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# Unity and reconciliation in Rwanda

A look at policy implications vis-à-vis social cohesion

## **SUMMARY**

This policy brief draws on experiences from a social cohesion project implemented by International Alert and Rwanda's National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC). Funded through the Multi-donor Civil Society Support Programme (IKIRARO programme) which is implemented by Palladium, the project is aimed at promoting social cohesion and peace among Rwandans through resilience and dialogue. The IKIRARO programme is supported by the governments of Sweden, Switzerland, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Using examples from the project, this policy brief suggests some integrated approaches to address some of the issues with Rwanda's National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation. The document also provides some recommendations to foster unity and reconciliation in the country.

## Introduction

Rwanda's National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation aims to build a united country in which all citizens have equal rights and where they are free to participate in the governance and development of their country. Since the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, the Rwandan government has been working on setting a strategic direction for sustainable peace and socio-economic development in the country. The government has put in place a number of policies and strategies, all aimed at fostering unity and social cohesion, and to ensure that Rwandans are treated equally regardless of individual difference.<sup>1</sup> Rwanda's constitution stipulates that peace, security, unity and reconciliation are essential pillars of development.

This policy brief examines community perspectives on how the National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation can be utilised by decision-makers, to address not just the existing gaps within the policy itself, but other conflicts and tensions that continue to hamper unity and reconciliation in the country.

It is worth noting that a number of programmes have been put in place to foster unity and reconciliation in Rwanda. These include: promoting Rwandan identity and putting national interests first, combating genocide and its ideology, creating a nation governed by the rule of law and respect of human rights, combating divisionism and discrimination, promoting interdependence and synergy in nation-building, healing one another's physical and psychological wounds, commemorating the genocide committed against the Tutsi with the aim of ensuring it never happens again, and, lastly, striving for self-determination and a passion for work. Similarly, various other institutional and legal mechanisms have been established to foster unity and reconciliation.

## Key achievements

Undoubtedly, there has been progress towards achieving unity and reconciliation in the country – much of it a direct result of the National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation. According to the 2015 Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer (RRB), the status of reconciliation in Rwanda stood at 92.5%, up from 82.3% in 2010. The number of Rwandans who view themselves through ethnic lines also reduced slightly from 30.5% in 2010, to 27.9% in 2015.<sup>2</sup> There has also been an increase in the number of genocide perpetrators confessing and accepting their role in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.<sup>3</sup> And with regard to social cohesion, the level of trust, positive interactions and solidarity among Rwandans is rated at 96.1%.

Overall, there has been significant progress in fostering peace and unity, as well as in restoring the human dignity and values of Rwandans. This is reflected in the number of people who express willingness to work together on community development projects, in business cooperatives, in peaceful coexistence, as well as in unity and reconciliation clubs. Working together has contributed to improvements in the economic and social welfare of individuals, and in intermarriages between survivors and relatives of genocide perpetrators. There has also been a marked reduction in cases of genocide negation as shown in the genocide incident figures for April 2018, where participants said that cases of negation and genocide ideology had reduced compared to previous years.

In the districts of Nyanza, Ruhango, Gasabo, Rubavu, Musanze and Nyagatare, the community dialogues and exchanges initiated by International Alert as part of the social cohesion project have strengthened unity and reconciliation and promoted social cohesion among Rwandans. The dialogues have been helpful in identifying reconciliation issues in the communities, providing solutions, and sharing experiences, stories, fears, concerns and aspirations – all of which are fundamental to reconciliation.<sup>4</sup>

A review of unity and reconciliation indicators from the NURC barometer studies shows that levels of reconciliation are extremely high (over 90%).<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to note that all the focus group discussion (FGD) participants questioned the reliability of the barometer findings. They said that the tools used to measure reconciliation were designed and administered in such a way that respondents were compelled to give positive responses. According to participants, whereas unity and reconciliation are cross cutting issues embedded in government plans, with specific budgets at district level, the funds are not adequate to implement all the programmes up to the grassroots level.

## Persistent challenges

Despite all the achievements, attaining complete unity and reconciliation in Rwanda remains a challenge. Most of the hindrances to unity and reconciliation are directly linked to the policy itself. They include the following:

Genocide ideology and ethnic stereotypes remain a challenge to the process of unity and reconciliation in Rwanda. FGD participants said that, in some areas, the level of reconciliation is still very low. It was also noted that, during national surveys, people tend to respond very favourably not because that is exactly what they think, but because that is



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Students take time to reflect on their country's past during a commemoration for teachers killed during the genocide.

what they feel the person conducting the interview will be comfortable with.

Whereas the National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation puts emphasis on community sensitisation and educating Rwandan society to own the policy, our research found that, besides lack of ownership, community members have superficial knowledge of what the policy entails. This gap is rooted in the absence of unity and reconciliation programmes in district plans, and a lack of clear indicators or outcomes for the short and long term. This lack of knowledge about the policy extends to all other stakeholders who are required to implement the policy (the private sector, FBOs, CSOs and numerous government institutions). Lack of knowledge and ownership was said to be caused by the absence of a proper policy implementation strategic framework, which also contributes to a top-down approach, where most programmes are introduced by the government and simply rolled down to the local community. Respondents also felt that unity and reconciliation are considered a soft issue and thus no longer prioritised. This view is in line with the findings of an NURC-commissioned study in

2015, which also revealed that the National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation is not well known among the potential stakeholders.

Besides, the spirit and letter of the policy focuses mainly on the relationship between survivors and perpetrators of the genocide against the Tutsi. Yet, there are particular cases that ought to have been considered in the policy. For example, children of perpetrators and children born out of rape during the genocide against the Tutsi have grown into adults who are failing to manage the burden and wounds inflicted on them by their history. These children face psycho-social trauma and an identity crisis that continues to affect their social life. Children of perpetrators and those born out of rape grapple with the desire to construct their individual identities in the face of the atrocities that their parents committed, which tarnish their image through transgenerational association. At the same time, children of perpetrators believe that their peers' relatives are responsible for their parents' and family woes. This jeopardises the process of unity and reconciliation among the youth, as not only are these children ascribed an undesirable identity – children of killers (*abana b'interahamwe*) – but they also

accede to the collective blame for genocide-related crimes committed by their adult relatives.

In addition, whereas the policy requires the involvement of the private sector, FBOs, CSOs, all government institutions and citizens in fostering unity and reconciliation, it does not elaborate in specific terms or provide a clear framework of how these actors should play their respective roles. Findings revealed that the policy is not well understood among these stakeholders. A case in point is the private sector whose role was rightly conceived as to create jobs, fight poverty and improve the livelihood of Rwandans. However, creation of poverty-alleviation programmes including investment and job creation by the private sector does not necessarily translate into unity and reconciliation unless there are deliberate efforts to implant unity and reconciliation intentions into the practices of the private sector. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in the private sector or within government poverty-alleviation programmes. This good intention remains complex in itself. Realisation of this model is further complicated by the lack of a policy implementation strategic framework or plan to facilitate the private sector to understand this implicit role. The same situation applies to other actors such as CSOs and FBOs, as well as many government organs.

The NURC may be mandated with monitoring and ensuring implementation of the National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation but it is constrained by the lack of an appropriate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework. The NURC lacks adequate manpower and financial resources to monitor unity and reconciliation every year and in every institution. There is also no systematic framework that requires all relevant actors to include unity and reconciliation outcomes, indicators and activities in their planning, monitoring and reporting (PMR). This hampers effective implementation and realisation of unity and reconciliation objectives.

Although the National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation emphasises fighting against all forms of injustice and the eradication of a culture of impunity by ensuring functional rule of law, at community level, compensation for the properties looted or destroyed during the genocide remains a critical obstacle to achieving unity and reconciliation. There are three main reasons that have been identified as the cause of non-compliance: deliberate refusal to honour obligations, non-execution of judgments, and poverty on the part of some perpetrators. Some perpetrators are not willing to compensate for the properties they plundered, while others cannot afford to pay back, given that they

live in abject poverty, despite the fact that restorative justice is an important element for a successful unity and reconciliation process.

Another challenge relates to the reintegration of genocide ex-prisoners. While the government is committed to rehabilitating genocide ex-prisoners, the policy is silent about this matter. This in turn has led to the rehabilitation programme being implemented without a clear guiding policy. Despite some reintegration programmes by the government and actors such as Prison Fellowship Rwanda, there is concern about many genocide ex-prisoners who still harbour genocide ideologies and behave cold-bloodedly in communities especially during the genocide commemoration period.

In examining the prevailing obstacles to unity and reconciliation, respondents were concerned that the current methodology of rating the best and worst is too qualitative and does not take into consideration some dynamics specific to some districts. The suggestion is that a mixed method approach of qualitative and quantitative approaches should be employed for future RRB surveys. This study further observed that compensation of the victims of the genocide against the Tutsi is not clearly understood. There is no research that has attempted to diagnose the challenges, strengths, weaknesses and best practices from those who have effectively compensated victims and how such best practices can be replicated.

### To the government of Rwanda:

- Adopt strategies including: strengthening bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relationships and designing programmes that allow diaspora groups to be engaged in peacebuilding and dialogue initiatives, to encourage a broader and more inclusive conversation about peace in Rwanda. This could be done through setting up national and international dialogues focusing on critical unity and reconciliation issues with the intention of supporting the diaspora to engage in peacebuilding.
- Undertake a comprehensive assessment with a view of understanding the challenges and best practices from communities or individuals that have dealt with the issue of compensation for genocide. Findings from the assessment could then inform policy direction on how best to deal with the issue.
- Put in place deliberate principles and guidelines on how all actors, the private sector, CSOs, FBOs and citizens, should explicitly play their role in the National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation. This should be done, first, through inclusive and active participation of these actors in a coordinated

framework, and collectively developing a comprehensive strategic framework with its subsidiary annual action plans that covers interventions of all actors mentioned in the policy.

- Consider adopting strategies such as the creation of separate and active unity and reconciliation forums of FBOs, the private sector and CSOs that could convene regularly to share experiences and best practices, and to discuss reconciliation issues and best strategies to address them.
- Ensure the policy is further elaborated to include the social reintegration of former convicts (both pre- and post-release reintegration) aspect as a key component of unity and reconciliation. This should be informed by research and best practices such as those supported by CSOs and FBOs.
- Make sure that future surveys on unity and reconciliation take into consideration qualitative data that complement quantitative in order to have fair conclusions that could inform policy instead of rankings.
- Provide the NURC with the necessary resources to address the intergenerational consequences of the genocide, with a

focus on the children of perpetrators. The government could ensure a budget is allocated and funds raised for this work.

- Support the NURC in reforming its questionnaires and improve its capacity to conduct research. If the barometer is returning inaccurate results, it might be because the research questions have been wrongly phrased. Addressing this might improve the barometer results.

### To the NURC and CSOs:

- Identify role models among ex-prisoners of genocide and genocide survivors at both national and district level, and provide them with the necessary training, skills and confidence to become motivational speakers about unity and reconciliation among members of the public. They should be encouraged to share their testimonies and to provide sensitisation to others who are still resistant to unity and reconciliation messages. This could be done through existing community structures such as umuganda, inteko z'abaturage, ndi umunyarwanda, Itorero, community meetings, media, among others.



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Ex-combatant Lambert received trauma counselling to help him cope with his experiences.

- The NURC should seek and strengthen collaboration with relevant actors, the private sector, CSOs and FBOs, to develop awareness-raising strategies at different levels. Awareness-raising should be tailored around the education of respective roles and responsibility in unity and reconciliation, and emphasising ownership of the National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation.
  - In collaboration with other relevant actors, the NURC should adopt transgenerational and identity crisis counselling and healing interventions, including psychotherapy for children of ex-convicts struggling with trauma. This could be done through unity and reconciliation clubs and/or establishment of specific psycho-social therapy centres. Such interventions should be designed bearing in mind the specific nature of burden and shame, pain and trauma that was passed down to them by their parents who committed genocide and rape.
  - In collaboration with other actors, CSOs should design and establish capacity-building programmes for religious leaders, especially on aspects such as social healing, reconciliation and social cohesion. The same but tailor-made capacity-building programmes should be planned for CSOs, the private sector and government institutions.
  - A comprehensive review and reflection of how best to maximise monitoring the implementation of the National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation within the available means should be conducted. The NURC could institute a framework that brings together CSOs, FBOs and the private sector to plan, monitor and report collectively on all unity and reconciliation interventions.
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## Endnotes

- 1 J-P. Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two thousand years of history*, New York: Zone Books, 2003
- 2 National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC), *Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer*, Kigali: NURC, 2015
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 International Alert, *Quarterly reports to donor*, International Alert: Kigali, 2018 (unpublished)
- 5 NURC, Op. cit..

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