

**Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies  
Berlin Annual Meeting  
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**Ignorance and humiliation  
*Talking points*  
by  
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**Brief**

*My discussion will mainly deal with humiliation, through such items as (i) Understanding the concept of humiliation, (ii) the ignorance as being one of the major causes of humiliation, (iii) the need to expand the awareness of the humiliation phenomenon in order to alleviate the suffering of the victims, to reduce the spread of that evil in our societies and to improve the management of the consequences of humiliation.*

*Although Humiliation is a practice or attitude that can have devastating effects in our countries, people by ignorance continue to use it or its various aspects as a strategy to reach political, social or economic objectives, not knowing that these objectives can not be sustainable in the long run.*

*Without pretending undertaking a formal survey in my entourage, I nevertheless by curiosity asked few questions at random to check the level of understanding and awareness of perpetrators and victims. It was not a surprise to find out that really, not only people don't seem to conceptualise the phenomenon of humiliation, but also they just are not aware of the long term effects on quality of the individuals and communities relations.*

*Peoples' first reaction reveals that humiliation is a complex, strong and widespread phenomenon, rooted in the nature of relations between individuals, communities and nations. There are a number of different situations of humiliation with different intensity. There are small and big cases of humiliation. Most of them are based on competition and defeat. Others are based on ignorance, on our incapacity to understand our position and the position of our neighbours..*

*My presentation is about ignorance of citizens about humiliation phenomenon. The consequences of that ignorance is the continuation of suffering of the victims. The presentation concludes on a few questions to be discussed during the annual meeting.*

*Those questions are:*

- a. *How can the findings of HumanDHS leave the laboratories of the Universities and research centres to become available to people, brothers and sisters in order to improve on the quality of their lives? How can we build awareness about the dangers that humiliation represents in our societies?*
- b. *Should Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies consider organising conferences in Africa, to which politicians, people involved in the reconciliation process, representatives of communities, individuals can take part, with the main objective of building their awareness in different forms in which humiliation expresses itself? How can we improve our education systems and our culture by developing more tolerance and better attitudes among people so as to build a future, free of humiliation, save the younger generations from suffering from the same evils as in the past.*
- c. *Should not Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies be called to rescue in conflict resolution or in the reconciliation process, in the view to setting up a strong basis for sustainable and long lasting reconciliation by introducing the right approach in human relations?*
- d. *Should not Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies spread its recommendations more actively in the Great Lakes region, in particular, by opening an office to pursue and monitor the progress being made in narrowing the sensitive differences aggravated by the past humiliating experiences?*
- e. *I noted a lot of ignorance or unawareness of the phenomenon of the phenomenon of humiliation in my own environment. Is this an indicator of development backwardness or is it common to all societies, including the developed world?*

## Introduction

My discussion will mainly deal with humiliation, through such items as (i) Understanding the concept of humiliation, (ii) the ignorance as being one of the major causes of humiliation, (iii) the need to expand the awareness of the humiliation phenomenon in order to alleviate the suffering of the victims, to reduce the spread of that evil in our societies and to improve the management of the consequences of humiliation.

It would be highly ambitious to talk about ignorance and humiliation at the same time. Both concepts cover such a variety of perceptions that it would be a challenge to cover them all within the allocated time. Moreover I don't think I can do more than just expressing views of my experience as a former politician and private businessman.

Therefore, this is not going to be the presentation of any results of a scientific research. Nor is it going to be a delivery of any academic exposé. It's going to be a humble contribution as a result of observation of a witness, a spectator and sometime, by ignorance, an actor and perpetrator of humiliation. Because even today, I continue to witness acts, experiences and consequences of humiliation.

## Understanding the Concept of Humiliation

Those of us who don't deal with this concept on daily basis, who are not involved in the research on this subject, taking part in these meetings is a blessing. It gives me the opportunity to improve on my knowledge about the concept of Humiliation. In fact, exploiting qualitative information and references which the Executive Office has kindly addressed to all members, essentially thanks the wonderful website, has already helped me to enlarge my understanding of the concept of humiliation.

Dr Lindner Evelin has sent to me the definitions of humiliation that have been used in her analysis. From this documentation, I now have a precise and concise definition of humiliation, i.e. *lowering of a person, subjugation that damages pride and honour, to be put in a state that is lower to what the person thinks he deserves*, among others. But she rightly cautioned that ***humiliation is cultural dependant and what is humiliating in one culture may not be humiliating in another culture.***

It appears that humiliation is rooted in the nature of relations between individuals, communities and nations. There are a number of different situations of humiliation with different intensity. There are small cases and big cases of humiliation. Most of them are based on competition and defeat, where "***the winner wins everything and the looser loses everything***" is common. Therefore as long as there will be competition, there will be humiliation. Because humiliation is so frequent in our societies, appears under different forms, with different impact on our lives, we don't have the right perception of that phenomenon in which the same peoples can be successively offenders and victims.

While preparing my coming to this Annual Meeting, I have by curiosity asked few questions to some of my countrymen: adult, young, poor and rich:

- f. What is humiliation?
- g. What the forms and the implications of humiliation?
- h. Do you think that humiliation has played a role in the history of Rwanda?
- i. What can be done to eliminate or alleviate humiliation in a community?

From the answers received, I noted the following:

People acknowledged that they had never thought it to be a serious issue. They acknowledged their ignorance even if they know about the word “humiliation”, about specific humiliating situations but no analysis on the link with conflicts, the bad quality of relations between individuals of the same communities, etc.

Well, after you have provided some explanations, they start analysing humiliation, not from the perpetrator, but from the victim point of view. Everyone wants to present himself as a potential victim. We all tend to forget that we are all potential perpetrators.

We don't want to recognize that we may have our share of responsibility when we are humiliated. There is a tendency of simplification of the process

All the people I discussed the issue with, were surprised to hear that humiliation can have such devastating effects on our life! Their answers were not surprising!. They reflected my first reaction of surprise when I came across the concept for the first time.

There are things that are getting clearer in my mind:

1. Humiliation is always characterised by an actor and a victim, and some time the same individual plays both roles. Most people tend to remember only their experience as victim of humiliation.
2. The forms of humiliation vary considerably from a culture to another; nevertheless some forms of humiliation can be identified as universal.
3. Any implication of humiliation is dramatic for the author and more so for the victim.
4. It is generally recognised that humiliation has played a tragic role in the history of Rwanda,
5. Some people believe that humiliation cannot be eliminated, for it is inherent to human nature. Others are of the opinion that gender and human rights promotion will gradually reduce humiliation in any community.
6. Humiliation is not only the responsibility of perpetrator; sometimes the victim has his part.

It's important to understand some aspects of the phenomenon, to feel this idea deserves all the attention of communities of human beings. I discovered that many of us, live in ignorance of some reality that is shaping our lives, and sometimes is destroying our human environment.

### **Motivation of Humiliation**

My interest to deal with *ignorance* of the common citizen of this phenomenon of humiliation starts from my personal experience. Ignorance and humiliation is somehow my personal story; it's telling my ignorance during so many years of this phenomenon, which is so crucial in our societies. for 99.9% of the concerned, humiliation is not always understood.

I came across this concept by accident, when I met with Dr Evelin Lindner in Rwanda back in 1999. For the first time, I was informed about the research she was undertaking, the importance of that research and why she was interested in the Rwandan society. It was not difficult to convince me that the humiliation plays an important role in the conflicts in the suffering of people in different communities.

But how many people will have a chance to meet with Dr Lindner or any other specialist in their lifetime to be briefed about the subject? Many of my countrymen who have no chance of meeting with a person like Evelin, will probably never sit down and discuss the implications of humiliation in their communities. That's why I thought putting this topic of ***Ignorance and Humiliation*** on the agenda is worthwhile.

Like probably in many other parts of the world, human beings in our regions act in order to safeguard their egoistic and immediate interests or to keep a political and economic order. Most of the time, humiliation is never an objective pursued per se. It's a sub-product of our ignorance, our selfishness and our short-sighted strategies, serving the interest of the perpetrators and not caring the situation of the victims.

As we can see, humiliation is a complex, strong and widely spread phenomenon, so frequent but still largely ignored by the majority of us. In other words, it is something that is part of our lives and still very few people are aware of it, of its consequences and of how to get rid of it. We are all like the Bourgeois Gentilhomme of Molière who was surprised to discover that for years, he was using la "PROSE" in his normal conversation, without knowing the form of speech he was using! We humiliate others without knowing and we are perpetrators of evil by ignorance. We suffer as victims of some thing we could easily avoid if we knew how to do it.

Ignorance does not save us from taking the blame and paying the price. For there is always a price to pay. History has shown that sooner or later humiliation backfires on the perpetrators. It has a long lasting effects on generations of victims. It can backfire immediately or after ten days or after several generations.

### **Humiliation in Rwanda**

Dr Evelin Lindner has written extensively on this; so I will not repeat what she has done. Everybody heard about cases of humiliation in the History of my country and the terrible drama they led to. If it had not been ignorance, all those cases could have been avoided or at least their impact on peoples live could have been alleviated. For example, the first contacts of the Europeans (Germans) and my countrymen were full of misunderstanding, ignorance on both sides but all with devastating effects in short, medium and long term; ignorance and recognition of the values and humanity of the other part.

At the outset of the last century until probably today, Rwanda has become an extraordinary social environment in which all the humiliating situations have developed with success. It became a cultural speciality, a trademark and a terrible *steamroller* in the entire society.

People have been successively, perpetrators of the day and victims a day after, etc., until the finish line in 1994 that took more than a million of our brothers and sisters who have gone, ignorant that their drama has started long time ago and has never been addressed correctly. The mass killing of over 1,000,000 Banyarwanda, deprived the country of human capacity, institutional capacity; decline of GDP by 50%; destruction of socio and economic

infrastructures. People in Rwanda are learning today that life would be better on the conditions that they change the type of relations they used to have among themselves. They know now that developing successively quality of relations between individuals based on mutual tolerance and mutual respect may be one of the conditions to economic development. **Is there a link between the quality of relations between individuals and the state of development?**

The link between humiliating situations and the conflicts that have erupted has never been recognised until today. Humiliating attitudes are imposed in fun and laughter, and later on become tragic. Situations develop in the complete ignorance of the consequences that they could cause in the long term, i.e. colonial personnel were looking down on local people, because they wrongly were convinced that those local people had no culture, no values, even no heart. Local people wrongly accepted this humiliation, convinced that the new-comers were after all superior. But in what way they were superior, no one asked any question. Ignorance prevailed!!

For the perpetrators, the things may happen in good faith, in ignorance of the suffering. As the Greek philosopher of old times Socrates said, most of the time, evil is a result of ignorance, because if people knew very well, they would avoid evil, because evil has backfire effects.

### **Cultural misunderstanding**

In some cases victims themselves contribute to their humiliation by ignorance of the nature of what is happening to them or by lack of humility allowed by the cultural conditions in which things are said or done. Understanding different cultures, their forms of expression and attitudes could contribute to reduce tensions and humiliation. *Examples*

Ignorance misleads many people in their behaviour, in their reactions and attitudes. We sometimes are not fully aware when we are committing humiliating actions or attitudes; because we don't know the impact or the effects they will have on the victims. The victim himself is ignorant when humiliation affects him. The whole society underestimates the impact of cultural attitudes or behaviour with humiliating component. That's why I proposed that this ignorance be addressed in our societies.

### **Fight against Humiliation**

In Rwanda there are some issues, which are very sensitive. One of them is certainly the problem of is the ethnically based identity. Many writers have written about the 3 ethnic groups that compose the Rwandan society. But Rwandan used to live without a reference to any ethnic considerations. There were other discriminating criteria based on merit, outstanding social or economic achievements, and loyalty to the King.

The ethnic conflicts are the creation of the colonial powers that exacerbated the differences with the purpose of maintaining their supremacy. The dramatisation of differences reached a first peak in 1959 and as a result, thousands of people had no choice but flee for the exile. The second peak was reached in 1994 when millions were slaughtered. The notions of Hutus and Tutsi are man-made. They are not the creation of God. Still, people have killed in their name.

Still, by ignorance, we continue to maintain those ethnic issues in our language knowing very well that they contributed to the most terrible bloodshed of the modern times.

Ethnicity is not the only humiliating situation that can provoke conflicts among citizens. . Within each group in Rwanda, each community, each enterprise, in each village there are other forms of humiliation, which are equally devastating.

Some of them are known by Rwandans only. There are cases of verbal harassment, social and economic discriminations and exclusion of individuals from acceding to their rights simply because they belong to this or that family.

Honestly we do not pay enough attention to the phenomenon of humiliation. The research carried out by Dr Evelin Lindner and other scientists should be made known to our countries in order to change some of cultural settings which we take as our cultural values, but in fact are a sign of backwardness, a great risk to our peace and stability, an indicator of the low quality of relations in our communities.

In this period of reconstruction, where the Government of Rwanda is looking for a true reconciliation between Rwandans, we should work together to eradicate any form of humiliation wherever it can appear. That's the only way to build a society with a better quality of life, based on respect of human being where humiliation in all its forms can be banished for ever.

Politically, it appears that tremendous efforts have been made to take the advantage of the lessons of the past. The new constitution that has been promulgated in 2003, has provided a living legal framework enabling diverse legal instruments and formal institutions to be put in place to manage, control and resolve social conflicts caused by social exclusion. Examples of such legal efforts include the following institutions:

- Law against sectarianism, and discrimination of whatever kind, this is prohibited and punishable by law (article 11 of the constitution).
- National Council of Dialogue (NCD), meetings held annually and chaired by the Head of State. All issues (political, economic, social and security) affecting the state are openly discussed and new future strategies developed.
- National Commission for the fight against genocide.
- Gacaca Courts.
- National Unity and Reconciliation. This is an independent body responsible for building peace and reconciliation, eradicating the consequences of the policies of discrimination and exclusion, which characterized the past regimes.

In addition to that, since 1997, the identity cards don't mention any more, the ethnic identity of the bearer. Review of diverse literature and discussions with knowledgeable people on Rwanda, generally indicate that the process of promoting reconciliation, peace and security through constitutionalism and the rule of law; good governance has, among other positive social dividends, brought about wider involvement of the civil society organizations in diverse programs which promote reconciliation, willingness to co-exist in harmony and to nurture a new culture of forgiveness among the population.

Nevertheless, in spite of the above progress made by the Government and the people of Rwanda, the international community and media continue to maintain the ethnic divisions and

the old ethnic devils which have done so bad to the country. Regularly you hear international media insisting more on ethnic differences rather than what should unite the Nation.

We should even banish those words from our language, because they carry with them death stigmas. I don't think they are of any interest or can be rehabilitated. Being a creation of human beings, they are necessary imperfect, with not always good human intentions.

Obviously, we know the situation is evolving favourably in terms of legislation and government policies and strategies. But we also know that for the Rwandan Society to fully internalise and to positively respond to this new culture of tolerance is bound to take time.

### **Concluding remarks**

Let me take this opportunity to express once more my appreciation to Dr Lindner and others for their initiative of launching this Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies. It is painful to note that humiliation continue and even gain new momentum worldwide. Nevertheless, I believe that HumanDHS could reinforce its programme of *building awareness about humiliation, starting in communities at high risk*. This will contribute to improving the quality of relations between individuals, between communities and between nations.

*Normally, diversity is good. When the Creator puts together diversity, he produces a nosegay of flowers. But when human beings put together diversity and run it as human, most of the times they produce a cocktail of Molotov.* This has happened in Rwanda where ethnicity has been developed, not for the good of Rwandans, but for their misfortune!!

Humiliation can be cured and its effects neutralized only if we can go back to the root of the Creation of humanity and note that God has created men and women without any bad intentions of humiliation.

While concluding this short note, I submit the following questions to the appreciation of the participants :

- j. How can the findings of HumanDHS leave the laboratories of the Universities and research centres to become available to people, brothers and sisters in order to improve on the quality of their lives? How can we build awareness about the dangers that humiliation represents in our societies?
- k. Should Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies consider organising conferences in Africa, to which politicians, people involved in the reconciliation process, representatives of communities, individuals can take part, with the main objective of building their awareness in different forms in which humiliation expresses itself? *How can we improve our education systems and our culture by developing more tolerance and better attitudes among people so as to build a future, free of humiliation, save the younger generations from suffering from the same evils as in the past.*



- l. Should not Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies be called to rescue in conflict resolution or in the reconciliation process, in the view to setting up a strong basis for sustainable and long lasting reconciliation by introducing the right approach in human relations?
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- n. I noted a lot of ignorance or unawareness of the phenomenon of the phenomenon of humiliation in my own environment. Is this an indicator of development backwardness or is it common to all societies, countries and communities?

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