

BELLOWS: Times of crisis break down walls of ethnicity, tribe

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Thursday, April 2, 2020 0:46

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Health CS Mutahi Kagwe

Health CS Mutahi Kagwe. The daily Ministry of Health briefings have become must watch news amidst Covid-19 realities. FILE PHOTO | NMG

As millions of Kenyans stay hunkered down in their homes as much as possible, we peer out through our windows at birds flying, bees buzzing, and dogs playing.

We get struck with the constant realisation that animals are immune from the disaster befalling humanity.

We feel more together as one with our fellow humankind from Nairobi to Accra, from Cape Town to Tokyo, and from Edinburgh to Dallas, we all social distance, hope in scientific breakthroughs, and revel in the value of our friends and family.

No race persists unharmed, no ethnicity unscathed, and no class untouched.

Our hearts break for our brothers and sisters who must still go forth to earn a living due to economic necessity or to save the world as frontline medical professionals and scientists.

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The daily Ministry of Health briefings have become must watch news amidst Covid-19 realities. We all read up on public health, virology, and immunology.

Humans hold the unique ability to come together in the midst of crisis. What appeared important in February now seems utterly ridiculous since March 13 when our first confirmed case shattered our innocence.

Previously, powerful forces sought to constantly divide Kenyans in order to gain from profit or power. As we first learned from the colonial British Empire, so much division promulgated upon us based on ethnicity and numerous subdivisions therein can divide and conquer.

But in uncertain times, let us reflect on what it truly means to be Kenyan as one people.

As sociologist Steven Ratuva explains, ethnicity comprises a collective social construction and creates a sociocultural identification. It permeates into and affects society's perceptions, attitudes, behaviours, practices, policies, and laws.

We see examples of ethnicity everywhere. From Thailand to the Philippines, Brazil, America, Spain, and to right here in East Africa, we see examples of ethnicity between people groups and the manipulation therein.

Ethnicity intersects our class structures, our political machinations, how resources get distributed, human rights abuses, marginalisation, and of course discrimination.

But here in Kenya, we often hear of ethnicity in terms of the potentially explosive force for potent political mobilisation.

The upsetting study by Jonas Hjort back in 2014 found that in Kenyan workplaces, people can discriminate against their colleagues from other ethnic backgrounds even to the extent that they themselves lose money in the process.

So, the discrimination made everyone receive lower income. But in 2020, new research helps shed new light on the extent of our ethnic biases.

Despite making sweeping assumptions that Nairobi represents a microcosm of all of Africa in a way that one would not assume Oslo, for instance, could give insight into all Europeans, the research team of Lars Berge, Kjetil Bjorvatn, Simon Galle, Edward Miguel, Daniel Posner, Bertil Tungodden, and Kelly Zhang found some interesting results regarding how Nairobians view ethnicity.

In experimental games between all one ethnicity teams and multi-ethnic teams, our preferences and performance stayed similar. So, in short-term experiments, we easily and happily ignore ethnic differences.

These results fly in the face of assumptions that Kenyans only see each other in terms of ethnic divides.

Inasmuch, during these challenging times as we pull together as a nation to tackle our own version of the global Covid-19 pandemic, we can work together no matter our ethnic backgrounds.

We can excel jointly. We hold the capacity to view each other from a tribal-blind perspective. From the coast to the lake, from the forests to the plains, from the peaks to the valleys and everyone in between, we can view each other as in-group as Kenyans and forge ahead to conquer pestilence and build an even better nation.

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<https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/lifestyle/society/Times-of-crisis-break-down-walls-of-ethnicity/3405664-5510972-dhr2q8/index.html>