

Reflections on Unity Club Intwararumuri: A 28-year journey of bearing the torch of unity



Members of Unity Club, popularly known as Intwararumuri during their 15th Forum in 2022. Unity Club is made up of present and former members of cabinet.

By Prof Jolly Mazimhaka

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repercussions of an unimaginable tragedy that had befallen Rwanda two years earlier in 1994.

There was a need for members to make a rational decision on how they could offer support in the reconstruction of the then-devastated country. As mentioned above, the Rwanda of two years after the genocide against the Tutsi was as if a severe hurricane had swept over the land, and shamefully and blatantly claimed more than one million lives in a matter of only a hundred days.

In the aftermath of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi, the nation grappled with profound wounds and scars, and a cocktail of emotions that included confusion, deep-seated mistrust, fear, anger, fury, pain, and prejudice among others. Societal divisions were rampant, and these were further divided into yet other newer subdivisions following the post-1994 socially mixed grill of Rwandans from both within and out of the country, including former refugees returning home.

Recognising the imperative need for unity, healing, and reconciliation, the 1994 post-genocide Government of National Unity took matters into its own hands to foster a culture of unity, forgiveness, and reconciliation during the period of reconstruction and rehabilitation.

It was in this early period of attempting to sew back together the torn fabric of a nation, that **Unity Club Intwararumuri** was born. Contrary to William Shakespeare’s questioning of “What’s in a name,” arguing that “a rose by any other name can smell as sweet” – there is, actually, a lot in a name. Especially a name as intentional as the **Unity Club Intwararumuri**. The very name carries meaning. It speaks for itself, reflecting as it does, the club’s vision and mission of bearing the torch of unity along a 28-year-old journey to foster reconciliation, restore unity, and build peace in Rwanda. Neither an enviable nor an easy task by a long shot!

Founded on February 28th 1996 by Her Excellency, Mrs. Jeannette Kagame, the club’s pioneers had to first reflect on how they could offer support in handling the nightmarish



First Lady Jeannette Kagame, who is the chairperson of Unity Club shares a light moment with Impinganzima, the elderly genocide survivors residing in the Huye ICDP

The devastating effect of this indescribable inhuman terror is a tale for another day. For people to be able to move on, it necessitated that unity, reconciliation, and peace be harnessed as pillars for Rwanda’s sustainable development and restoration of hope. This was at a time when hope for many was still elusive and when trust was indeed very shaky, but it was also a time when the resilience of the human spirit found inspiration in being bold.

From the outset, Unity Club dared to be bold in its efforts to help integrate the most affected communities made up mostly of widows and orphans, and more recently, the immediate neighbors living in surrounding villages. The club

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set in motion a series of urgent community initiatives that would be led by the organisation’s Secretariat and carried out by members who, in themselves, were still struggling from within to make sense of what had befallen the country two years earlier, and where they might fit in.

There was a desperate need for them not only to build trust and understanding even among themselves, the country’s leadership, and the citizens at large, but also to rebuild unity and reconciliation, the very essence of the Rwandan identity that had been trampled on with impunity. Through mostly outreach programmes, Unity Club members began a memorable journey together “Towards a Common Goal,” as its rallying slogan goes. The target was to first heal the wounds of the most vulnerable segments of society, including orphans, widows, *Incike or Intwaza* (the only surviving members of lost families), and child-headed households; offering care and compassion, various needed resources, educational support to all in need, and of recent, organizing and attending weddings of those who had become of age.

A deep commitment to building a more inclusive and compassionate society.

As mentioned above, the post-genocide situation in the country was desperate, but as the common saying goes, desperate situations call for desperate measures, and so it was with Unity Club. Certain initiatives amid this indescribable atmosphere in the country so akin to hell on



President Paul Kagame receiving Unity award in 2010 from members of Unity Club. He was the person to be bestowed the award.

earth had to be put in place.

The club’s initial mandate was to focus its attention on a series of initiatives that aimed at offering compassion and fostering trust and understanding among its members and local communities. The primary purpose of the club in the earlier phases of the post-genocide period was to extend a hand of friendship and share a piece of human kindness by providing the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, a warm embrace, and a smile to these most vulnerable segments of society – with the key focus being on reassuring them that they were not alone. Unity Club was offering a shoulder to cry on.

In doing so, the club hoped to build a nationwide community of more inclusive, compassionate, and responsible citizens. Worthy of note is that in the long run, this approach cultivated trust and a sense of unity of purpose among members themselves, and helped restore hope, faith, and

some measure of trust among those most affected members of the wider society.

It should be noted that at its inception, Unity Club membership was largely female, specifically, spouses of male cabinet ministers who were then in the majority, plus the only two female cabinet ministers at the time. On its 10th anniversary, celebrated in 2007, Unity Club chose to expand and consolidate its membership base. To this end, the club admitted in its ranks, former and current male cabinet members, as well as male spouses of former and current female cabinet Ministers, to take up their place as Associate Members, for life. It is important to note here that Unity Club’s slogan is “Once a member, always a member,” making membership to the club a solid pact between member and club, and between club and country.

As membership grew in number, so did responsibilities. It became necessary for the club to seek out various other partners and stakeholders involved in similar activities, with whom to share their common vision. These partners included but were not limited to the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF), the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC), the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC), the Ministry of National Unity and Civic Engagement (MINUBUMWE) and the (now defunct) National Commission for Unity & Reconciliation (NURC), World Food Programme (WFP), Good Neighbors Rwanda, Rwanda Defence Force Command and Staff College (RDFCSC), Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, ... These partners have played a key role in Unity Club’s major annual activities, most especially the Annual Unity Club Forum, which provides a platform for self-evaluation and subsequent strategizing on a way forward guided by the club’s Strategic Plan.

The goal for these annual forums is for members to promote cohesion, and to work together to enhance unity and peace, thus serving as a beacon of hope for social cohesion and as an inspiration to the Rwandan citizens at large. Of note is that these forums are normally attended by the entire political leadership and heads of public and private institutions, including

His Excellency Paul Kagame, the President of the Republic of Rwanda, who is also an honorary member of the club and often Guest of Honor at these forums, and of course the First Lady, Madam Jeannette Kagame as the Chairperson and founder of Unity Club. The high-level attendance at these annual forums is significant; it shows the value the government attaches to the work carried out by Unity Club.

In her article of November 8th, 2023, entitled *How Unity Club shaped Rwanda’s Future* and published in *Great Lakes Eye*, Lindah Uwase correctly observes that the “importance of political leaders in shaping the destiny of their communities cannot be overstated. In Rwanda’s case, leadership plays a pivotal role in transitioning the nation from division to unity, from chaos to order.” And so it is with Unity Club.

The inclusion of Associate members into the membership of the club did, without a doubt, bring with it an added advantage to the general operations of the club. Their participation in the club’s Annual Forums, the most recent being the 16th, held on the 29th of October 2023, not only

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gave weight to each successive Annual Forum, but the club also became marked by an increase in energy and vibrancy with enlarged participation. This, in turn, inspired the expansion of initiatives following a paradigm shift to embrace partnerships and/or collaborations in building and enhancing unity and resilience, especially among the youth. The year 2007, therefore, became a turning point for the club with its transformative humanitarian activities moving



Unity Club built 24 decent houses known as 4together for the Neighbors of Impinganzima in Huye District Mukura Sector Taba Village..

forward. Since then, the club’s Annual Forums have been instrumental in figuratively carrying the torch forward, and slowly but surely lighting the way into a more coherent nation in all aspects.

By 2010, Unity Club had built its foundation upon the pillars of unity, peace, reconciliation, and resilience. Fully cognisant of the impact of divisionism based on socially constructed identities, Unity Club aligned itself with Rwanda’s vision to seek homegrown solutions to fostering a unified national identity. Recognising the urgent need for Rwandans to reclaim and assert their hereto-distorted common identity, Unity Club sought to instill or revive in all Rwandans, the spirit and patriotic duty to love and protect the country and all those who live in it.

This spirit has existed amongst Rwandans from the beginning, including during and immediately after the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi when People known as *Abarinzi b’Igihango* protected those who were being targeted. It was within this historical context that, in 2010, Unity Club, in collaboration with the *National Unity & Reconciliation Commission (NURC)*, officially instituted a Unity Award in recognition and in honor of outstanding individuals and organizations whose unwavering support and commitment to unity and reconciliation was exemplary, serving as it did, as a guiding light to the nation and its people, particularly the youth.

The club was proud and honoured to award its inaugural Unity Award to a well-deserving recipient and supporter, H.E Paul Kagame, the President of the Republic of Rwanda. The award was given in recognition of his contribution to promoting unity and peace among Rwandans. In subsequent years, a good number of recipients of the award came to be recognised, a few of them unfortunately, post-humously. These exhibitors of *Ubumuntu (humaneness)* were ordinary

citizens doing extraordinary humanitarian acts during and after the 1994 Rwanda genocide against the Tutsi.

This category of people, irrespective of their ethnic, religious, regional, or racial background has since been selected each year to receive the award by Unity Club in active collaboration with the *National Unity & Reconciliation Commission (NURC)* replaced by the *Ministry of National Unity and Civic Engagement (MINUBUMWE)* since 2022 and the local leadership at lower administrative levels of government. Statistics available indicate that at the national level, 64 recipients in total have so far received this Unity Award between 2016-2023. Out of the 64, 38 sadly passed away (R.I.P).

The public recognition of these exemplary human beings who, for several years had lived a life marked by divisions along superficial ethnic lines and yet chose to carry out outstanding acts of humanity, goes a long way in mending fences within and among communities where such divisions may still exist. These unsung heroes scattered around the country who helped thousands of Rwandans survive the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi, were saving the lives of fellow Rwandans irrespective of their ethnic background.

These brave men and women made a deliberate choice to save lives, not to take them. They will always be remembered as agents of unity, peace & mercy, and mostly for their *Ubupfura*, or the essence of *Rwandanism*. They are the living proof for most Rwandans, especially the young generation, that anything is possible; that socially constructed divisionism destroys both the nation and its peoples and must not only be shunned at all costs but must also be eradicated, NEVER happen AGAIN!

One of the “tools” chosen by Unity Club was *Ndi Umunyarwanda*, a concept conceived to defuse existing superficial divisions and splintered identities that had mushroomed liberally over the years having been created by a poor and myopic leadership up until 1994. The divisions and subdivisions of a people that had once shared a culture, a language, and cultural beliefs and practices had consequently created a deep-rooted and unnecessary division by years of poor leadership and governance up until 1994.

For that reason, Unity Club took it upon itself to introduce and explain the *Ndi Umunyarwanda* concept from 2013 on. It was a concept conceived as a homegrown solution to problems of socially constructed identities that had grown out of protracted indoctrination on the genocide ideology, especially among the youth, and which, over time, had eclipsed the Rwandan real and primary identity.

From then on, the *Ndi Umunyarwanda concept* has taken its place as an umbrella theme guiding all Unity Club’s Annual Forum programs and has been given an important platform to date. All efforts at strengthening unity and reconciliation among Rwandans are based, says Jeannette KAGAME and Rwanda’s First Lady and Chairperson of Unity Club, on harnessing *Ndi Umunyarwanda* as “a foundation on which ...the country’s togetherness is built” (In *First Lady calls for renewed efforts to consolidate Unity, Reconciliation Gains*.

KTPress. 28th-29th October 2023). Guided by the Unity

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Club Annual Forums on unity, reconciliation and resilience, it should be noted that these forums have provided a rich platform each year for the club’s self-reflection, discussions that include the youth, suggestions for a way forward, and subsequent activity plans for the following year. Since 2013, the club has put a lot of effort into introducing and explaining the *Ndi Umunyarwanda* concept nationwide in the hope of changing the yet unchanged mindsets, some of which are, sadly, born not necessarily from experience but from hearsay.

In this regard, this smart *Ndi Umunyarwanda* campaign has been instrumental in restoring a sense of self-identity, and in instilling patriotic pride and self-worth, particularly among the youth. Furthermore, to enhance the budding “Rwandan spirit” within the younger generation, the club has engaged, and continues to engage, college and university students in discussions and competitions aimed at fostering an appreciation for having a country for all Rwandans, a reaffirmation of one common identity, and by extension, a growing patriotism and a sense of ownership.

The most recent *Ndi Umunyarwanda Integration Project* competitions carried out in phases (2021-2023) targeted Higher Learning Institutions. The entire project was sponsored by the *Ministry of National Unity and Civic Engagement* (MINUBUMWE), *Rosa Luxemburg Foundation-East Africa (RLF-EA)*, the *Ministry of Youth and Culture* (which is currently the *Ministry of Youth and Arts*), the *Ministry of Education* (MINEDUC) and in partnership with the *Rwanda Defense Force Command and Staff College*. Unity Club aimed to create a forum for the exchange of ideas among students in the sense of promoting unity among themselves, and working together to enhance unity, resilience, reconciliation, and peace in the country, the very foundation of the country’s sustainable development.

The project aims to continue providing a platform for dialogue between elders and youth to foster the intrinsic values of appreciating being Rwandan well enough to participate

fully in the country’s socio-economic development. *Ndi Umunyarwanda*, or *I am Rwandan*, plays a key role in bringing to the fore, the full acceptance and appreciation of one’s identity; the self-identification with what it means and what it takes to own and wear the Rwandan identity with dignity and pride; it is to own and protect who and what you are; it is the sense of belonging to something bigger than the individual.

The *Ndi Umunyarwanda Integrated Project’s* Competitions for higher learning institutions also aimed at encouraging the youth to appreciate and carry out meaningful research, therefore, were harnessed to facilitate knowledge about *Ndi Umunyarwanda* amongst the youth population of Rwanda, and to empower them to disseminate that knowledge and to help them develop a sense of unified identity.

It is safe to say at this stage that *Ndi Umunyarwanda Integrated Project* and other projects or programmes carried out by Unity Club to date have contributed positively to bringing about unity and peace. However, along the club’s 28-year journey towards their complete attainment, it became evident that the goal might not be achieved without first healing the wounds left behind by the genocide against the Tutsi particularly among the youth. The traumatic events of 1994 left many shattered lives not only physically, but also psychologically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

It became clear during the sharing of testimonies at every successive Unity Club Annual Forum that giant strides had been made regarding the creation of unity and peace, but the question arose as to how much this had been achieved most especially among the youth? This question not only raised curiosity, but it also prompted Unity Club to want to establish to what extent the impact of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi had had, particularly on the youth with peculiar problems. Consequently, in 2021, Unity Club in partnership with the Ministry of Youth (which is currently the Ministry of Youth and Arts) made a conscious effort to commission

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The Intwararumuri and other senior government leaders during a past forum.

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research on the *Impact of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi on the most affected youth: Analysis of youth’s peculiar post-genocide problems and emerging solutions*.

The research targeted six post-genocide Rwandan youth categories, namely: youth who survived the genocide against the Tutsi, youth whose parents were found guilty of genocide, youth without a trace of family origins or family ties following the Genocide against the Tutsi, youth born out of rape during the genocide, youth born from ethnic intermarriages, and youth born after the Genocide against the Tutsi. The findings are an eye-opener and have been shared on Unity Club’s website. Both the findings and recommendations, it is hoped, will inspire further research on other key issues highlighted in the initial research report for further investigation or follow-up.

Such initiatives as mentioned above are in line with Unity Club’s mission of combatting the consequences to ordinary Rwandan citizens of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi. The club took to advocating for widows and widowers whose families had been completely wiped out, leaving them sole survivors or *Incike* according to the local parlance, namely today called Intwaza. Counting back to 1994, many of these survivors who, sadly, had nobody left to call their own, have also inevitably been aging. Old and living alone was a recipe for more disaster for this vulnerable group of people.

This situation prompted Unity Club, in collaboration with partners, to put up hostels known as *Impinganzima* in which the Intwaza (*Incike*) would be housed and sheltered in four locations of the country, namely Huye, Bugesera, Rusizi, and Nyanza Districts, and would no longer be lonely. The club and partners would take care of their basic needs: food, shelter, clothing, and health, and provide paid staff to administer and monitor their general welfare. Currently, these four locations accommodate a total of 224 widows and widowers who have found in each other peace, tranquility, and companionship.

This initiative was inspired by what Unity Club representatives had previously discovered during their visits to Avega’s beneficiaries in different Districts to mark the annual commemorations of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi. The visits had unearthed numerous challenges, including the struggles and tribulations faced by genocide survivors who had not been able to give dignified burials to their families, but also *Incike*, who had absolutely no one left to call their own, facing a double jeopardy of sole survivor hood, but who had also not had the opportunity to bury their own. The genocide had left in its wake significant poverty, bleeding hearts, and an overwhelming number of orphans, widows, and widowers most of whom had been left as sole survivors. They had next to nothing.

Unity Club has always been intentional in its selection of activities that would directly or indirectly benefit most especially vulnerable Rwandans who had been negatively impacted by the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi. The club had discovered that, on the periphery of where the model *Impinganzima* was built, lived entire communities – ordinary but vulnerable citizens who were living in less-than-ideal conditions.

Recognizing the clear need to pay attention to these and to all vulnerable Rwandans in dire distress, the club, along with

collaborators, introduced specific projects and programs that would weave into their fabric, possibilities of community *integration* in the hope that those projects and programs would benefit all vulnerable communities in selected areas of operation in the country. Such projects included among others; the *Integrated Community Development Project (ICDP)* that would address the social welfare needs of communities.

As a result of these key partnerships and collaborations, Unity Club was able to integrate as beneficiaries in the pilot ICDP project in Huye District, Mukura Sector (2019 to date), the ordinary citizens living around the *Impinganzima* hostel. This project involved the upgrading of *Impinganzima*, mainly the construction of a palliative care unit; an ongoing construction of 26 new houses to replace those that previously were in very poor condition, an *Early Childhood Development (ECD)* center, a big tent which will be replaced, in the upcoming months, by a Multipurpose Hall that would accommodate 500 people. These ordinary citizens, neighbors to *Impinganzima* of Taba Village, Mukura Sector, Huye District had been in dire need of basic infrastructure, having been living all their lives in temporary shacks.

These citizens were also dealing with trauma and other psychological baggage due to the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi. Fortunately, with support of Unity Club partners, these were provided with decent housing, basic financial needs, and health care. Unity Club’s purpose for extending its attention to the inclusiveness of all was to bring on board the communities living on the periphery of *Impinganzima* so they could also benefit from the projects so far extended to residents of *Impinganzima* as well.

Another added advantage is that these two groups living side by side yet separated can get to mix and mingle and get to know and appreciate one another while sowing seeds of unity and reconciliation. Clearly while taking care of ordinary communities” socio-economic welfare, Unity Club continues to bear the torch that will light the way toward a more cohesive, inclusive, and potentially prosperous Rwanda.

There is yet another of the Integrated Community Development Project that Unity Club, reinforced by partners, participated in, and that is the *Saemaul Zero Hunger Communities (SZHC)* project whose overall agenda was to specifically address food security and generally to solve or to alleviate genocide-related challenges, this time, in Nyamagabe District, Cyanika Sector.

It has been operating since 2011 and is still ongoing. To bring comfort to those victims of genocide who had had no opportunity to bury their dead in respect and dignity, Unity Club offered to construct the Cyanika Genocide Memorial Centre where genocide survivors would be able to bury the remains of their family members with honor, thus help them to face reality and to come to terms with it. In terms of the healing process, this kind and thoughtful activity brought to survivors, one hopes, comfort, and relief. The club embarked on the *Seamoul Zero Hunger Communities (SZHC) activities* and continued its smart campaign of raising awareness on the compelling need for unity & reconciliation through various talks and discussions as well, which led to

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community members gradually starting meeting, chatting, and working as a team on local activities.

Unity Club in collaboration with his partners had repaired damaged roads and houses, he has also been involved in farming, constructing classrooms and an ICT laboratory, football pitches and other spaces for recreation. The socio-economic development activities that positively targeted survivors of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi, and in which whole communities, including families of perpetrators, participated, became the means for building unity between survivors and their immediate neighbors, some of whom may have committed genocide. It goes without saying that the Integrated Community Development Projects in which Unity Club continues to actively participate, have contributed greatly to the club’s journey of lighting the way to unity and reconciliation.

Besides activities related to developmental projects, Unity Club also actively contributes to strengthening relations among its members through other activities related to the internal affairs of the club. As recent as October 2023, the indefatigable Unity Club members successfully organized the *Annual Retreat* and *Annual Forum*, in collaboration with its partners and collaborators such as the *Ministry of Nation Unity and Civic Engagement* and others. As is done each year, this activity serves to provide a wider platform for members’ introspection, and for the evaluation of progress within the realm of national unity.

The most recent of these twin events were the 4th Annual Retreat (28th October 2023) for effective members, and the 16th Forum (29th October 2023) for all members, effective and associates alike. Deliberations included participation by youth who shed more light on how far unity has been achieved most especially among the youth, citing the big influence Unity Club’s intentional activities that involve the Youth have had on them positively. However, they also delineated several challenges still to be overcome. Clearly, Unity Club’s torch has lit the way, and the baton is slowly but surely being passed on to the next generation of Intwararumuri. The struggle for positive outcomes continues.

At this point, one can safely say that over 28 years, Unity Club with faithful partners and collaborators, has stood the test of time and has emerged from the ashes of despair as a living testimony to hope, resilience, determination, and good leadership, carrying the Torch of Unity through Rwanda’s tumultuous journey of recovery and growth. The journey was not easy. However, worthy of note is that in the long run, the club’s approach to providing healing through unified activities which in turn, build unity between and among members, partners, and collaborators, has largely been successful.

It has cultivated a measure of trust and a sense of unity of purpose within the various communities, including within and among members of Unity Club themselves. Though perhaps not at 100% yet, the achievements so far are an indication of endless possibilities when action is propelled by a united front. The club’s call for action has helped restore hope, faith, and some measure of trust among those most vulnerable segments of society.

Currently, the club continues to bear the torch of unity, and its steadfast dedication to fostering trust, understanding, and collaboration remains a testament to the enduring spirit of the Rwandan people. With each initiative and program, the club serves as a constant reminder that however rough the path to a brighter future is, there is nothing that unity of purpose, compassion, emotional intelligence, and a shared commitment to building a better tomorrow for ALL Rwandans, can’t do.

The road is still long, and there is a lot more to be done both to consolidate, to introduce, and even to mend, but the prospects, measured against what has been achieved in the past 28 years so far, remain promising. The decision to embrace the integration approach has served not only to celebrate champions of unity, men and women alike, but also to inspire a new generation of Rwandans ready to follow in their predecessor’s footsteps. It is both hoped and desired that these will carry forward the torch of unity for years to come, in a country we all love to call our HOME ■

