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Social protection is centuries-old!

Culture and social protection for the very poor in Uganda: evidence and policy implications

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What is Chronic Poverty?

The distinguishing feature of chronic poverty is extended duration in absolute poverty.

Therefore, chronically poor people always, or usually, live below a poverty line, which is normally defined in terms of a money indicator (e.g. consumption, income, etc.), but could also be defined in terms of wider or subjective aspects of deprivation.

This is different from the transitorily poor, who move in and out of poverty, or only occasionally fall below the poverty line.



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Abstract

In spite of continued growth, millions of Ugandans remain in long-term, extreme poverty. They are also likely to continue being by-passed by the opportunities that economic growth offers, mostly to the 'active poor'. Recognising this, Government and other development actors are turning their attention to policy initiatives geared towards 'social protection'. This paper posits that these initiatives might borrow much from elsewhere, in the process neglecting the local cultural context, and failing to build on existing indigenous protection mechanisms that are susceptible to being strengthened.

The paper presents findings from research conducted by the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda, a local NGO, on the interface between culture and 'traditional' social protection mechanisms for the very poor in Uganda. Research has focused on the prevalence and functioning of such mechanisms, the reasons for their survival (or withering), the benefits they provide and to whom, and opportunities for strengthening or revitalising them.

The paper goes on to suggest several policy implications and makes the point, for a start, that social protection initiatives could usefully take this cultural context into account. Secondly, policy could build on (rather than substitute) these traditional solidarity values and mechanisms. Some mechanisms have indeed shown resilience, adaptability and a degree of inclusiveness that can provide opportunities for future growth. If these today appear insufficient to address all the economic and social challenges that the very poor face, the latter can nevertheless (at least at times and for a time), turn to the opportunities such mechanisms offer, or at least invoke the values of solidarity that have (and do still) inform them, for support.

Research results also indicate that these mechanisms display several limitations, including the reciprocal nature of many collective benefits, at times excluding the very poor; another is the risk of 'adverse incorporation' and exploitative relationships. Supporting such mechanisms will therefore have to take these limitations into account, such as by incorporating different types of contributions by the poorest to groups, that are not necessarily monetary.

Should some of the conclusions and policy pointers presented here be considered, policy makers may feel daunted by the task of scaling-up what currently remain localised, if often beneficial, culturally-driven and sustained solidarity mechanisms. Rather than designing a completely externally-inspired social protection initiative, however, the findings indicate that much might be gained by strengthening *existing* mechanisms and building on *existing* values, rather than starting afresh. This would, however, require a re-examination of attitudes among policy makers and implementers towards cultural resources and values. It would also require 'cultural mainstreaming' in government ministries and agencies. This should foster a more sympathetic understanding of the potential that one's cultural heritage affords in all



aspects of life, including the value of solidarity towards the less fortunate in the community and the nation.

Keywords: African values, Ugandan culture, traditional protection mechanisms, poverty, solidarity, social protection

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1 Introduction

1.1 Rights, values and informal social protection mechanisms

While social protection is generally defined as public actions aimed at reducing vulnerability and providing support to those trapped in poverty (whether in terms of social insurance, social assistance or laws and standards to protect citizens), this paper is also informed by a 'political' and 'transformative' view which extends social protection to address *both* causes and symptoms of extreme poverty and thus considers equity, economic, social and cultural rights, rather than confining its scope to targeted income and consumption transfers.

It is also informed by a perception of social protection that goes beyond public actions and a set of policies and programmes – to a citizens' perspective that includes not only formal ('public', as well as 'private'), but also non-formal systems and values of social protection, such as those based on kinship and traditional values of solidarity and reciprocity¹.

1.2 The national context, culture and social protection

In spite of lowering levels of poverty, millions of Ugandans remain in long-term, extreme poverty and are likely to continue being by-passed by the opportunities that economic growth offers, mostly to the 'active' poor². Recognising this, Government and other development actors are increasingly turning their attention to 'social protection'. This has in part been justified by the observation that family and other informal support mechanisms are under increasing strain, although the 2006 Uganda National Household Survey indicates that 21 percent of households look after an orphan, without public assistance. Such a figure exemplifies the strength of social networks to protect the very poorest from shocks and guarantee a minimum standard of living, an observation that also emerged at a recent conference on social protection in Africa³. Thus, elsewhere on the continent,

Some evidence suggests that cash transfers may facilitate growth or strengthening of informal social protection measures. In Zambia, Schubert finds that cash transfers enabled participants to engage in local rotating savings clubs (...) In Ethiopia, the Productive Safety Net Programme has fostered the regeneration of a rotating savings scheme known as 'ikub' (...) used to purchase livestock and agricultural inputs (...) So it seems plausible that cash transfers that increase income in poor households may rejuvenate informal social protection mechanisms, rather than displacing them. (Sabates-Wheeler *et al.*, 2008)

¹ For a discussion, see Devereux and Wheeler (2004), Barrientos and Shepherd (2003), Development Research and Training (2007) and Chronic Poverty Research Centre (2008).

² The chronic poor account for about a quarter of Uganda's population (Chronic Poverty Research Report, DRT, 2005).

³ See, for instance, Seeley *et al.* (2008)



It is these 'informal systems', and the cultural context that informs them, that constitute the focus of this paper, although culture is often negatively perceived in Uganda, as 'backward' and therefore generally to be avoided. This study adopts the perspective that, while this may often be the case, there may also be positive aspects of local culture⁴ that are essential to inform how individuals and communities act and define themselves.

Similarly, social protection policy initiatives might borrow much from elsewhere, without building on indigenous protection mechanisms that could be strengthened. We posit here that, while government will have to play a lead role in most social protection initiatives, it is likely that these will be more effective if they clearly reinforce, whenever possible, existing informal, family- or community-based mechanisms. One objective of this research is to give an indication of the validity of this statement and, if this is the case, to suggest what could be done to re-enforce these mechanisms.

1.3 Research in Buganda, Ankole and Lango

To examine the prevalence of 'traditional' social protection mechanisms, how they operate, the reasons for their survival (or withering), their beneficiaries, how they affect the social capital of the poorest; and opportunities for strengthening or revitalising them, field research was conducted in three rural areas: four villages in the traditional kingdom of Buganda; three villages in a pastoralist environment (Ankole) and three in a region emerging from conflict in the North (Lango). In addition to reviews of the literature, field work included observation, semi-structured and life history interviews, focus group discussions and wealth ranking exercises with altogether approximately 340 respondents, from December 2007 to July 2008.

As an ethnic group, the Baganda represent about a fifth of Uganda's population. All respondents met in this region had experienced political, social or economic shocks, to varying degrees, mostly related to civil strife and the HIV crisis. With norms and traditions revolving around the institution of the king, or *Kabaka*, they entered what was for many a period of mourning after their kingdom was abolished in the 1960s, until the current government of President Museveni regime restored it as a 'cultural institution' in 1993. This restoration, though not without its detractors because of its 'a-political' nature, provided a fresh impetus for the monarchy and, more broadly, for Kiganda culture (the two being inextricably linked) to re-surface.

Ankole, to the West, was also a 'traditional kingdom', similarly outlawed in the immediate post-colonial period. Contrary to Buganda, however, it was not restored in the 1990s, in part because the rather monolithic cultural make-up in Buganda (excluding the significant immigrant communities) is not replicated in Ankole. Today, rural Ankole communities are still

⁴ The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda defines culture 'as a constantly changing set of values, identities, traditions and aspirations that govern the way we relate as individuals, communities and nations. It informs one's sense of pride, belonging and motivation to be productive'.



categorised along two sub-ethnic groups, described by respondents as the *Abaliisa*, primarily cattle keepers (or *Bahima* in the literature), while the *Abahingi* (or *Bairu*) are cultivators, though a significant population of both groups has diversified into other activities. The monarchy was associated with the dominant *Abaliisa* and, with a move to individual land ownership, much of this went to members of the political elite, eventually creating patron-client relationships between the *Abaliisa* land-owning elite and the *Abahingi* agriculturalists.

Lango, in Northern Uganda, long exhibited less centralised governance structure features, dominated by clans, than in the kingdoms. The last two decades of insurgency, as the Government battled the Lord's Resistance Army, was cited as the major factor contributing to extreme poverty. This insurgency has led to loss of life and property, trauma, disability, abduction, and disruption of social and economic activity. Before government decided that people should go to camps, their way of life was dominated by the need to be constantly on the run. Food supply dwindled with abandoned fields. However, the shock with the longest impact was reported to be the loss of cattle to rustlers from neighbouring Karamoja, especially in 1988 and 1989. The economic and cultural effects of this loss is still felt and at least partly explains the deeper and more widespread poverty witnessed in this region of the country. In addition, households are often affected by famine, when rains fail. Finally, although the epidemic has hit all parts of Uganda, HIV/AIDS has especially affected areas where armed conflict has been intense.

1.4 Poverty and vulnerability in the study areas

The nature of extreme poverty - and vulnerability to extreme poverty - in Uganda has been largely documented. The Chronic Poverty Report 2004-05 describes its extent and complexity, including the 'web of inter-related factors' that account for its persistence, including the lack of access to productive assets, the lack of education, and constraints on other forms of human and social capital. Poor people can become chronically poor as a result of shocks, including insecurity and HIV, and more long-term processes, such as land fragmentation. To these must be added gender inequities. In sum, 'with no surplus to save, low levels of human, social or political capital and few productive assets, escape routes for people in chronic poverty are profoundly limited' (CPRC, 2005:33).

In the study areas, respondents identified the very poor (typically constituting at least 10-15 percent of the local population) as those without access to means of production, often without food, and those without social or other means of support. Women and children were generally worse off, with the latter rarely attending school. Alcoholism, defaulting on loan repayments leading to the loss of assets, especially land, and crop failure contributed to this. The very poor included, in Buganda and Ankole, elderly people, often migrants, sick and neglected by relatives; in Ankole, those without cattle, who often look after cattle for a

⁶ See, for instance, Karugire (1971), Ndebesa (1989), Roscoe, (1911 and 1923), Tosh (1978).



minimal salary and whose children do not attend school as they too tend animals for others. Widows evicted from their marital homes by their in-laws were also singled out, as well as orphans staying with elderly grand-parents or as part of child-headed households, unemployed school drop-outs, and poor people with a disability or families with disabled children. In Lango, the very poor also included direct victims of the war, widows whose husbands were killed, children who had been abducted and maimed, street children, including the traumatised; the elderly abandoned in camps and those who turned to begging. It also included those entirely dependent on NGOs, and young girls who resorted to marriage, to transactional sex, had left school and worked as bar attendants or brewers of local gin. Older childless individuals and unmarried men, who are especially prone to food deficits, ridicule and isolation, also featured.

2 Community social protection and welfare mechanisms

2.1 A plethora of mechanisms at play

In all villages visited, both the poor and non-poor cope with shocks, using various mechanisms either of a traditional or of a more recent nature, but informed by long-standing values of solidarity. All these operate in interlocking and overlapping ways. They have neither clear cut boundaries, nor do they always have a rigidly defined membership. Respondents, anthropologists and other sources help us to re-construct a rich and complex picture⁶.

If we take the example of Buganda (Diagram 1), we can identify ‘traditional’ mechanisms which include a number of family-linked systems. The clan (*ekika*) is valued for giving a sense of identity and pride, belonging and friendship, as well as help in times of difficulty, when death of a family member occurs. The extended family at different levels provides an important coping mechanism for a large number of orphans and widows, reflecting the extent to which the strong bond of family togetherness is appreciated. It also provides a means for incorporating foreigners into a nuclear family, but has been affected by the devastating deaths of fathers, uncles and aunts due to AIDS. Some of our respondents were of the view that in-laws were the most dependable.

Beyond the family, community-based systems (the community itself, *munno mukabi* - an informal, community-based, mutual help group that pools resources to respond to emergencies) denote the value of solidarity itself. Some of our respondents named their communities as the most important means of coping, because whenever they are faced with a difficulty, the clan or in-laws arrive when village people have already done the biggest part. Other ‘mechanisms’ included friendship: belonging to a group of friends or some kind of network, however informal, applied to the very poor among our respondents, even though this might not translate into material benefits, but results in ‘belonging’ and ‘recognition’. There were also self-help groups of recent creation: while the practice of group formation



was until the 1950s not part of Kiganda culture, there are now numerous⁷ and often based on *omukwano nfanfe* (true friendship). All groups have members and a leadership structure, and some were, to some extent, triggered by the desire to access external benefits. The poorest were, however, often excluded from such groups because they could not raise the required amount for membership, even by contributing their labour.

In the other study areas, somewhat similar pictures arose. Thus, in Ankole, 'traditional' mechanisms also include a number of family-linked and community-based systems, friendship mechanisms, and self-help groups. All the *Abahingi* and *Bakiga* who were met mentioned 'friends' as an important source of assistance. Contrary to respondents in Buganda, however, many also spoke of government support as providing a major coping mechanism, such as with free primary education, which some called 'bursaries for poor children'. These positive feelings were not extended to the traditional ruler's government: *Abahingi* respondents pointed out that land distribution had excluded them in the past. As a result, they were still locked into servitude, roaming from place to place in search for work or land to hire.

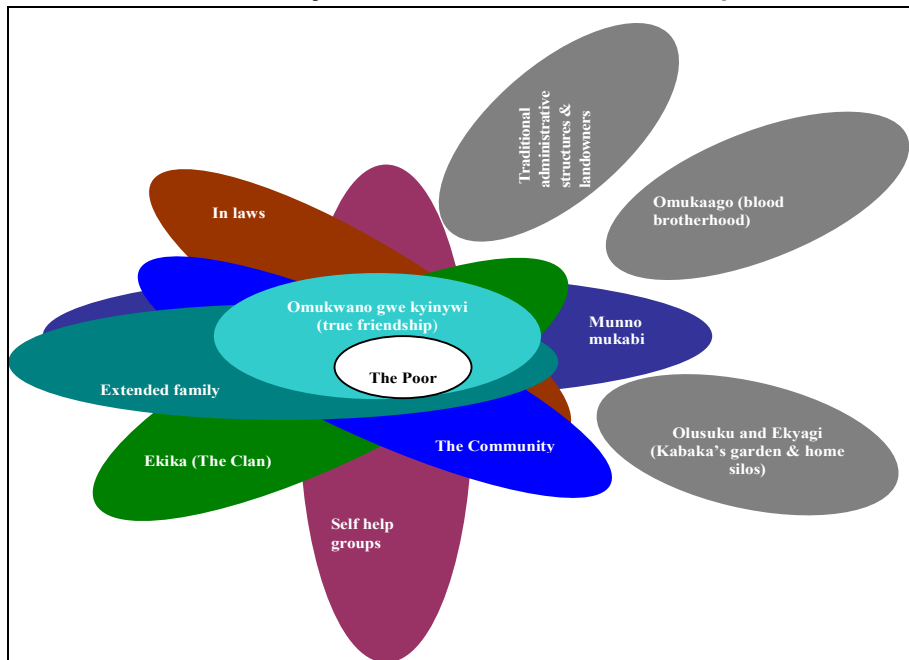
In Lango, traditionally, a number of social and territorial groups also existed, to which individuals belonged, owed their loyalty and were moulded into Lango culture also existed. These included the clan (*atekere*), the lineage (*Jo Dogola*), the family at different levels, age groups and others. Traditional leaders.

(*Rwot* and *Jago*) had their sphere of influence corresponding to a clan or alliance of clans. As elsewhere, the clan and groups of clans had protective economic, social, religious, legal and security functions. Women 'belonged' there and were passed on through inheritance, while cattle were also considered clan property. The clan system was described as 'strong', and there was always someone responsible for the very poor, including people with a disability, the destitute, orphans, and the elderly. Individuals could also seek help within a lineage. Even during the LRA insurgency, respondents said, affected clan leaders in various areas would negotiate for arable land from leaders in the less disturbed zones. They also gave cassava and simsim to displaced people to cultivate and they advocated for clans mates to help. Forming self-help groups has however nowadays become an important means to cope with the crises resulting from the insurgency. Some of these groups exhibit elements of solidarity and hard work, but many respondents felt that the responsibility for taking care of the poor has been left to NGOs, in the process fostering a 'dependency syndrome', especially in camps.

⁷ These typically include youth groups involved in HIV/AIDS awareness, piggery, and caring for the elderly; widows associations; farmers associations, women's groups for various economic activities.



Diagram 1: The interlocking and overlapping nature of solidarity mechanisms in Buganda. The ovals near the poor represent mechanisms that still exist while the detached shapes represent those that have either withered away or are of little relevance to the poor.



2.2 Ancient traditions abandoned in the face of contemporary challenges

Respondents at all research sites found that the level of support from 'traditional' mechanisms had declined because of changing circumstances, including increased poverty, HIV/AIDS and a weakening value system. In some cases, mechanisms have altogether disappeared and remain for the older people to reminisce on. Thus, in Buganda and Ankole, as the kingdoms receded into memory, the tradition of the *omukaago* (blood brother) vanished, as did the *olusuku ggandalyasajja* (a household garden of plantain, sweet potatoes and cassava) and the *ekyagi* or *ekitata* (a granary in Buganda, Ankole) to ensure food supply at difficult times, in part at least because the latter were enforced by the king's chiefs. Beyond this, elderly respondents noted that in the past there was much sharing and cooperation between people of the same village. Responsibility for raising children and orphans for instance belonged not only to a family but to the 'whole village or clan', so a child would not suffer from the loss of parents. In Buganda, respondents especially associated such changes with the gradual weakening of the monarchy, the custodian of values and norms, from the time of its co-option by the colonial authorities.

In Ankole, the landless would get land from those who had more; today everything that was free has turned commercial: '*one cannot get free milk or even free obushera (millet drink)*'. Similarly, the practice of blood brotherhood was said to have broken down because of the spread of a monetary economy: '*the value of friends was replaced with cash...Money compensated for many things...there was no need of omukaago*'. Other forces were at play too: the clan was observed to have weakened, especially in Lango and Ankole where, in the



past, people of the same clan usually resided in the same locality and were united by a strong bond. Overtime, however, with land scarcity and population growth, young people have been moving away in search of work and land. Finally, where traditional administrative structures have been re-instated in the 1990s, these remain largely ceremonial because their mandate is limited to cultural matters and they only exist alongside better resourced government structures.

In Lango, multiple crises have weakened traditional solidarity mechanisms ‘across the board’. It is especially in areas that have been affected by conflict that both traditional and more recent solidarity mechanisms have been severely disrupted. Once they cease to be of value, they vanish, even if temporarily. Thus, with displacement, cooperative labour groups no longer found the necessary environment to function. With large-scale cattle rustling, the *Jo Awi Dyang* – keeping cattle in one kraal, with one person looking after several people’s animals – disappeared with the cattle. Similarly, the extended family no longer plays the role it used to play. Some of the poorest respondents pointed to their children as a source of support when fleeing, but others had to find refuge in camps because they had nowhere else to go. If relatives still take care of orphans, they now often prefer to support them from a distance, without the additional burden of providing housing, food and clothing. Support given to a poor relative is based on pity, mindful of what others might say if they there is no care: *‘These days our people have copied a culture that came from Europeans and prefer or say that ‘I want my own thing’ and not ‘ours’.* Some respondents also thought that support to widows had weakened in the face of the HIV crisis, which discourages widow inheritance, a factor leading to high poverty levels for women headed households, as there is reduced support from men within the clan. This, an elder stated, is a problem throughout Lango: widow poverty will remain a problem unless the clan finds alternative means of supporting vulnerable individuals.

2.3 Adaptation and incorporation: the evolution of community groups

With time, people thus found that traditional mechanisms based on kinship and family relations could no longer support them in the face of ‘modern’ shocks: new ways to cope were devised, but these were often based on ancestral values and practices, and informed by changing contexts, evolving ethnic mix and the availability of external support. The *munno mukabi* groups in Buganda and the communal labour groups in Lango provide two examples.

While *munno mukabi* has changed over time, it has remained true to its original principle: a way of life, an abstract reference to the spirit of sharing especially during times of death, sickness and celebration of marriage. Over the years, some communities perfected the system by choosing *munno mukabi* leaders and registering members, establishing *munno mukabi* groups. The restoration of the monarchy in 1993 and the current drive to strengthen



Buganda's cultural roots and institutions sped the process. With the emergence self-help groups with a bias towards income generation, 'pure' *munno mukabi* groups were however becoming less attractive. Younger people joined the new groups leaving the 'pure' ones mostly to the older generation. Many young people thus stated that *munno mukabi* is just about death or sickness, yet they have other compelling demands, such as HIV/AIDS and large numbers of orphans to care for. Because of this, *munno mukabi* groups changed: some started income generating activities (often after an exposure, travel or training event elsewhere), while others evolved into new self-help groups but retaining the principles of *munno mukabi*, highlighting its role not only as a coping mechanism, but as a societal value. (Box 1). Thus women in one of the respondent groups referred to their members as *Banywanyi* (blood 'brothers') – people they fall back to in times of difficulty, underlining how a modern group derives strength from traditional values. As *munno mukabi* increasingly turned towards economic benefits and monetary values, the very poor, unable to make financial contributions, have however found themselves excluded.

The evolution of work groups in Lango is also instructive. Traditionally, solidarity mechanisms included the *wang tic* ('work line') comprised of twenty to forty people in a village, headed by the *adwong wang tic* (guardian of the *wang tic*). The *adwong wang tic* was responsible for order at the beer party after work, when each member had worked on their fields in turn. This was an 'economic group', but it would also open up fields for the elderly, while young women would provide cooked food to an old person living nearby. Colonialism turned the *wang tic* into a territorial unit with its previously elected leader now appointed village chief, responsible for tax collection, maintaining law and order and mobilising members for forced labour. People responded by creating *awak* cooperative labour groups, whose leaders were elected and whose membership transcended *wang tic* boundaries. After the 1960 drought, a majority of the peasants, unable to provide the millet brew needed to compensate the visiting labourers, also became unable to access cooperative labour. The requirement that the beneficiary of labour offers millet brew was abandoned but, with an increasingly monetised economy, *awak* members were also in constant need of money. This led some *awak* teams to turn to wage labour teams, mostly for the benefit of the richer farmers, called *akiba*, where the group sets a day to work on a farm for pay, the proceeds are saved and divided amongst members at the end of the year. The system further evolved when the millet brew, from a token of appreciation, became an item for sale. Today, *akiba* groups collect money, usually weekly (about 0.50 US cents), from which one can borrow without interest but, although they target economically productive individuals, often leaving the very poor out. New mechanisms have therefore developed: *alea alea* and *kwanyu kalulu*, for instance, are groups where members cultivate each others' fields in turn after picking numbers. The major requirement here is that one should be strong enough to dig. For people considered poor and elderly, the groups upon request will cultivate, provided that the beneficiary pays back the group from the harvest, either in cash or in kind, within 12 months. Hence the remark 'These days the groups have changed: what used to be done in turns and one repaid by digging, now you have to pay to become a member.' And hence the appearance of *leja leja*, labour practiced daily by the poorest peasants and households. Those who participate in *leja*



leja receive very low pay, often resulting in continuous debt with the rich peasants to refund cash advances.

Box 1: Luguzi village: survival and evolution of a traditional systems and values

An active munno mukabi group had existed for many years in Luguzi but was disrupted by the 1981-86 war which displaced group members. Upon return, a new group was formed. While retaining the initial principle of munno mukabi of supporting those in need, it incorporated income generation initiatives.

In the new group, all members make an equal mandatory monthly contribution of U.shs 1,000. An additional collection (amabugo) is made to support a bereaved member. Those who do not have food or money to contribute when required, borrow to meet their commitment.

Some group members participated in further training that triggered an appreciation of the need to be enterprising and to share knowledge on farm and livestock management: '... everyone must be helped to improve and cooperate. Without unity we will remain poor....' The group purchased cooking utensils and gas lamps that are hired out at social events. Some members engaged in livestock rearing and formed a sub-group through which they collectively sell milk to a large commercial dairy. With increased incomes, members started supporting other social events, such as weddings and graduation celebrations: 'A child's upbringing is not only for its parents but for the entire village.'

Although they mentioned their limited capacity to help HIV/AIDS affected members, they found means to support them: families, rather than individuals, were enrolled as members so that a family could continue to benefit even if the active member became ill. Members are involved in community activities and can make individual contributions to support non-members in times of difficulty too. Support to a community member however often depends on his or her contribution towards solving other people's problems.

In Luguzi too, a group of youth are mobilised by the Local Council Chairman and a female mentor to help the elderly and vulnerable, in accordance with the cultural value of supporting those in need. The youth, who are all schooling, spend their holidays repairing pit latrines, kitchen sheds, slashing and cleaning their compounds. When they work at an old person's home, they prepare their own food and do not expect payment from the beneficiary.

2.4 Philanthropy and minimum safety nets

Overall, where traditional solidarity mechanisms survive, a resident is normally assured of the absolute minimum requirements, such as shelter, food and a burial place. In Buganda, for instance, everyone, including the very poor and immigrant workers, are buried on common, *obutaka* land or other land acquired by a clan member for burial. Mechanisms based on family structures such as the clan, extended family and in-laws, as well as friendship and community support benefit the very poor, either as blood relatives or adopted members. In Ankole, among the *Abahingi*, the poorest are mainly supported by family and friends, while the very poor *Abaliisa* are mostly helped by the extended family and the 'sub-tribe' as a whole. Even those who move away from their ancestral homes in search of land or work usually move as a group of relatives, clan members or neighbours. Where circumstances have allowed – especially away from conflict areas - the poorest are often provided with a range of benefits out of sympathy and a persistent spirit of sharing. Many orphans and children of very poor parents are cared for by their grandparents or aunts who



cater for their housing, medical and other needs. Other very poor people may eventually become part of a 'host family'. Immigrant workers can be provided with housing, or land to build a temporary shelter and grow food. Households with disabled children can be supported by their host communities. Some widows met for this study were rendered homeless after their husbands' deaths, but are able to cope using traditional mechanisms, sometimes translated into shelter and land to grow food.

These mechanisms are, however, not without their drawbacks. Cooption into a 'host family' for the very poor can, for instance, result in the assisted person sometimes living in a 'master-servant' relationship, which can include quasi-forced labour – cultivating, collecting firewood or water. This can result in disempowerment, as some of the very poor in a Buganda village intimated, *'We pray for the rich to get wealthier because they help the poor.'*

Secondly, the exclusion of the very poor from the benefits of traditional welfare mechanisms can intensify as these evolve. Examples include community groups mentioned above, with their subscription-based mechanisms, the requirement to contribute and the reciprocal nature of their support. Thus, in Ankole, at many clan meetings, contributions are made to a welfare fund: these are only intended to support the contributors.

3 Social capital building

If traditional solidarity mechanisms make a contribution to the welfare of the very poor, do they also build their 'social capital'?

3.1 Access to information

Respondents described a number of cultural mechanisms through which people, including the very poor, access information. These included the clan, as in Buganda and in Ankole, where information is shared, such as on land matters, deaths, or last funeral rites. In addition, every clan or sub-clan normally convenes *okumanyagana* (interacting with each other – *kumanyana* in Ankole), where men and women are encouraged to take part, meet children and interact with other people from their lineage. People may be mobilised through radio announcements or by word of mouth and are asked to carry along some money for development programmes. Traditionally, information was also passed on to everyone, including the very poor, through the Kingdoms' hierarchy of administrative structures in Buganda and Ankole. In Ankole, this however was remembered to concern mainly the payment of oppressive taxes. In Buganda, the poor also had access to the *kitawuluzi* (the chief's court), where information would be shared and disputes settled. With the chiefs' reinstatement in the 1990s, they provide a conduit of information and are engaged in activities to revive Buganda's norms and values, such as fundraising for the Kabaka's Education Fund, and traditional marriage ceremonies or last funeral rites. While it is normally



the active poor who make use of these opportunities, the very poor maintain relatively strong linkages with their clans and will make an effort to travel and attend these functions. They are included in all these events, as they were in village meetings where Local Council Chairpersons provided information, including on government initiatives. Respondents felt that no one objected to their contributions and they felt that they were heard. When the elderly speak, they are listened to and their ideas are welcomed, because of age, experience and exposure.

Similarly, in Lango, respondents reported that depending on the level of cooperation within a particular clan, they sometimes call meetings and inform members on issues such as land, death, and murder cases. In some areas, information trickles down from the *Won Nyaci* (the head of all clans) who summons the *Awitong* (clan head) to deliver to a general meeting. Some clans have also adopted the use of radios to pass on information.

Many respondents also share information through friends and by virtue of their membership in self-help groups. Some groups have also undertaken awareness raising activities and study tours. In Ankole, the very poor, particularly the elderly, widows, casual workers, and the landless observed that friends were their most important source of information for personal development. In Lango, community groups were also an avenue for sourcing information for elderly and isolated people. At regular group meetings, issues of common concern are discussed and, in the process, a communal spirit is strengthened but, as elsewhere, membership requirements preclude the presence of the very poor from such fora.

3.2 Risk management

In Buganda and Ankole, the main risks identified by the very poor include death, illness, loss of assets (e.g. land to credit institutions or cattle theft), and drought. Many of the very poor have, over the years, managed their risk through traditional structures and institutions. The clan and the village are prominent in this respect. In Ankole, it also includes wealthy land and cattle owners, who act as patrons: There is also a strong bond among the *Abaliisa* as a sub-tribe and this provides a form of initial social capital, mirroring the widely-held belief that any person who works cannot be poor. Many of the poorest manage risks through casual labour on farms: today such a worker who works for a wealthy *Omuliisa* is able to acquire cattle, possibly as a gift from the employer, and escape poverty: *'Such a person can even be given the wealthy man's daughter in marriage because it is believed he will make it in life.'*

Identifying with a clan, especially in Buganda, along with family and village, is still one of the most common forms of social cohesion and many benefits accrue from this. In addition, belonging to a clan motivates positive social behaviour, and provides a source of esteem – which reduces conflict. However, when feeling inadequate, the very poor often choose not to relate with their clans mates, and there is also a view held among some of the very poor that clans only help those who are already prosperous. In Ankole, the clan was a source of protection, as people stayed close to each other for protection against wild animals and to



search for food together in times of drought. Most people still, to some extent, identify with a clan, many of which have *ebigombe* -groups for rotating funds. While remarking that the clans help those who are already well off, the very poor expressed their pride in identifying with their clans.

Staying or growing up in a village regardless of ethnic background, entitles a person, including a very poor person, to some benefits, especially a sense of belonging and security. As part of the community, the very poor are expected to participate in communal work and to attend marriage and other cultural occasions. Through this participation, the village recognises their presence and they are offered support when they encounter difficult times. This sense of belonging and recognition also empowers them to take up local opportunities to their benefit, even if this is only sustenance at village ceremonies. In Ankole, during community events such as weddings, the poor may not be invited, but participate in the preparations, fetch water and firewood, and stay around to enjoy the occasion. Participation is concretised in Buganda and Ankole in *bulungi bwa nsi* (*burungibwensi* in Ankole). Literally translated as 'for the good of the world', this refers to community work, when everyone in the village volunteers in activities, such as maintaining community roads. In the past, *burungibwensi* was also employed to fight off wild animals. On a typical day of *bulungi bwa nsi* the village chief would, in the past, sound a drum and everyone would assemble to undertake the specified activity together. *Bulungi bwa nsi* is still practiced in most of the villages visited in Buganda, although the drums have been replaced by word of mouth and the King's chief replaced by a Local Council Chairperson. Indeed, in these villages, the roads and water wells were in good condition, which was attributed to *bulungi bwa nsi* in which most members of the community took part. The very poor said that they are informed of such occasions and they participate, thus improving their social standing in the community. As respondents met in one of the study villages said, '*The very poor people provide labour during bulungi bwa nsi... and it is through such communal events that their role is recognised and whenever they get into difficulty we reciprocate by helping them*'. The '*bulungi bwa nsi*' tradition is being revived by the Buganda kingdom as part of a five-year development plan.



3.3 Recognition and a sense of belonging for the very poor

For the very poor, traditional mechanisms play a vital role to ensure individual recognition - a gap that government and NGOs do not fill since they often target the active poor. Thus, by attending meetings and ceremonies and contributing to discussions, the very poor are able to interact with persons of all levels, including local opinion leaders, and to feel valued. The very poor also keep informed about local affairs through such occasions. By residing in the village, participating in activities such as *bulungi bwa nsi* and benefiting from community solidarity, the very poor also feel connected, trusted and part of the neighbourhood. These result in tangible benefits: they have networks of friends who provide mutually beneficial relationships and friendships that ensure they are settled citizens and are able to survive, even with little or no public assistance. Some were provided with land to grow their food, or given houses to reside in, and they expressed satisfaction with their membership of the village community. It could also be observed that the very poor did not appear to face stigma. Those who became part of families and communities (such as immigrants), enjoy the sense of security that stems from being known and accepted (Box 2).

Box 2: In the village or the clan: a sense of belonging

'My legs are paralysed...I just put my jerry can at the roadside and when the children go down to the stream, they pick it to fetch water for me' Abbas Ssemuko, Luguza village, Buganda

'I have night blindness...the people always assist to guide me home' Andrew Lukomeye, Luguza village, Buganda

'I belong to the Buhwezu clan; we normally have clan meetings where we get to know each other. Even people with young children bring them.' Mujuni, a poor person from Bushenyi but local resident. Kazo village, Ankole

'I come from Kabale to visit my clansmates - Mrs. Karibanda, a poor widow in Kigarama village, Ankole

In contrast, patron-client relations:

'I take care of my workers (Abaliisa)...I pay their children's school fees, house them, provide medical care and other needs. I know many other cattle keepers who also take care of their workers like me.' - James Bulange, cattle keeper and cultivator, Nyamotonyo, Ntungamo

Some shortcomings are however also evident: the nature of the information available is limited, especially on matters critical to individual and collective survival (such as land). Community meetings focus on parochial issues and avoid those with political overtones. In Ankole, remote communities are especially cut off from externally-oriented information. Lack of access to information, in spite of people's requests, provides an indication of a critical gap between the people and their government leaders, which traditional mechanisms are unable to completely bridge. Because the very poor do not belong to self-help or *munno mukabi* groups, they can also miss opportunities to improve their livelihood through exposure to new ideas, as well as the opportunities to influence decisions concerning village priorities. The



very poor can also be tied into exploitative relationships - they become dependent on friends or 'relatives', instead of being able to build their self-confidence and self-sufficiency (Box 2).

4 Conclusions and Policy Implications

This study points to a set of overall conclusions and remarks that may inform policy development. Some are cross-cutting; some, given the variety of social and cultural contexts described above, are more relevant to a particular region or situation.

4.1 Ethnic culture and 'traditional' social protection mechanisms count

Uganda's rural communities evolve in a cultural context that is still much informed by the traditions, practices and governance systems associated with earlier generations. In particular, the ways in which the very poor survive are informed by values and practices, though constantly evolving, that many residents continue to relate to ethnic culture. In Buganda, these are still firmly associated with the Kiganda monarchy. In Ankole, cultural practices and values manifested through various welfare mechanisms are also entrenched. In Lango, in spite of a weakening of cultural mechanisms to support the poor, those that exist still have their roots similarly grounded.

Today, as opposed to the past situation, traditional systems are often insufficient to address the growing economic and social challenges that communities are facing. Nevertheless, they adapt and when the very poor experience extreme hardship, they can (at least at times and for a time) turn to these practices and to the values of solidarity, trust and participation that have (and still do) informed them, for support.

If some of these traditional practices have been challenged by a perceived irrelevance to the present development context or by extreme social shocks (such as those experienced because of conflict in Lango and parts of Buganda), the principles and values that inform them are still considered not only valuable by those who directly benefit from them, but also an element to define personal and collective identity. This explains help given to beggars, to the elderly who are isolated and to others, and assistance often dictated by clan, family or community solidarity or by values which, if not adhered to, will bring disrepute and shame to the person who disregards it. This can provide often more effective, culturally familiar (and at least more immediate) support than turning to government programmes.

**Policy Implications:**

- Social protection policy initiatives could usefully take the local cultural context into account. Anti-poverty initiatives should complement, even build on existing solidarity mechanisms (rather than substitute them), use them as entry points, and utilise existing structures and the values that guide them. The restoration of the traditional cultural institutions offers an opportunity in this respect. In Uganda, this could take very practical forms, such as borrowing on the *ekigagara* (stretcher) of Western Uganda, to improve its design and promote its use elsewhere; or giving space to the elderly to advocate for culturally-based social protection on dedicated radio programmes.
- The cultural context can be diverse and, where solidarity mechanisms reflect ethnic culture, this implies that a blanket, nationwide prescription and methodology will not yield as promising results as an approach that recognises cultural particularisms. Thus, in Uganda, an emphasis on clan-based structures might well yield better results in Buganda, say, than in Ankole. Similarly, the study of traditional welfare mechanisms in Ankole provides helpful insights to the understanding of social protection in an ethnically diverse community from which policy makers can draw purposeful lessons.

4.2 Some of the mechanisms assume positive characteristics

Some mechanisms have shown resilience, adaptability and a degree of inclusiveness that can provide opportunities for future growth. In particular:

4.2.1 *Tangible, non-material and low-cost benefits accrue sustainably to the poorest*

Notwithstanding their weakening in some cases, the very poor have in the face of shocks and vulnerability resorted to, and have been supported by, informal solidarity mechanisms, such as the family, the clan, a circle of friends or neighbours, occasional community workgroups. Such mechanisms not only provide welfare benefits, but also more intangible and essential help: they allow the very poor a measure of recognition in their communities and, through the values of solidarity, trust and participation, enhance their social capital. The elderly can, for instance, contribute in a village meeting because they are considered to have accumulated a wealth of wisdom over the years. By contributing to discussions or to communal work, the very poor feel recognised, connected, trusted and part of the neighbourhood.

This value base is essential to understand why such mechanisms often prove resilient and sustained; not only are they meant to provide support during challenging times, they are resorted to in all situations. In contrast to a good number of external interventions, they are also low-cost, self-sustained and can cover large numbers of beneficiaries. Thus, mutual self-help group often have long-term (or at least indeterminate) horizons, locally-rooted community support to the vulnerable incurs few transaction costs, and clans in Buganda provide a point of reference for thousands of people at a time.

**Policy Implications:**

- Poverty reduction programmes could usefully seek to strengthen sometimes weak but evidently useful 'traditional' mechanisms. Such mechanisms can be used as entry points to implement national social protection programmes. In Uganda, such institutions include the *akiba* and *alea alea/alulu* work groups, the clans, and self-help groups.
- Solidarity mechanisms should not be overlooked while deliberating formal social protection policies; they can at least play an important complementary role, given attributes of low cost, sustainability and large coverage. In Uganda, they also provide important intangible benefits (participation, trust, inclusiveness) and thus provide another area of complementarity with other interventions.

4.2.2 *Groups are a cultural phenomenon*

The principles of helping one in need have been retained and incorporated in new development groups because they are considered to be an important means to support one another. These include *munno mukabi*, the *akiba* and *alea alea* groups, *mwezikye* burial groups, clan-based and other self-help groups. These do not operate outside the scope of our understanding of culture, tradition and their values of 'togetherness', 'community' and 'neighbourliness'.

Many of these groups focus on savings and credit as a strategy to tackle poverty. *Abahingi* communities for instance, place much emphasis on the monetary gains from their interaction with extended families, clan members and networks of friends: thus, all the *Mwezikye*, clan-based and more recently formed groups have one thing in common: *bika oguze* (save and borrow). These groups may often prove more vibrant, better culturally rooted and therefore more sustainable than groups inspired by external actors (NGOs, Government) and often driven by the prospects of outside support.

They may, however, foster consumption, rather than long term investment (such as when the *akiba* proceeds are spent on festivities) and they often exclude the very poorest in the community, who cannot afford the 'entry fee' and are seen as potential liabilities, unless some system exists to incorporate them, such as when repayment of group labour contributions is deferred until harvest time.

This is one area where the very poor themselves, as well as some key informants, suggested ways in which the very poor could be involved in social protection schemes: '*Sensitise self-help and munno mukabi groups to include us*'. In Lango, '*if the akiba groups were not demanding entry fees, the poor would be much better protected*'.

**Policy Implications:**

- Groups often express a social responsibility to help one in need which can be capitalised on. In Uganda, they can provide conduits for the poor to organise themselves and benefit from other government programmes: a *bulungi bwa nsi* day could also, for instance, be dedicated for the youth to help the poorest.
- Where groups exclude the poorest, social protection initiatives could, for instance, aim at empowering community women's associations to reach the most vulnerable. In Uganda, the *alea alea* that digs in turns, if aided with improved technology, can increase acreage and improve food security. These can help the very poor materially, and widen their networks and exposure, since they may not require a financial subscription on their part. A system of incentives to include the poorest in groups, such as access to basic technical assistance or priority access to Government programmes, could also be envisaged.
- Similarly, 'traditional' savings organisations can be taken advantage of in the design of programmes that seek to augment household incomes, including developing these organisations' capacities in savings and credit management, as well as project planning. Groups can be linked to sources of credit, thus enhancing the tendency to save (rather than consume) group surpluses. These may provide more effective vehicles, based on a spirit of cooperation, than any hurriedly assembled and externally-inspired savings and credit cooperatives.

4.2.3 *Strong immediate and extended family ties*

These are still considered the first option for support in times of hardship and celebration for many among the very poor, although the extended family is often straining from demands being placed on its better-off members, while 'individualistic tendencies' were often decried by respondents.

Policy Implications:

- Commitment and loyalty within families make them viable points of entry for support especially for orphans, the elderly and people living with disabilities. In Uganda, supporting saving mechanisms within the extended family could also be considered, especially where these savings are tagged to future benefits, e.g. an education fund for the children in an extended family or clan.

4.2.4 *The clan*

This still provides a sense of identity, belonging, pride and security for many people, including the poorest. The 126 recognised clans in Lango are still influential in conflict resolution and in arranging marriages. Respondents recalled that young men in the clan would build houses for old people houses while the young women cooked for them, and some respondents thought that charitable practices could be revived within clans. In Buganda, clans remain strong self-mobilisation tools.

**Policy Implications:**

- The clan can provide a potentially effective system through which common values and principles can be reinforced, such as with regard to collective initiatives for food security, support to the vulnerable and clans-mates in need, and education and responsibility for children / orphans. They could also provide points of entry for campaigns related to HIV, the fight against corruption, and for mainstream development programmes. Clans could also provide a means to protect the assets of the very poor, if empowered by law and policy, at minimal recovery cost to the aggrieved party.

4.3 Additional opportunities

4.3.1 Food security

The *Ekyagi*, *ekitara* and *olusuku* – the compulsory homestead granary and plantation – also provide opportunities, if adapted to current circumstances. In Ankole, for instance, there were many requests by respondents to have the *ekitara* reactivated. Many elderly Abahingi respondents recalled the benefits of the granaries, as implemented during the pre-independence period and suggested that government considers reintroducing them in all rural communities.

Policy Implications:

- Development programmes can incorporate an aspect of ‘food security for all’ by restoring the principle of saving seed and food in rural communities. In Uganda, access to the very poor would have to be assured, and the possibility of restoring granaries at parish or sub-county level could be investigated. This could include collective efforts to establish home gardens recognising non-monetary contributions such as labour, to enable the very poor have a stake in the food and seed stored.

4.3.2 Harmonising administrative authority

Traditional cultural rulers at village level, such as the *Omwami* in Buganda or the *Adwong wang tic* in Lango, have seen their powers reduced, their authority partly taken over through the Local Council system, and their right to levy taxes abolished. Nevertheless, they still often mobilise communities for public functions and handle local disputes, including conflicts over land. In places, they also mobilise community action not only to maintain wells, roads, and bridges but also to support the very poor in times of critical illness or death. ‘*Assistance for the very poor could be channelled through the village leadership structures*’, some respondents suggested.



Policy Implications:

- For the poor who are vulnerable to risks, such as loss of assets, including land and cattle, traditional institutions can be recognised by law and policy to protect such assets at low cost to the poor, while maintaining harmony.
- In Uganda, the *Omwami's* responsibility to trigger collective action towards addressing critical concerns of the very poor and ensuring that they are included in initiatives that do not necessarily involve monetary contribution could be strengthened.
- Traditional local structures can also be recognised by local government to mobilise communities and participate in local governance and in designing programmes that benefit the poor. In some areas of Uganda, a seat for cultural leaders on local councils might be both acceptable and useful, to voice the concerns of the very poor and promote cultural values of solidarity and responsibility.

4.3.3 Youth support to the elderly

Reviving values that encourage the support that the youth give to the elderly and vulnerable (repair simple structures, compound maintenance) and incorporating this into development initiatives will occupy the youth's time constructively and lay a foundation for future social responsibility. Some existing experiences may be instructive in this respect.

Policy Implications:

- Research can be undertaken to explore how cases where the youth support elderly and vulnerable members of their communities can be scaled up. Given past experience in Uganda, structures can be created within clans to revive charitable work, taking advantage of the clan youth wing, where these exist. Youth can be trained in basic construction skills and teamwork for social responsibility.

4.3.4 Communication

Information is essential for empowerment. In communities where meetings were not held, the very poor were less informed about important issues, such as the productive use of assets or land eviction, resulting in anxiety and limited commitment to contribute to local development initiatives. 'Traditional' values are important in this respect: the elderly can, for instance, contribute in a village meeting because of the respect that their age and wisdom command.

**Policy Implications:**

- Regular and relevant information needs to be provided to the very poor, to enable them to better address their concerns and know where to get support through government and other development programmes. In many Ugandan communities, the cultural leader, such as the *Omwami*, is a recognised source of information and can act as a point of information dissemination
- The very poor can make a contribution to local debates and programmes that concern them: giving them space is a step to empowerment and enhances the relevance of development initiatives. 'Cultural information spaces' can be well-suited to enhance this participation.

4.4 Taking limitations into account

Where reciprocal benefits are involved, the very poor are often excluded. Thus, significant support is often only enjoyed by paid up members of self-help groups. Second, one might find that there is a counter-productive emphasis on consumption: the *akiba*, for instance, apportion and use up savings during festivities, as opposed to using them for, say, household investment. Third, solidarity mechanisms, while inspired by traditional values of 'togetherness' and 'neighbourliness' can assume exploitative characteristics that trap the very poor into a situation akin to bondage. Fourth, traditional welfare mechanisms do not always unite people beyond their ethnic sub-divide. Thus, any form of cooperation or solidarity between the two different Banyankole sub-tribes, can be tenuous.

Policy Implications:

- Programmes that take advantage of existing informal structures should recognise their inherent limitations. Thus, in Uganda, compensatory mechanisms to promote equity could include strengthening the values and practice of *munno mukabi* and other groups to include the vulnerable and the very poor by incorporating types of contributions that are not necessarily monetary, or that can be deferred, and introducing training, competitions, tours, awards and other incentives for groups to include and care for the very poor. Where traditional solidarity mechanisms are used as conduits in the implementation of social protection interventions by NGOs or Government, equitable access and investment in assets could become conditionalities if, say, a self-help group is to benefit from credit or small grants. Rural communities practicing *munno mukabi* or belonging to similar groups can be given technical advice on savings and credit, simple investments and risk management, to broaden the concept of supporting one another to address current challenges.



4.5 Scaling up and linking to current social protection efforts

Should some of the conclusions and policy pointers above be considered, policy makers may feel daunted by the task of scaling-up what currently remain localised, if often beneficial, culturally-driven and sustained solidarity mechanisms. Much currently, it happens in families, communities or villages, both in terms of tangible and intangible benefits: how does one now move to the national level?

While this is an entirely legitimate question, would similar - if not greater - misgivings not accompany the design of any completely externally-inspired social protection initiative? The findings of this study indicate, to the contrary, that much might be gained by strengthening the *existing* mechanisms and building on *existing* cultural values, rather than starting afresh.

Further, it has been observed that since the abolition of traditional cultural administrative structures in 1967, the central and district governments that replaced them have not been particularly effective in preserving and promoting solidarity and equity values, arguably (given the spread of corruption, especially in the public sector, and other social evils) even the opposite.

The International Conference on Social Protection for the Poorest in Africa held in Uganda in September 2008 not only noted the possible synergy between cash transfer schemes and informal social protection mechanisms (see below), it also emphasised that social protection endeavours in low income countries require sustained political support. 'Political sustainability', for which a design in tune with public attitudes about poverty and redistribution, and an established record of transparency, effectiveness and impact were singled out as necessary, also provided a strong focus of discussion. Public 'buy-in', as well as 'government buy-in' were felt to be crucial. 'Building on the existing' would go some distance in meeting this objective

Building on the existing would also entail a review of the role of cultural institutions at all levels, carefully taking into consideration Uganda's rich cultural diversity, with a view to assigning them a greater role in promoting tradition-based social welfare and engagement for the very poor than currently is the case (or is envisaged). These institutions, large and small, are the custodians of the norms and values upon which the solidarity mechanisms described in these pages are based.

In Uganda, where formal social insurance for the majority of the needy and vulnerable is still a distant prospect, traditional mechanisms can, with judicious support, potentially fill the gap, in a sustainable and culturally attuned fashion.



Policy Implications:

- Attitudes among policy makers and implementers towards cultural resources and values need to be re-examined to foster a more sympathetic understanding of the potential that one's cultural heritage affords in all aspects of life, including the value of solidarity towards the less fortunate in the community and the nation.
- While this could even involve a review of the school curriculum, it could also include 'cultural mainstreaming' in government ministries, agencies, and the private sector. This would contribute to a number of positive outcomes, including an appreciation of the contribution traditional values and norms make towards social protection, as well as making 'frontline' implementers (NGOs, local governments) more attuned to cultural contexts, resources and possible linkages.
- Any efforts to 'refresh' or support existing mechanisms should involve the respective cultural institutions. Such support should not mask the need to sensitise new clans, traditional chiefs and communities on traditional solidarity mechanisms and supporting the very poor, in view of changed local circumstances and possible 'conservative' mindsets.
- A focal point or unit in-charge of 'traditional social protection' could usefully be established within the ministry responsible for social protection. In Uganda, this would be charged with coordinating and promoting culturally-based welfare efforts through support to institutions such as clan structures, BUCADEF (Buganda Cultural and Development Foundation), village based initiatives, etc.



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