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**PEACE FOCUS:  
DECEMBER 2016**

# Reconciliation and reintegration in Rwanda

Twenty-two years on: What have we learned from  
Rwanda's experience?

## **SUMMARY**

Two decades after the genocide against the Tutsi, International Alert asks what should reconciliation programming look like in Rwanda in the future and what lessons does it hold for those seeking to promote reconciliation in other parts of the world. This Peace Focus paper outlines five key lessons for policy-makers and practitioners interested in the challenges that lie ahead and good practice for addressing them. These are:

- After a period of intense violence, counselling has proven to be a fundamental prerequisite for any dialogue process.
- Bridging divides through dialogue is a process that takes time and needs to be managed carefully. It seems necessary to invest in a long-term process that will provide enough time for groups to build trust in each other through small steps and that will be flexible enough to adjust to a variety of different paths towards progress.
- Modelling behaviour has proven effective in making the process sustainable and scalable, with community members acting as role models of positive change for their peers.
- Integrated economic development activities can provide a useful basis to promote collaboration around a shared goal and to generate more inclusive reconciliation and reintegration processes.
- Trauma and grievance can be intergenerational. Engaging youth to consolidate long-term impact will benefit the sustainability of the intervention.

## The challenges of reconciliation

In 1994, the Rwandan genocide, known officially as the genocide against the Tutsi, wiped out the country's social, economic and political institutions. Two decades later, Rwanda emerged as a dramatically different country. It was ranked among the highest of 48 African countries in achieving the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals. The economy has grown by 8% annually over the last half decade and corruption levels are low. Life expectancy has increased from 48 to 58 years in the last decade and infant mortality is dropping rapidly.<sup>1</sup> In January 2015, women held 64% of parliamentary seats, a long way ahead of all other African countries.<sup>2</sup> The government's efforts to bring about reconciliation have greatly contributed to this progress. However, restoring relationships within communities is complex and needs time. Below the surface, communities across the country are still deeply divided and fragmented, and instability in neighbouring countries puts the fragile reconciliation at risk.

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At a psychological level, the extent of the trauma and impoverishment created by the genocide is still a live issue in Rwanda and will be for the foreseeable future. Cases of untreated trauma continue to surface among adults and young people. The post-genocide context has also created new sources of trauma, particularly for ex-prisoners and their families as they struggle to adjust to life outside of prison. Trauma can also be passed through generations within families, affecting children who did not experience the genocide. In 2012, the transitional justice 'Gacaca' courts, which were created to promote communal healing and rebuilding after the genocide, began to close. Many cases remained unresolved and grievances went unaddressed, leaving a continued sense of injustice among both victims and perpetrators.

The most recent Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer (RRB 2015)<sup>3</sup> reveals that the reconciliation journey remains long. Around 28.9% of respondents believe that there are

Rwandans who would try to commit genocide if conditions were favourable, while 25.8% of respondents reported that some Rwandans continue to plant divisions and genocide ideology in others. These figures are a testimony to the fragility of Rwanda's stability. In response, the state continues to call for more efforts against genocide denial and negation.<sup>4</sup> The sustainability of Rwanda's gains has also been questioned by analysts, who cite continuing drivers of tension – including unresolved historical grievances, high levels of land dispute and a governance style in which ordinary citizens admit having very little say regarding the important decisions that affect their lives.

In addition, more than 70% of the rural population remain extremely poor, especially farmers,<sup>5</sup> and particularly those residing in the southern and western provinces. Land scarcity and insufficient off-farm opportunities represent an increasing conflict risk, with real or perceived inequalities and exclusion promoting social tension. Poverty can also prevent individuals from healing their psychosocial wounds, contributing to a continuing lack of confidence and mutual reliance within communities. This represents a further and considerable barrier to reintegration and reconciliation.

## A three-tier approach to reconciliation

For the past seven years, Alert has been involved in implementing a project to support Reconciliation and Social Reintegration in Rwanda (the RRP project), with the help of funds from MISEREOR and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). In the course of the project, Alert and its five local partners<sup>6</sup> worked with 5,613 people (48% female and 52% male) from different groups, including former combatants, ex-prisoners, genocide survivors, women and youth, who attended regular project activities in eight sectors.<sup>7</sup>

The RRP project remains extremely relevant to Rwanda's present-day challenges. It follows a unique model based on three tiers – psychosocial support, dialogue and economic recovery. During implementation, Alert has learned a series of lessons that may be useful to development practitioners and policy-makers working in Rwanda, or in other contexts such as countries emerging from conflict with reconciliation needs. In this paper, we provide a snapshot of the theory that underpins the project and focus on five key lessons that we have learned during implementation.

## Summary of RRP project's strengths based on external final evaluation findings

1. Legitimacy granted and support given by local authorities – the project has been whole-heartedly accepted by the communities and local authorities. In some cases, peace clubs have been expanded beyond the required clubs at the cell level and the model has been heralded by the Rwandan government as a successful example of community reconciliation. The project works with, and often complements, existing government programmes, and local authorities are invested in the work that Alert has been undertaking in their communities.
2. Commitment and dedication of community facilitators, who are composed of genocide survivors and perpetrators and who alternate roles in facilitating community exchanges.
3. Engagement and commitment to the project by partners, who each address a particular project focus area.
4. High regard in villages and sectors of project participants as community leaders and conflict resolvers.
5. The triumvirate model of psychosocial support, dialogue and microfinance works – this model is conducive to social cohesion, trust and mutual respect. Attempting to heal participants' wounds through psychosocial activities has given beneficiaries the strength and confidence to participate in dialogue activities, which has led to more inclusive income-generating activities.

### Counselling is a prerequisite for bringing people together

The counselling model works at different levels: individuals, relationships and communities. Each level of change has a different focus and approach.

Individual healing starts with counselling and trauma therapy groups. Counselling helps individuals to overcome their traumas, improve their quality of life, express and mitigate suffering, and improve understanding of their emotions and reactions. Project participants are adamant that counselling was an essential step in starting to rebuild broken relationships.

Working at an individual level meant that people had increased self-awareness, more confidence in and understanding of themselves, and were better able to manage their emotions and behaviour. As a result, participants were better able to relate to the 'other' and better positioned to understand, accept and potentially forgive. Importantly, it also leads to increased ability to work constructively, to cooperate and to engage in community life.

### Dialogue is a process

Dialogue was used in the project to help heal relationships between different groups, particularly survivors and ex-prisoners. It is a means of rebuilding trust in and understanding of the 'other'. The project found that adopting a multi-staged approach to dialogue – whereby dialogue is a 'process' not a one-off activity – was critical to its success. The process adheres to the following steps.

First, community leaders are drawn to the dialogue from the different groups and engage together in a 'healing of healers' process. Subsequently, the community leaders invite other leaders to dialogue sessions in the community. Then, dialogue sessions are organised for each group separately, before they face the other groups in joint sessions. This is necessary to clarify the purpose and process of dialogue sessions and to prepare for the mixed-group sessions.

The mixed-group sessions are held weekly or monthly, depending on participants' availability. Issues to be discussed are identified by the community. Each time a session takes place, a report is written that includes recommendations. Alert and its partners obtain these reports from community facilitator leads and give feedback to better understand field issues and progress on handling community issues. Subsequently, Alert follows up on the recommendations and key actions taken, sharing lessons learned with local administration through courtesy visits and reports.

The progress achieved through dialogue is limited if the individuals taking part have not received counselling. To be sustainable, it must also be paired with initiatives that proactively bring parties together to work towards a common goal or good – such as community economic development activities.

In the earlier phases of the project, especially in the pilot phase, there were different starting points in the process, depending on the context: for example, in rural contexts, people began with counselling; in urban settings, people



## Monica's story

Monica was married to a man from a different ethnic group to her own. She recounts her experience during the genocide in Rwanda.

*"During the genocide, my family was attacked by my brothers and father. They forced me to witness them slaughtering my six children and husband with pangas (machetes) and traditional weapons, to create maximum pain. I can still hear their screams of pain and terror. My father was screaming at me that it was my fault the family was murdered because I married a 'snake', the local expression describing a Tutsi. All my brothers were in jail for the horrendous crimes they committed. The cause of the genocide was blind hatred. How else could a family murder their family? Even now, I do not understand hatred.*

*The dialogue club leader came to my house many times to convince me to join. I was living in a dilapidated house along the river in total isolation because I was betrayed by my family and rejected by my husband's family ... After the trauma training, I had the courage to call my brothers who were out of jail. Initially, it was unbearable to see them because the memories flooded back with enormous grief. I forced myself to go to the club, and with further counselling, I now understand why they committed murder and have forgiven them."*

Monica is 50 years of age and has two young children.

started mainly with the socio-economic component. Alert's experience in implementing this project has shown that in areas where the entire process was not implemented there were fewer and less sustainable outcomes.

The underlying assumptions for this lesson learned is rooted in basic human needs<sup>8</sup> theory, which posits that identity, security and recognition are the basis of individual development and security in a society. Denial by society of recognition and identity can lead, at all social levels, to

alternative behaviours designed to satisfy such needs, be it ethnic wars, street gangs or domestic violence. Therefore, starting the process with psychosocial support and dialogue helped to establish safety and restore a sense of self and relationship with the 'other', as part of identity and belonging, thus providing for basic human needs. Joint economic development activities further strengthened the new relationships, ensured sustainability of the process and provided additional motivation for participants from all groups to continue to engage with each other.

## Benefits of the dialogue process





Photo © Carol Allen-Storey for International Alert

Pictured left to right: Louise, Donata and Evariste.

## Spotlight on peace clubs

Donata is the daughter of a survivor and aged 21. She explains how the peace clubs have helped her.

*"My mother refused to answer questions I would ask about my dad ... so I began to follow the Gacaca court trials. I discovered it was a Hutu neighbour who butchered my father ... The peace club inspired me to resolve the hatred I felt for my neighbour. A while after the war ended, he came to our home and begged forgiveness. Now, he behaves as a father to me ... The greatest lesson I learned from the peace club was how to forgive."*

The peace clubs are a core part of the project. They are safe places where dialogue can take place and one of the reasons why the project has been whole-heartedly accepted by the communities and local authorities. Clearly, the peace clubs will continue to function beyond the confines of this project. People (especially youth) are very enthusiastic and have built on the existing clubs as a way to organise activities in their communities. In addition, some participants in the micro-lending programmes have gone on to build successful micro-enterprises and now participate in borrowing schemes on their own thanks to the support and training provided by Alert and its partners.<sup>9</sup>

## Modelling behaviour guarantees scalability and sustainability

People learn through observing other people's behaviour, attitudes and outcomes of those behaviours.<sup>10</sup> One of the strong aspects of the approach was using community facilitators from the actual communities and from different groups that were part of the project (such as survivors, ex-combatants, ex-prisoners, youth). Community facilitators act as role models for the community through their ability to overcome differences, bring groups together and seek constructive solutions to everyday issues. Moreover, they too continue to be healed and empowered as they observe changes in the community members. Seeing the change in community members is a motivating factor for the facilitators and participants, and makes the process sustainable.

## Role of community facilitators

According to a community facilitator from Muganza sector:

*"As community facilitators, we feel healed and empowered to help our communities. Community members who went through the process can now join facilitators' group. And we need to become mentors and help them. The other important thing is to share what we learned and what we achieved with other sectors, so they can do it too. As we all live in these communities, we know people and can approach them, we understand them, and they trust us. We call it people-to-people and home-to-home approach."*



Photo © Carol Allen-Storey for International Alert

Pictured left to right: Frank, Jeanne, Wyclef, Denise and David.

## Role of young people

David, aged 19, is the son of a survivor.

*“The youth of 1994 were known as the butchers, brutal killers. Twenty years on, today’s youth will leave a legacy about the positive change they made to build a strong society based on humanity. The youth then were taught*

*hate and division; now we must educate about unity ... Before I joined the peace club, there was a lot of prejudice in our school. In the club, we learned how to forgive, live with one another and cooperate for the common good ... I am fascinated about designing and building roads and structures. My dream is to become an engineer.”*

This process also allows for scalability. It means that the project can be replicated, as those who have been through the process support others to go through it too. In addition, it builds trust between communities: as more people go through this sensitive and difficult process, others are encouraged to do so as well.

## Sustainability depends on continuous bridge-building activities

The economic dimension was an important part of the project in terms of microfinance. It brought various groups together around small economic activities, creating a common ground and reinforcing the dialogue process. Before Alert started the project, most economic recovery activities in Rwanda targeted genocide survivors only. Expanding this to other vulnerable groups – people and households most affected by the genocide and its consequences – had a bridge-building effect that improved acceptance among groups and allowed the dialogue process to become more sustainable in the long term.

In strengthening the dialogue process, the microfinance activities led to increased interaction and reconciliation. As

a result, the project recorded the joint rehabilitation of 59 damaged houses of survivors and 14 houses of ex-prisoners, 81 intermarriages between young people from the families of genocide survivors and ex-prisoners, and numerous examples of attendance at wedding ceremonies of another group, all of which never or rarely happened before. A total of 192 micro-businesses were created, including livestock purchasing and selling, agribusiness (vegetables, cereals and fruit production and sale), community commerce and hairdressing, in addition to 287 jobs being created. On average, RWF 200,000<sup>11</sup> was saved by saving groups, solidarity groups and cooperatives, while 224 loans were provided, 189 of which were reimbursed. Those who did business earned on average RWF 18,000 of net income per month and used 31% of their income to cater for their domestic needs, including paying for medical insurance, school fees, clothes, painting and cementing their houses.

## Working with youth bridges divides and builds an inclusive future

In support of the reconciliation process in Rwanda, there is a need to bridge differences and create a shared and inclusive identity. The project has shown clear evidence that people can forgive and that they are ready to do so. It showed that

reconciliation is possible and that it has healing effects on individuals and communities. A unifying identity can come naturally after reconciliation. In the project, those who felt reconciled also felt more patriotic.

However, 'forgetting' was never mentioned by the project beneficiaries. The stories, narratives and traumas are transferred to the next generation, and can become even stronger as they are not based on direct experience but on collective memories and collective, selective interpretation. They are resistant to change as they do not seek evidence; they are embedded in deeper psychological layers, in archetypes and collective consciousness.

The dialogue clubs showed excellent results in schools and communities, including improved performance of students and a positive impact on teachers and parents.

As trauma can be passed on through generations, together with narratives of divisions and exclusive identities, the project was adjusted to target young people. Increasing and scaling up the peace clubs in schools (dialogue sessions) showed excellent results in schools and in communities, including improved performance of students and a positive impact on teachers and parents.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, during the project, the number of peace clubs almost doubled due to the efforts of graduates from schools who replicated the approach and created new clubs by themselves in another 18 villages. These new clubs were supported by the project and 653 dialogue sessions were conducted, providing space for exchange between people affected by the genocide. Subsequently, an additional 18

peace clubs were established, including at the University of Rwanda College of Education and College of Business, by secondary school graduates who had been attending peace clubs in school.

## Moving forward: Continuing to adjust to current realities

Throughout the project, the dialogue groups were very participatory: topics were chosen by all participants and reflected the needs of the different communities involved. This explains the continued interest in participation in dialogue groups.

Over the past seven years during which the project has been in place, issues and challenges faced within the community have shifted.

Teen pregnancy rates are particularly high in the communities where the project has been implemented. Some of these cases are the result of rape. Girls are isolated from the community, rejected by their parents and end up homeless or, in a large number of cases, commit suicide. In response to this, counselling groups have aimed to break the silence around this issue. The groups have included parents of teen mothers so that they can be more supportive, and the groups also develop sensitising programmes for the broader community.

The adaptable nature of the three components of the project – counselling, dialogue and socio-economic reintegration – enables participants to adjust their focus to meet new and emerging challenges, therefore promoting the sustainability of the project's outcomes. It will also hopefully be essential to ensure that they continue to contribute to in-depth reconciliation.

## CONCLUSION

Rwanda has made incredible progress since the genocide against the Tutsi. However, huge challenges remain regarding social cohesion. There is an ongoing need for psychosocial support to address the symptoms of trauma, for continuous exchanges within communities and for joint work to strengthen renewed relationships. Our work building on trauma healing, phased dialogue processes, peer-to-peer support, integrated economic incentives and the engagement of young people has achieved some encouraging outcomes. Based on Alert's experience in Rwanda, we believe that the recommendations outlined above are useful for policy-makers and practitioners continuing to work in Rwanda, but also for those who are considering reconciliation programming in other parts of the world – for example, Syria, Yemen and Mali.

## Endnotes

- 1 S. Hunt, The rise of Rwanda's women: Rebuilding and reuniting a nation, Foreign Affairs, May–June 2014
- 2 United Nations, The Millennium Development Goals report 2015, 2015
- 3 Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer 2015, [http://nurc.gov.rw/index.php?id=75&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=136&cHash=06d13fa3849c2b8da3d3d91e6ff7c483](http://nurc.gov.rw/index.php?id=75&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=136&cHash=06d13fa3849c2b8da3d3d91e6ff7c483)
- 4 In the 2015 and 2016 genocide commemorations, the theme is 'remember genocide against the Tutsi and fight against genocide ideology'.
- 5 National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, The evolution of poverty in Rwanda from 2000 to 2011, Results from the Household Surveys (EICV), February 2012, p.19
- 6 The project partnered with five local civil society organisations (CSOs) including: ARCT (Association Rwandaise des Conseillers en Traumatisme), which provided psychosocial support; Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe, which coordinated community dialogues for reconciliation; Umuseke asbl, which led youth peace dialogues in schools; Duterimbere NGO, which led entrepreneurship empowerment-related activities; and Duterimbere IMF, which provided microfinance.
- 7 Sectors are an administrative unit in Rwanda. The Republic of Rwanda is divided into provinces, districts, sectors and cells.
- 8 J. Burton, Conflict resolution: The human dimension, The International Journal of Peace Studies, 1998
- 9 P. Firchow, Reconciliation and socio-economic reintegration in Rwanda (RRP), Final project evaluation, February 2016
- 10 This is based on social learning theory – see: A. Bandura, Social foundations of thought and action, Prentice Hall, 1986
- 11 US\$1 = RWF 797 as at August 2016.
- 12 In Kinyinya secondary school in Gasabo district, Alert tested the scores of students who had and had not attended the peace clubs. A sample of 32 students were selected and followed during the 2015 school year. For 69% of students who attended the peace clubs, their project test scores increased by 10% to 15% in civic education, history and geography, compared with 32% of students who had not participated in the peace clubs. This can be explained by the additional information gained through discussions at peace clubs and by the development of critical thinking through these discussions that can assist with learning and problem solving.

## Acknowledgements

This paper was written by Vesna Matovic and edited by Marie Weiller.

The programme on which it is based was made possible through funding from MISEREOR and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

International Alert's reflection on and learning from this programme was enabled through organisational development support from the PeaceNexus Foundation.

International Alert would also like to thank its strategic donors: the UK Department for International Development UKAID; the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency; the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of International Alert and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of our donors.

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Registered charity no. 327553  
ISBN: 978-1-911080-34-3