

Mak Hosts World Philosophy Day: Ugandans Urged to Champion Social Inclusivity and Demystify Philosophy

On 21st November 2024, Makerere University joined the rest of the world to celebrate the World Philosophy Day. World Philosophy Day was launched by UNESCO to recognize the role of Philosophy in human civilization. Since then, Philosophy Day is celebrated on every third Thursday of November each year. In Uganda, Makerere University Department of Philosophy and Uganda Philosophy Society in collaboration with UNESCO have been marking this Day through public lectures on issues that affect society today. This year, Makerere University and Uganda Philosophy Society with support from Uganda National Commission for UNESCO (UNATCOM) organized a public dialogue to mark this Day from Makerere University Main Hall under the theme *Philosophical thinking for inclusive and sustainable future of Uganda*. Two hundred participants drawn from academia, Civil Society and the public participated.

The celebrations were officially opened by the Principal College of Humanities and Social Sciences represented by the Dean School of Liberal and Performing Arts Dr. Pamela Khanakwa and closed by the Hon Member of Parliament Butambala who is also Chair Uganda Parliamentary Accounts Committee Hon. Muwanga Kivumbi. The ceremony held at the Senate Telepresence center was also graced by Uganda's Chairperson Equal Opportunities Commission Ms. Safia Nalule and the Director General UNESCO represented by Dr. Dominic Mundrugo- Ogo.

Demystify Philosophy - Dr. Pamela Khanakwa

Dr. Pamela Khanakwa, Dean of the School of Liberal and Performing Arts, officially opened the celebrations. Representing the Principal of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHUSS), Dr. Khanakwa lauded the organizers, particularly Dr. Wamamela, for their dedication to making the event a success.

Dr. Khanakwa emphasized the importance of demystifying philosophy, traditionally viewed as abstract or reserved for intellectual elites. She noted that the day's theme—centered on social inclusion—resonates deeply with Uganda's current challenges. Reflecting on historical philosophical contributions, such as John Locke's social contract theory, she argued that philosophy has long addressed moral and political behaviors essential for societal harmony.

She also outlined Makerere University's initiatives to integrate philosophical thinking into its curriculum. These include the introduction of cross-cutting courses like *Philosophy of Method* and a university-wide *Introduction to Ethics* course. Dr. Khanakwa urged students and academics to champion critical thinking and ethical behavior, citing instances where ethical lapses, even among philosophy students, undermine the discipline's principles.

Dr. Khanakwa celebrated the work of Dr. Jimmy Spire Ssentongo, a philosopher and cartoonist, as a testament to philosophy's practical impact. She encouraged students to explore innovative ways of contributing to humanity's betterment. "We are good, but we can always strive to be better," she concluded, calling for fruitful discussions during the day.

Dr. Jimmy Spire Ssentongo Calls for Empathy for the Marginalized Groups

Representing the Head of the Department of Philosophy, Dr. Jimmy Spire Ssentongo highlighted philosophy's historical and contemporary significance. He described philosophy as the "mother of all disciplines," noting its foundational role in shaping scientific inquiry, democracy, and governance. Dr. Ssentongo emphasized the importance of philosophy extending beyond academic spaces to influence society positively, urging Ugandans to foster empathy and speak out against social injustices. "The theme today calls upon us to reflect on how philosophical thinking can address issues of inclusivity and sustainability in Uganda," he stated.

Dr. Ssentongo praised Makerere University's commitment to incorporating philosophy into its curricula, equipping students with the analytical tools to tackle societal challenges. He urged philosophers to use their knowledge for social transformation, stressing that philosophy is not just an academic pursuit but a discipline rooted in addressing real-world issues. He explained how philosophy underpins various fields such as science, politics, ethics, and social theory, and how many pressing global issues—inequality, environmental sustainability, and human rights—are deeply philosophical in nature.

He called for a transformative approach to philosophy, noting that philosophers must focus not only on abstract concepts but also on concrete issues like poverty, injustice, and inequality. "Philosophy is about action," he stated. "It is about making a difference in the world, and our world is in dire need of change."

Dr. Ssentongo urged his fellow academics and students to be active participants in addressing societal ills. He passionately advocated for philosophers to develop an empathetic approach to understanding the struggles of marginalized and oppressed groups. "We must stand up and speak out on behalf of those whose voices are not heard," he declared. Citing famous philosophers like John Locke and Immanuel Kant, he reminded the audience that philosophy has always been about guiding societies toward justice, equality, and ethical behavior.

He specifically stressed the role of philosophers in promoting inclusivity, saying, "In Uganda, and indeed the world over, inclusivity must be at the core of our philosophical thinking. We cannot claim to be philosophers and remain silent in the face of injustice." He called on philosophers to stand against discrimination in all its forms—whether based on race, gender, or social class.

Dr. Ssentongo challenged academics to use their platforms to advocate for the most vulnerable members of society. "Silence in the face of injustice is complicity," he said, urging scholars to make their voices heard, especially when advocating for the oppressed. He encouraged participants to apply philosophical thinking to every facet of their lives, engage with political and social systems, and advocate for justice, even when uncomfortable.

Dr. Ssentongo reminded the audience that philosophy is about the betterment of humanity. "If we are to contribute meaningfully to our society, we must be willing to speak truth to power and

advocate for justice," he said, leaving the audience with a clear message: philosophers must extend their work beyond theory into the streets and policies that affect everyday lives.

UNESCO Asks Makerere to establish a Chair of Philosophy Program

Representing the Secretary General of UNESCO, Dr. Dominic Mundrugo-Ogo emphasized UNESCO's commitment to advancing philosophical discourse globally. He lauded Makerere University's leadership in celebrating World Philosophy Day, describing it as a platform for critical discussions that resonate beyond academic boundaries.

Dr. Dominick, highlighted the critical role philosophy plays in addressing global challenges and promoting peace. He began by expressing gratitude to the attendees and emphasized the global significance of World Philosophy Day, which is celebrated worldwide. He pointed out that the theme of the day, tailored to Uganda's context, aligns with the broader global theme of inclusivity and bridging social gaps, demonstrating philosophy's potential to address societal inequalities.

Dr. Dominick recalled the founding of UNESCO in 1946, following the aftermath of World War II, and the organization's mission to promote peace through intellectual dialogue. Quoting UNESCO's declaration that "wars begin in the mind," he stressed that the cultivation of peace must first occur within individuals' minds, urging the importance of philosophical reflection in preventing conflict and fostering global peace.

He underscored the necessity of philosophy in promoting critical thinking and public awareness, arguing that it encourages individuals to make informed choices rather than follow instructions blindly. In the face of globalization and complex societal issues, he called for philosophical analysis to address common human challenges and advocated for philosophical dialogues as tools to solve global problems.

Dr. Dominick also highlighted the alignment between philosophy and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to equality, inclusivity, and access to education. He pointed out that SDGs 4, 5, 8, 10, and 16 emphasize these core values, advocating for philosophical reflection to achieve social cohesion and tackle global inequalities.

While discussing social cohesion, Dr. Dominick cautioned against achieving inclusivity at the expense of cultural diversity. He argued that while inclusivity is essential, it should not erase differences but instead promote a society where diverse identities are respected and valued. Drawing from the biblical idea of "being one another's keeper," he emphasized the importance of unity without homogeneity.

He also expressed a long-standing desire for Makerere University to establish a Chair of Philosophy, pointing out that, despite being the largest public university in the region, the institution currently lacks such a program. Dr. Dominick advocated for the creation of this academic chair to strengthen philosophical discourse and outreach, noting that neighboring institutions like Kenya have successfully established similar programs.

In recognition of those promoting philosophy, he praised Dr. Nixon Wamela for his dedication to the cause, acknowledging his role in organizing the World Philosophy Day events and his journey from undergraduate studies to earning a doctorate. Dr. Dominick called for expanding the philosophical dialogue to reach wider audiences, including through digital platforms like Zoom, to facilitate global conversations on philosophical issues.

Concluding his remarks, Dr. Dominick expressed optimism for the future growth of philosophical discourse at Makerere University and globally. He reiterated his hope for the establishment of a formal Chair of Philosophy and ended by thanking the organizers and participants, wishing them a fruitful celebration, and mentioning his departure for another important engagement.

Contributions by Key Guests

Philosophy's Role in Youth Inclusion for a Sustainable Uganda: A Keynote Address by Professor Byaruhanga Rukooko

In his keynote address on the role of philosophy in fostering youth inclusion and ensuring a sustainable future for Uganda, Byaruhanga Rukooko emphasized the need for critical reflection on the socio-economic challenges facing Uganda's youth. His address, highlighted the importance of rethinking how philosophy can address issues of inclusion, sustainability, and justice in the country.

Rukooko began by acknowledging the central role of youth in Uganda's future. With youth constituting 70% of the population, he emphasized their importance in shaping the country's destiny. However, despite their numbers, the youth in Uganda face significant socio-economic challenges. Statistics show that while enrollment in education has increased, 17% of Uganda's youth between the ages of 18-30 have never attended school, and 64% of primary school children in northern Uganda drop out. Youth unemployment has also risen from 2.93% in 2022 to 4.2% in 2024, with 44% of youth affected by poverty. These figures, Rukooko argued, underscore the urgent need for investment in youth development, particularly in education and job creation.

Rukooko contended that philosophy has a critical role to play in overcoming these challenges. He described philosophy as an activity that critically examines human experiences and beliefs, helping individuals to reflect on the assumptions and ideologies that shape society. "Philosophy is the critical examination of the grounds for our beliefs and the methods by which we arrive at our beliefs," he quoted Bertrand Russell, noting the importance of philosophy in fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills among the youth.

He further argued that philosophy's relevance lies in its capacity to develop conceptual frameworks that can address the complexities of governance, education, and technology, as well as moral questions in society. Philosophy, according to Rukooko, also promotes intellectual freedom, tolerance, and a deeper understanding of diversity, which are all crucial in an inclusive society.

The concept of social inclusion, defined as ensuring that all individuals, regardless of background,

have equal opportunities to participate fully in society, was central to Rukooko's address. Drawing on the works of prominent philosophers like John Rawls and Amartya Sen, he highlighted the ethical importance of inclusion in promoting fairness and justice. "Social inclusion is an ethical endeavor that supports distributive justice, empathy, and care," Rukooko stated.

He also pointed to the positive effects of inclusion on business, education, and overall social well-being. Rukooko referenced research from the World Bank and McKinsey, which showed that inclusive economies grow by 2.5% and outperform uniform groups by 35%. He stressed that inclusion helps reduce inequalities, improves mental and physical health, and supports a sense of belonging.

To foster youth inclusion, Rukooko proposed that philosophers must take an active role in cultivating critical thinking and logical reasoning among young people. He suggested that philosophy should be integrated into national education curricula and that youth should be encouraged to engage in problem-solving, ethical reflection, and self-awareness. He also emphasized the need for philosophy to address real-world concerns, such as technological advancements, health issues, and environmental challenges, while promoting social cohesion and sustainability.

Rukooko proposed the establishment of philosophy-based youth initiatives, such as philosophy clubs, workshops, and competitions, to engage young people and encourage them to become philosophers. Additionally, he called for the creation of a fund to support philosophical activities in Uganda, which could empower youth to shape their own identities and contribute to societal change.

Finally, Rukooko concluded by linking social inclusion with sustainability. He described sustainability as the ability to maintain or improve societal conditions over the long term without compromising future generations' opportunities. He argued that for Uganda to achieve sustainability, it must prioritize social equity, justice, and intergenerational ethics. "Sustainability should be understood as a form of intergenerational ethics where present actions do not diminish the opportunities for future generations to enjoy similar levels of well-being," he said.

Rukooko emphasized the urgent need for philosophy to drive both social inclusion and sustainability in Uganda, recognizing the interconnectedness of these values in ensuring a prosperous future for the youth. He called on philosophers and policymakers alike to embrace these challenges and work together to create a society where every young person has the opportunity to thrive.

Government efforts in the realization of social inclusion

The Chairperson Equal Opportunities Commission Ms. Safia Nalule focused on the role of philosophical thinking in addressing societal inequalities. She highlighted the Equal Opportunities Commission's efforts in promoting inclusivity and urged participants to use philosophy as a lens for creating equitable policies and practices.

Safia Nalule, in her speech on government efforts to address exclusion and promote inclusivity, underscored the importance of transitioning Ugandans still engaged in subsistence farming into the money economy, which accounts for 39% of the population. She highlighted this shift as crucial for achieving national inclusivity and ensuring a sustainable future. Nalule explained that exclusion in society is driven by factors such as gender, age, disability, tribe, and income disparities, often perpetuated by historical or traditional biases.

Nalule also emphasized Uganda's commitment to inclusivity through its ratification of various international human rights conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These conventions have been integrated into national laws, including Article 32 of Uganda's National Constitution, which addresses the rights of marginalized groups, and the Equal Opportunities Commission Act of 2007, which mandates inclusivity for women, youth, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. However, she pointed out that challenges persist in the implementation of these laws, particularly in raising public awareness and fostering widespread participation in the legislative process.

One of the major hurdles identified by Nalule was the limited public awareness of inclusive laws and policies, as many citizens focus on daily survival needs like poverty and healthcare. This preoccupation often limits their engagement with political processes. She also noted that public consultation during the formulation of laws is often inadequate, resulting in policies that may not fully reflect the needs of all citizens. While Uganda has a highly inclusive political system with quotas for marginalized groups, issues with political representation remain, especially in constituencies that are too large or where geographical and cultural barriers make it difficult for representatives to connect with their constituents.

Nalule addressed the issue of the growing monetization of politics, where the financial demands of campaigns contribute to the entrenchment of inequality and undermine the effectiveness of political representation. She also highlighted the importance of Uganda's Vision 2040 and National Development Plans, which incorporate provisions for inclusive development. However, she stressed that many citizens are unaware of these plans, and questions remain about how many people are consulted during their formulation. She emphasized the need for better citizen participation and tracking in national development efforts, particularly through the National Involvement Plans.

Nalule also pointed to Uganda's inclusive and transparent budgeting process as a key achievement. With a bottom-up approach, the Ministry of Finance works with the Equal Opportunities Commission to ensure that national and sectoral budgets are gender- and equity-responsive. The introduction of the Certificate of Gender and Equity Compliance has been pivotal, ensuring that budgets align with inclusivity standards before they can be approved by Parliament.

The issue of effective consultation in national censuses was also raised, with Nalule calling for greater community involvement, particularly at the local government level, to ensure accurate and inclusive data collection. She argued that this would improve the design of policies that better address the needs of marginalized groups. For a sustainable future, she stressed the importance of

citizens not only participating in the government's planning and budgeting processes but also following up to ensure their views are integrated and projects are implemented as promised.

While acknowledging the strong legal and political framework for inclusion in Uganda, Nalule recognized significant governance challenges, including the poor alignment of national and local priorities, ineffective participation in the budgeting process, and limited resources to address local needs. She concluded by reiterating that Uganda's development efforts must continue to focus on strengthening participation, transparency, and accountability to ensure that all groups, especially marginalized ones, are included in national development efforts. By addressing these challenges and building on existing frameworks, Uganda can move closer to a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Dr. Robert Kakuru Highlights Challenges of Social Inclusion, Calls for Broader Societal Cohesion

Dr. Robert Kakuru, Chairperson of Makerere University Academic Staff Association (MUASA), and General Secretary of the Forum for Academic Staff of all Public Universities in Uganda, shared his views on social inclusion during a recent address. He began by questioning the concept of social inclusion, asking, "Who is including, who is being excluded, and why?" He drew attention to the power dynamics of inclusion, likening it to a "dining table" where some are fed and others remain hungry, as well as a "market" where the powerful act as buyers or sellers, while others are treated as commodities.

Kakuru expressed that advocating for inclusion has become a "crime" in certain settings, especially in academic environments like Makerere University, where he has faced police harassment for championing staff rights. He emphasized the challenges faced by marginalized groups, such as students who struggle to address issues like inadequate housing conditions and are met with repression when attempting to assemble and advocate for change.

A key point Kakuru raised was the problematic mindset in leadership, stating that often, leaders ask excluded groups to change their mindset, while in reality, it is the leaders who should alter their approach. He argued that the issue of exclusion permeates all levels of society—from the global stage to institutions like universities, where rules are manipulated to maintain the power of a few individuals.

Kakuru also highlighted the issue of "tokenism" in participation, where calls for involvement often serve as a mere formality without genuine impact. He pointed to legislative decisions made behind closed doors, such as those involving the rationalization of government agencies, which are presented as participatory but are, in reality, already decided.

On the matter of accountability, Kakuru stressed that it should not be reduced to superficial measures like receipt validation but should include judicial, administrative, and quasi-judicial accountability. He further critiqued the legal framework, suggesting that current laws perpetuate systemic discrimination and are part of the problem of exclusion.

In concluding his address, Kakuru raised the need for a paradigm shift in how society approaches inclusion, suggesting that instead of focusing on inclusion, society should aspire toward social cohesion and shared joy, not just shared pain. He expressed discomfort with the prevailing philosophy of perpetuating and sharing pain, advocating instead for a vision that centers on collective happiness and well-being.

Gulu University's Dr. Kizito Micheal Calls for a Critical Examination of Neoliberalism's Impact on Uganda's Youth and Society

Dr. Michael Kizito, a prominent academic at Gulu University, called for a deeper reflection on the consequences of neoliberal policies in Uganda, particularly concerning social inclusion and the opportunities available to youth. Speaking at a recent forum, Dr. Kizito emphasized that neoliberalism, with its focus on market-driven capitalism, has created a divided society where opportunities are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few, leaving many youths marginalized.

Dr. Kizito posed critical questions about the limits of social inclusion, asking, "Is inclusion a given, or does it have boundaries? Can anyone truly be included, or are there structural exclusions built into our systems?" He noted that issues of social exclusion are often rooted in power dynamics, with certain groups, such as the children of political elites, having an undeniable advantage over others in accessing jobs and resources.

"The youth are not a homogenous group," Dr. Kizito stated. "In Uganda, we see a divide between those with access to power and resources and those who are disconnected from the state apparatus. There are youths in this country who have the privilege of securing jobs with a simple phone call, while others languish in prison without anyone to advocate for them."

Dr. Kizito also criticized the reckless adoption of neoliberalism, which he argued has led to systemic inequities. "Neoliberalism in Uganda has wreaked havoc on the social fabric. It has shifted the focus from collective well-being to individualistic greed, promoting the idea that success is solely the result of market forces, with little regard for ethics or social responsibility."

He highlighted the growing challenges faced by academics, including the difficulty of advancing to higher academic ranks despite years of service. "We've introduced neoliberal capitalism, which has fragmented opportunities for well-being and perpetuated exclusion," Dr. Kizito remarked.

Dr. Kizito concluded by calling for a reevaluation of the neoliberal model and its effects on social justice in Uganda. "It is time to confront neoliberalism and rethink how we promote inclusive development that benefits all segments of society, not just the privileged few."

The forum, which was moderated by Dr. Kizito's former mentor, Professor Rukooko, also included a panel discussion addressing the complex issue of inclusion in Uganda.

"Challenging Philosophical Norms: Kivumbi's Call for a New Vision of Equality and Unity"

Hon. Muwanga Kivumbi, Member of Parliament for Butambala and Chair of Uganda's Parliamentary Accounts Committee, closed the celebrations. He applauded the event's focus on inclusivity and sustainability, urging participants to advocate for these principles within their spheres of influence. Hon. Kivumbi emphasized the practical relevance of philosophy in governance and policy-making, calling for broader engagement with philosophical insights in Uganda's socio-political landscape.

Kivumbi expressed skepticism about the concept of social inclusion, questioning whether it was truly a noble cause or a continuation of human dominance. He critiqued the idea that the act of including marginalized groups may be rooted in a dominant mindset, where those in power "generously" include others at the table, thus maintaining control. He wondered why society doesn't aspire toward social cohesion or unity, instead of aiming for inclusion, which, in his view, could perpetuate a system where some people are positioned as the "dominant" ones who decide who is allowed to be included.

He also raised concerns about the way terms like "inclusion" were used politically, suggesting that they often merely reflected a desire to increase representation at the table, rather than addressing the deeper issues of equality. Kivumbi criticized the idea of focusing on sharing pain, quoting the philosopher O.H. Tiwa's idea of "sharing everyone's pain" but contending that instead, society should aspire to share joy and happiness. "Why must we always aspire to share pain?" he questioned, challenging the notion that human aspiration should be to constantly endure hardship or perpetuate suffering.

In a broader philosophical critique, Kivumbi raised the issue of youth movements and social categorization, which often divide people into groups—youth, elders, the disabled—and create separate agendas based on these divisions. He rejected the notion of "youth agendas," arguing that inequality and societal issues should be tackled universally, not through fragmented categories that serve to dominate and control.

He expressed frustration at the limitations of current governmental visions, such as Uganda's Vision 2020 and Vision 2040, questioning why development should be structured around 20-year or 40-year plans. He urged a more enduring approach that focused on building a nation for the future, not just in the next few decades. Kivumbi argued for the need to challenge the status quo, not just in politics but in the very way society views concepts like nationhood, equality, and leadership.

In addressing the inequalities in religious structures, Kivumbi questioned whether equality could ever truly be achieved while patriarchal practices are still embedded in religious doctrines, such as those in Christianity and Islam. He highlighted the contradiction between professed values of equality and the realities of power dynamics within faith communities.

Kivumbi concluded by emphasizing the need for a rethinking of societal goals—one that does not merely seek inclusion or the sharing of pain but strives for happiness, equality, and universal human rights. His remarks were a call for deeper philosophical and political engagement to tackle the fundamental issues of societal inequality, the politics of inclusion, and the aspirations of future generations.

Report by Jane Anyango

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