciliation, prevent impunity for serious crimes, and deliver justice to victims of gross human rights violations. To this end, it envisages an overarching justice framework comprised of both formal and informal justice mechanisms, including truth seeking, criminal prosecutions, traditional justice mechanisms, and reparations programs.<sup>65</sup> In order to meet some of its obligations under the agreement, the GoU established a Transitional Justice Working group (TJWG) under the JLOS (Justice Law and Order Sector) in 2008. In September 2014, the government's Transitional Justice Working Group released the latest draft of its national transitional justice policy, covering acts committed from 1986 to the present throughout the country. The policy acknowledges that reparations, among other measures, are needed to reintegrate victims back into society and to deal with issues common to post-conflict situations, such as land disputes and children born in captivity.

Since its inauguration, President Museveni has come repeatedly under harsh criticism for his restrictions on political pluralism. Not only has he retained power for more than three decades but also recently enabled an extension to his term of office following a 2005 referendum accompanied with a contested constitutional change that allowed him to alter the limits on presidential terms. He was re-elected as a president on 18 February 2016, amid deep controversy as his main opponent was placed under house arrest and international observers dismissed the election result as a sham. According to several interviews<sup>66</sup> held with established Ugandan academics in the country in early 2015, President Museveni has repeatedly questioned in public the relevance of peace and conflict studies in Uganda. Moreover, the growing promotion and support of science to the disadvantage of humanities (affecting also peace studies) was a recurring theme during interviews at Ugandan universities.

### ***Education and reconciliation in post-conflict Uganda***

As in many other conflict-affected countries, education in Uganda was initially seen as an essential ingredient for economic and social development. An extensive mapping of the country's main peacebuilding and development frameworks since 2009 revealed that education is either depicted as a service delivery to be provided to the public and/or as a means to empower the marginalised and poor, but not explicitly as a tool towards social transformation (e.g. through representation in decision making processes, recognition of segregation or reconciliation by addressing the root causes of conflicts).<sup>67</sup>

At the ministerial level, only recently have policies been drafted to address the integration of peacebuilding into the education sector to some extent. To give a few examples, the Ministerial Statement (2012-13)<sup>68</sup> acknowledges the need for clearer dissemination of policies related to disadvantaged and conflict affected areas. At the same time the MoESTS (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports) created a careers guidance and counselling department with a mandate that includes the provision of counselling services in schools as well as the training of teachers to handle issues of conflict. In addition, Uganda's school curriculum incorporates themes on conflict and peace. More recently, the UNICEF Peacebuilding and Education Advocacy (PBEA) programme also played a role in integrating aspects of peacebuilding into future education sector policies. Efforts included programmes targeting early childhood education and peacebuilding, or addressing violence against children in schools and teacher training for peacebuilding at primary level.

These positive achievements notwithstanding, the role of education in peacebuilding continues to be challenged by slow and weak policy implementation in areas such as: teacher training and capacities, infrastructure, socio-psychological support for both teachers and students, and education and livelihood generation for youth. In addition, ineffective decentralisation processes and the emergence of low versus high quality schools (or privatisation) as well as corruption, challenge equity and social cohesion within and through education.<sup>69</sup> Most strikingly, however, a review of school curricula showed that learning content is not explicitly used as a means to come to terms with a conflict affected past or previous and present grievances and injustices. Instead, the curriculum's current approach (concomitant with interviewee's responses<sup>70</sup>, places great emphasis on inter-personal relationships, attitudes of

peace at the individual level, or within school and community environments. Root causes or drivers of conflict in various regions of Uganda are currently not addressed.

Concretely, examining the curriculum for peacebuilding aspects, strong emphasis is placed on nation-building with some recognition of the worth of respect for diversity. There are references to national unity, patriotism and cultural heritage ‘with due consideration to internal relations and beneficial interdependence’, and the inculcation of a sense of service, duty and leadership for participation in civic, social and national affairs through group institutions.<sup>71</sup> Arguably, in the light of Uganda’s history of state formation and past conflicts, it is a challenge to promote national unity while respecting cultural diversity. During interviews<sup>72</sup>, several respondents had mixed opinions about this interplay. Whereas some considered national unity as an important peacebuilding component, others felt that cultural diversity as such should not be dismissed and that both are equally important. More generally, interviewees from the NCDC and the MoESTS argued that the peacebuilding element in the Ugandan curriculum is encompassed within the curriculum’s overarching aim, namely to produce good citizens.<sup>73</sup> The topic “Peace and Security” is a crosscutting theme in P (primary) 1 and P2, and P3 includes ‘keeping peace in our sub-county division’.<sup>74</sup> In upper primary and secondary, the peace dimension is mainly found in the *Social Studies* component and cross cutting themes such as *Life Skills*. As such, peacebuilding is generally regarded as a tool of conflict-prevention, or solving conflicts at individual, group and community level, rather than a means of coming to terms with past conflicts. This may change in the years to come within the new social studies area syllabus in for lower secondary education, but its implementation continues to be postponed and is now expected to be launched in 2020 if funding is available.<sup>75</sup>

Overall, in so far as reconciliation is included in school curricula, it is conflict resolution at the individual rather than group level. This is represented as skills acquisition with students being able to empathise with other people’s issues, resist peer pressure and apply negotiation to handle hostile situations in which they find themselves, in a calm and non-violent way. This is not dissimilar to some western approaches to conflict resolution where the exploration of personal conflict in primary schools is seen as progression toward group conflict. However, several peace educators such Salomon (2010)<sup>76</sup> question whether personal understandings of conflict resolution actually transfer to ethnic group encounters.

It has to be noted at this point, that Uganda has one of the world's highest school drop-out rates in primary education with an estimated 75.2 per cent.<sup>77</sup> It remains therefore questionable how many students will indeed benefit from the new social studies curriculum at P6 (lower secondary) once it is implemented. Besides, Uganda's pressing developmental needs (in particular in the northern and eastern regions), alongside the many deficits in the quality of education across levels and districts clearly overshadowed the important role education could or should play in coming to terms with past and present injustices as part of a nationwide reconciliation process. At the time of writing roughly 90 % of Ugandan schools have no electricity and no official numbers are available of the amount of schools with no basic sanitary facilities.<sup>78</sup>

This approach towards the role of reconciliation in education further extends to the previously mentioned national transitional justice policy, in that its approach is once again leaning towards conflict prevention as opposed to coming to terms with the violent legacies of the past. It stipulates under point xxi. that the MoESTS should:<sup>79</sup>

- a) Identify and propose measures to the TJC to mitigate the adverse effects of the conflict to the education sector
- b) Promote the development of education and training programmes on culture

In addition, point xxii urges to “undertake civic education on religious values that foster peace and reconciliation (e.g. tolerance, respect, equality, peace, and love). Notably, the transitional justice policy is still pending. According to Otim & Kasande<sup>80</sup> ‘considerable resources and political will be required to successfully push it through cabinet and parliament.’

Besides, the country's first PRDP-I (Peace, Recovery and Development Plan for Uganda) envisioned for the first-time education as a peacebuilding tool to nurture processes of reconciliation, however, the ensuing PRDP-II makes no mention of it. This may be a missed peacebuilding opportunity, as victims and members of conflict affected communities in northern Uganda have repeatedly called for a truth-telling process that they believe would illuminate the root causes of the conflict, publicly acknowledge the plight of victims, and provide access to appropriate redress and reconciliation with perpetrators. In addition, some

interviewees from the north queried why the conflict in northern Uganda is not part of the national curriculum in schools. To give an example, one interviewee stated:<sup>81</sup>

We need to gather together different narratives of the conflict and much of it will not have a uniform fashion for everybody, but at least you have a collective understanding, a public record, what we could call “social truth”.  
What we need is social truth to go up to the curriculums.

In addition, several interviewees<sup>82</sup>, in particular from the northern parts of the country, felt that the way in which history is taught in schools is not always objective. Besides, although human rights and peace education is increasingly becoming an integral part of formal and informal education, it is not evident to what extent it explicitly relates to aspects of reconciliation. When we asked teachers how they promote peaceful coexistence in their own teaching responses included:

- We were trained to give at least one life skill advice in every lesson you teach, at times this relates to peacebuilding as well
- We sometimes organise sporting activities to promote companionship
- As a requirement of the curriculum, we organise debates in class
- We encourage or (in some instances) initiate the formation of peace, environmental or sporting clubs, where everyone is welcome to become a member. These children then become a group so peace and unity is achieved.

Hence, accounts on how reconciliation as a part of peacebuilding through education remained vague. No clear connection was made to address past and present conflict drivers within the country. Likewise, during class observations the lack of encouraging students to deploy critical thinking became evident.

Overall, expert interviewees argued that Uganda should embrace three different levels of reconciliation, namely, at national, regional and communal level. The role education can and should play in this attempt, still needs to be further discussed and debated among educationalists, practitioners and policy-shapers advocating for integrating peacebuilding into the education sector more thoroughly.

### ***Conclusion***

As the Ugandan case exemplifies, reconciliation processes can be embedded in an environment where different narratives of the conflict are silenced at the expense of a dominant version of the past. There is a general fear (in particular among Ugandan elites) that, the way in which the root causes of past and/or present grievances and conflicts are subject to public debate could possibly generate new tensions if not revive former divisions. As a consequence of this general fear - if not political control and elite domination - a large majority of the population is currently deprived of a social truth that accepts multiple versions and experiences of the conflict and would ultimately shape, if not alter their cultural and social identity. Moreover, when the past is silenced in schools, reconciling the different narratives of a conflict becomes even more difficult. The absence of multiple interpretations (and critical reflection) not only affects social transformation in the longer term, but also constitutes an indirect form of violence in impeding access to knowledge about the political and socio-historical evolution of the status quo. As a result, stifling of public discussion in the education sector on the various societal interpretations of a conflict inevitably depoliticises the transition process in question. If schools ought to be the birthplace of a flourishing civil society<sup>83</sup>, silencing the past hampers the nature of political activism, agency and voice stemming from the wider civil sphere.

Secondly, the argument that confronting political and socio-historical injustices will potentially revive past conflicts rests upon a notion of mankind as being incapable of resolving conflict in a peaceful manner. In fact, one could counter-argue, that the absence of various interpretations of the past can be even a greater trigger for conflict as opposed to not speaking about the history of a conflict at all. In other words, the absence of a social truth that provides room for different versions of the conflict, may foster sentiments of frustration and anger among conflict-affected population in the longer run.

Thirdly, our case study strengthens earlier calls made by Bush & Saltarelli (2000) to move away from a sheer preventative 'peace education' approach towards a 'peacebuilding education' that objectively addresses the drivers and root causes of a war. The biggest challenge towards this endeavour is the political-economy context in which curricula reform or educational programming are formulated, as well as the difficulty to acquire skilled and 'neutral' teachers or facilitators that are not perceived as a threat by those in power. Besides,

in the view of the many developing needs and bad infrastructure of Ugandan schools, it remains questionable to what extent peacebuilding education can be actually prioritised.

Fourthly, within Uganda's curricula economic inequalities are neither related to aspects of social cohesion nor how they are deeply rooted in the country's history of state formation. Thus, the curricula as it stands today hardly addresses the evolution of horizontal and vertical inequalities in the country and does also not equip students sufficiently with the needed skills to bridge the income gap between the rich and the poor. This is unfortunate, as educational institutions and school curricula could have the potential to contribute to political, cultural and socio-historical change in divided societies. At the same time, extending access to high quality education to the poorest and marginalised groups in conflict-affected societies is critical if education is to facilitate reconciliation.<sup>†</sup> A point, this paper did not address sufficiently, but has been discussed elsewhere.<sup>84</sup>

Lastly, the role education could or should play in the reconciliation process of a country remains an under-researched terrain and has to be deliberated among a wide range of local actors involved in peacebuilding work. Yet, as shown in the Ugandan case, for education to effectively and positively contribute to reconciliation and consequently social transformation processes, political will and commitment are imperative.

To conclude, we have shown how the educational system in Uganda has been largely harnessed for the purposes of improving individuals' employment prospects, economic development and to a certain extent also to prevent future conflicts. While this is undeniably an important role for education to play, we argue that it leaves the potential of education to act as a tool for reconciliation, social cohesion and ultimately social transformation largely unexploited. The sheer absence of addressing socio-historical and present injustices within and through education can have a depoliticising effect on a society at large. It deprives a population and individuals of constructing a social, cultural and national identity that is based on multiple understandings, experiences and narratives of a conflict and war.

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<sup>†</sup> We thank the reviewer for pointing this out.

04.05.2017

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