RECONCILIATION IN RWANDA: BUILDING PEACE THROUGH DIALOGUE

WRITTEN BY **VANESSA NOËL BROWN**

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Facilitated dialogue in the aftermath of a national conflict can counteract otherwise destructive debates and promote reconciliation. Through the thoughtfully orchestrated use of dialogue, there is cause for optimism that Rwanda can reposition its narrative, filled with cycles of interethnic violence, to become one of Africa's 21st century success stories. Dialogue is being used in various forms throughout the country, from formal discussion clubs to academic conferences, to help Rwandans strengthen national unity and equality.

Protracted conflicts such as the Hutu-Tutsi colonial legacy in Rwanda often result in violence, due to seemingly irreconcilable differences of identity. During intrastate conflicts, such as the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, parties dehumanise the opposing side. Forging national unity in the aftermath of neighbour-on-neighbour killings poses a tremendous challenge. Today, Rwanda provides a compelling case study in how dialogue – from community clubs to academic conferences – is making a significant impact on reuniting communities and preventing hate-filled narratives from being passed to the next generation.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide stunned the world with its intensity and volume of killing in this otherwise beautiful country, located at the centre of the Great Lakes region. While this tragedy will never be forgotten, Rwanda offers an inspiring example of how solid leadership and an active civil society can engage citizens in rebuilding their communities. This African nation can claim marked success in progressing from its darkest hour to a new era marked by economic development[1], increased security and, most importantly, the hope that national unity is indeed possible. Beyond the statistics, a recent visit to Rwanda provides a snapshot of how dialogue is being used to build interethnic reconciliation and national identity. In some cases, these aims are being achieved by helping communities to rediscover

Above: A giant photograph in remembrance of the 1994 genocide stands inside Rwanda's Genocide Museum in Gisozi.

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Discussion groups in schools aim to create a culture of dialogue and reconciliation.

traditional conflict resolution methods while, in others, Rwandans are challenging long-standing cultural norms that contradict the notion of equality for all.

Dialogue, Culture and Conflict

Dialogue, as a conflict resolution tool, differs from other communication methods such as mediation and negotiation. Instead of participants setting out to persuade one another of the accuracy of a particular point of view, parties engaging in dialogue approach the discussion as a constructive exchange of ideas, during which they can evaluate alternative perspectives.[2]

In the Rwandan context, dialogue is being used to facilitate community-building through the reunion of neighbours who, in some cases, were perpetrators during the genocide. While conflict resolution theorists proffer this technique as broadly useful, the reality of turning dialogue into effective conflict resolution practice depends on good facilitators and willing participants. While intrastate conflicts continue to rage in Africa, the current progress of reconciliation efforts in Rwanda offers hope for a more peaceful future. A recent interview with Peace Uwineza, a researcher at the Institute of Research and Dialogue (IRDP), a non-governmental organisation based in Kigali , provides a bird's eye view into how dialogue as a tool is being systemically applied throughout the country.

The IRDP began conducting focus groups throughout Rwanda in 2001, in an effort to determine what caused the breakdown in national unity and what steps could be taken to recreate that national unity. The focus groups included genocide victims, those accused of genocide, and those who had lived outside Rwanda before the genocide but had since returned. While these community members co-existed in schools, markets and churches, this occasion marked the first time that they were brought together to talk about the conflict and the challenges facing their society. IRDP staff went on to solicit additional feedback from students, government workers, soldiers, police, youth, women and the Rwandan diasporas throughout Europe, the United States and Canada.

After two years of action research, roughly 10 000 Rwandans had provided their opinions and reflections on the causes of the genocide. The IRDP conveyed the findings through meetings with academics, ministers and government leaders, and later formally published its work. In 2003, the IRDP presented its findings to national leaders and citizens and provided the following synopsis.

Genocide causes:

- *History*: German and Belgian colonialists created cycles of resentment by favouring first Tutsis over Hutus and then vice versa. This history was passed down in Rwandan textbooks, and it further reinforced ethnic divisions.
- *Democracy*: With political majority taken as synonymous to ethnic majority, democracy became a scapegoat for pitting the Hutu majority against the minority Tutsis.
- *Economic situation*: Poverty was a major factor in the conflict. Rwandan leaders perpetuated the conflict by encouraging Hutus to kill Tutsis for their property.
- *Justice and the rule of law:* Justice had been an ongoing problem. Historically, there was a culture of impunity when ethnic murders were committed. For example, when Tutsis were being persecuted and killed during the 1960s, 1970s and later in the 1990s, the prevailing thinking was that there would be no consequences for murder. Rather, there would be rewards such as gaining land or other economic resources from those murdered.

Throughout the research process, dialogue groups were formed at various levels of the community in order to facilitate public discussions concerning Rwanda's past and future. The IRDP's recommendations for further research and reforms continue to be disseminated

to policymakers, and debated by leaders and citizens throughout Rwanda.[4]

Its initial research formed the foundation for various dialogue clubs established throughout the country:

- *Ecole de debate*: Secondary school discussion groups have been created in 25 schools throughout Rwanda. The IRDP works with the school's headmaster to select around 30 students, who meet twice a month. The IRDP provides the student groups with discussion topics, such as 'Organisation and functions of state institutions'; 'Tolerance and democracy promotion', and 'Rights and duties of the state and of citizens'. The goal in this effort is not that students should address the particular topics suggested by the IRDP, but rather to create a culture of debate on national challenges, and encourage students to propose potential solutions.
- *District and provincial* groups composed of local leaders (officials in charge of education, health and so on) were created. These ongoing dialogue groups also discuss macro issues. For example, the issue of population management was recently addressed in a culturally sensitive manner, to encourage families to consider the benefits of having smaller families.
- *Dialogue clubs* were created in all provinces of Rwanda, so that citizens would have formally organised meetings in which to discuss and debate genocide-related topics, as well as current challenges to communities. Participants were drawn from the IRDP's original focus groups. While the IRDP provides some of the debate topics, again the aim is to encourage citizens to initiate and engage in discourse on public interests. The clubs have been provided with modest start-up funds by the IRDP, so that they may initiate income-generating projects of their choice.

The IRDP created a new form of citizen-to-policymaker dialogue through its application of modern technology to Rwanda's 'under the tree' dialogue tradition. This approach, more commonly known as Gacaca, is an old Rwandan tradition. Before the colonial era, Rwandans would elect well-respected elders in their community, who would sit on *Umucaca* (Kinyarwandan for 'covered ground') to resolve disputes among community members. Decisions were based on consensus, and all parties would have a chance to express their sides of the story before a case was settled. Penalties for the guilty included a fine or restitution of whatever had been the object of contention. Traditionally, in cases of murder, the perpetrator was banished or, in other cases, sentenced to death. After the culprit was banished or killed, a ceremony would be held to reconcile the families involved, and this would mark the end of the dispute.[5]

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Meeting and "talking under the tree" is an old dialogue tradition in Africa.

The IRDP documents modern-day 'under the tree' gatherings through films and reports. These are used as tools to take the conversations beyond the local community and directly to the decision-makers. The filmed discussions are shown to decision-makers as well as to other communities, in order to generate interest in the dialogue process. The IRDP documentaries have been shown to people in villages and to diasporas, allowing

for meaningful exchange of ideas between those people who remained in Rwanda and a significant population who now live abroad (most of whom fled due to genocide or for other political reasons). The IRDP functions as a neutral facilitator, and works to ensure that it accurately conveys participants' voices to decision-makers.[6] Because local citizens can watch IRDP films and read its reports, they are ensured that their comments have been accurately represented, creating a high level of trust with the IRDP's dialogue programmes.

The dialogue clubs are designed for participants to reflect on pressing social issues. One such topic currently being discussed at local and national levels is that of population growth, and its consequences on economic development. The issue of family planning has been a delicate subject since the genocide, given the great loss of human lives.[7] Dialogue clubs provide a forum for such topics to be examined amongst citizens, and between the local and national level discussions.

In addition to debating such issues of national importance, club members also learn to apply measured approaches to the resolution of typical organisational conflicts. In one situation, a club experienced an internal conflict in which someone had misused club funds, and the group was close to dissolving over this. The situation provided an opportunity for group members to utilise dialogue to identify the root of the particular problem, and determine how best to resolve it. Uwineza, who facilitated the club's discussion on the misused funds, offered this comment on the effects of the dialogue approach to managing conflicts: "In the end, they realised that they needed to stay together, if they came together after one had killed another's child, how could they break up over some [misused funds]… you have that confidence at the back of your mind."[8] Thus, dialogue clubs also offer participants constructive space in which to apply non-violent conflict resolution tools to day-to-day issues and, in so doing, contribute to security for the community at large.

Traditions and Conflict Resolution

Rwanda's post-conflict era has been marked by a return to its cultural traditions in efforts to address atrocities and to prevent future conflicts. Gacaca courts continue to be used to try genocide crimes.[9] Other home-grown traditions in conflict resolution are also finding successful integration in the post-genocide era. The return to dialogue made sense for the Rwandan cultural context, as it is a familiar approach. In Rwanda, there is an old custom: "We are meeting under this tree to discuss problems… it's different than when [people] have to go to court, that doesn't make much sense to local people; you have to travel long distances, pay money. People know that dialogue is easier, cheaper and they identify with it more easily. For Rwandan traditions, it's nice to meet to talk and chat and share."[10] After the IRDP's initial focus groups identified the causes and effects of the genocide, they sought to build on this 'conversational' tradition that emphasises gathering around something common that people share, through the creation of dialogue clubs.

The IRDP infused the dialogue groups with the Rwandan tradition of *Intango* (coming together around a pot of locally made beer):

> "We tell donors we cannot bring [people] together to talk for two hours if there is nothing to share. So the leaders who bring people together receive funds to make the beer… this is another tradition because people don't meet without giving beer to share (also soft drinks for those who don't drink)… some issues get heated up but at the end [of the dialogue meeting] they dance and go home relaxed."[11]

This integration of local traditions and facilitated dialogue, which focuses on reconciliation, appears to be successful in communities throughout Rwanda.

Another traditional conflict resolution method used in the country is that of *Abunzi*, or community leaders that help resolve family conflicts. *Abunzi* are being used to address various family disputes, such as conflicts related to land or inheritance. This tradition has been revived in the post-genocide era, so that problems can potentially be solved at a local level before going to national courts. For example, if there is a conflict between a husband and wife, she could first go to the *Abunzi* committee. They then call in the husband, and they try to resolve the matter together. *Abunzi* are roughly the equivalent of mediators in the community. Citizens with family disputes are asked to report cases first to the *Abunzi*, ahead of taking them to the local court. The role of *Abunzi* in Rwanda is becoming increasingly formalised. *Abunzi* receive training, and have standard guidelines for mediating domestic conflicts.

As Uwineza explained: "We need to go back to our traditional ways to solve problems, and people like it. Many people don't like spending money and wasting a lot of time; when they disagree they are free to use this approach – it exists in every cell or *Umudugudu* (neighbourhood). The [*Abunzi*] are located in communal places so… every neighborhood has *Abunzi*." Rwanda's return to its traditional customs, particularly in the various forms of dialogue being utilised in the country, appears to be a viable way to combine traditions with other recognised conflict resolution tools. The use of dialogue to promote national unity and equality is also evident in other types of public discourse throughout Rwanda.

Dialogue and Education

Dialogue as a conflict prevention strategy is being used to promote frank discussion on previously taboo topics. Dialogue in its various forms has proven to be an essential tool in national efforts to promote better health and gender equality – issues that are critical to building security in Rwanda.

Public dialogue initiatives, conducted by partnerships of government, academic and non-governmental organisations, reach beyond community forums and seek to address specific cultural behaviours such as health and gender. Various forms of dialogue on these topics are complemented by other activities designed to promote national unity such as *Umuganda*, the local word for community service. Once a month, Rwandans are asked to participate in improvement projects such as road repair. *Umuganda* provides opportunities for local leaders to engage in civic education, and create dialogue about HIV/AIDS and other topics of public interest.[12]

Rwanda has the highest population density in Africa (with a current growth rate of 3.5 percent), and preventable diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS continue to be a major impediment to the country's productivity. However, investments in health can reduce the cost of disease, increase labour productivity and reduce population growth.[13] Throughout Rwanda, one frequently sees billboards announcing '*Witergereza*', which is Kinyarwandan (the local language) for 'don't wait'. This message challenges parents not to wait until it is too late to talk to their children about HIV/AIDS. Throughout the country, parents and educators are being encouraged to engage in dialogue with young people – about specific topics like the risk of HIV/AIDS and about the country's past. Public discourse around HIV/AIDS prevention is another example of the way that Rwandans are using dialogue for the greater public good. In addition to public awareness campaigns, dialogue is being utilised in a variety of education settings. Rwandan leaders and students are also creating discourse in public schools on genocide ideology and on the status of women.

The Rwandan newspaper, *The New Times*, confirms the frank public discourse that characterises the country's ongoing efforts to transition its culture to one that promotes equality, and cautions its youth to be aware of and combat the underlying divisions that led to violence in their communities. In one account, Rwandan members of parliament (MPs) addressed secondary school students, noting the importance of eradicating genocide ideology in the curriculum:

> "Fortunately your school was not cited among those tainted by genocide ideology, but you have heard about it in other schools so you should try as much as possible to fight against it for a better future." – MP Bernadette Mukarutabana[14]

It is a notable sign of the country's forward-thinking leaders that genocide ideology and health education are being addressed preventatively in schools.

Using Dialogue to Promote Equality

While Rwanda can be proud of its economic growth in recent years, gender as a critical element in the country's economic success narrative must continue to be emphasised. Research confirms that the ongoing empowerment of women is critical to Rwanda's continuing social and economic improvements. Addressing women's role in Rwandan society therefore constitutes an important factor in national efforts to build security and foster non-violent conflict resolution skills.

The academic community is contributing to this dialogue through initiatives such as that led by the Center for Conflict Management (CCM) at the National University of Rwanda (NUR).

In 2003, the CCM established a research programme on Gender, Justice and Human Rights, to address the issue of gender discrimination and crimes in Rwanda. In 2006, the CCM and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) held an interuniversity conference at NUR on enhancing protection for gender-based violence. The conference aimed to raise awareness of gender-based violence in Rwanda and its negative impact on achieving national progress, and to make stakeholders aware of the connection between gender and core issues of peace and development.[16] The multi-day event was attended by students, academics and policymakers from throughout Rwanda. It included panel discussions and documentary viewings to stimulate discussion on gender challenges, and how different actors in society can work to combat them.

One issue highlighted in the conference presentations was the general acceptance of domestic violence in Rwandan culture. According to presenters, the practice of beating one's wife has long been viewed as normal in Rwanda, and the problem has intensified significantly in the post-conflict context, and termed a 'continuation of the genocide'. A (female) conference participant pointed out that the conference itself was an important starting point for creating a new dialogue about violence against women, simply because the conference was attended by a significant number of men.[17]

While the inclusion of health and sex education may be a long-standing norm in schools' curricula in the West, it has not yet become requisite in Rwanda's

national curriculum. Such academic conferences facilitate dialogue on sensitive issues amongst students and educators. These events and subsequent recommendations also serve to remind policymakers that today's youth must be engaged on topics that are critical to both the individual's and the nation's development and security.

Dialogue as a Conflict Prevention Tool

Despite dialogue having a successful impact at the grassroots level, IRDP researcher, Uwineza, was frank in her assessment that many Rwandans continue to face many challenges on the journey to unity and equality. She noted that while on the surface neighbours may get along, in one-on-one relationships people still remain aware that the person killed someone in his or her family. She believes that the only way to confront the genocide legacy is to keep talking: "They may not like each other… but at least they feel like they are being listened to, there is a need for that, it releases frustration."[18]

Dialogue alone will not erase Rwanda's turbulent past, but it is succeeding in creating a culture of discussion and debate that was markedly absent during the past cycles of interethnic strife that resulted in genocide. It engages average citizens in reflection on decision-making, and creates space for villages to integrate non-violent approaches when confronted with family feuds, community disputes and national debates.

These examples of civil society, government and academic-led dialogues taking place throughout Rwanda are just a sample of the concentrated effort in Rwanda to promote equality and sustainable peace. Underlying tensions still exist in communities around the country, particularly in places where Gacaca courts have already released genocide perpetrators. Many challenges remain for Rwanda in terms of its goals of national reconciliation and continuing economic development, but the concentrated efforts by a myriad of concerned citizens appears to be making a significant impact in Rwanda's transition from its volatile past. Community peace can only be achieved when individuals have learned to manage personal and family conflicts in a constructive way, and choose not to resort to violence to solve conflicts, either at home or in their broader social sphere. Engaged citizens and organisations like the IRDP and the CCM provide positive examples of how Rwandans are uniting to create a brighter future for the next generation.

Vanessa Noël Brown is a graduate student at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, and a visiting scholar with Search for Common Ground in Rabat, Morocco.

Endnotes

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3 Vanessa Noël Brown interview with Peace Uwineza in Kigali, Rwanda on 9 February 2008.

4 IRDP recommendations also available at its French-language website – <www.irdp.rw>.

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14 Quote from news article 'MPs warn students on genocide ideology' by Mudingu, Joseph in *The New Times* on 4 February 2008.

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