

## **WORKSHOP REPORT**

### **HEALING AND RECONCILIATION WORKSHOP FOR NGOMA COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT GOOD NEIGHBOURS INTERNATIONAL/RWANDA**



**Ngoma Cell, Kamonyi District, Rwanda**

**July 29 - 31, 2015**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Healing and Reconciliation Workshop was organized as an extension of the training and consultancy services offered by the Center for Research and Action towards Peace and Sustainable Development (CRASPD), for Good Neighbors International/Rwanda (GNI/R). It was a second phase following the Conflict Management Workshop which was done in May 2015. This workshop was designed to help the members of Community Development Committee (CDC) and local government leaders in the Ngoma Community Development Project (CDP) to deal with deep rooted psychological wounds which affect them not only in relationship with their neighbors, but also in daily activities for their development.

### **1.1. Workshop Objectives**

The objectives of the workshop were:

- To increase participants' level of awareness and understanding about the emotional and psychological effects of trauma, and the benefits of healing, forgiveness, and restored relationships;
- To empower them with skills that would help them in the process of healing and reconciliation
- To help them experience deeper level of healing;
- To identify community-based peace and reconciliation initiatives that may be supported by GNI/R

### **1.2. Workshop Date and Venue**

The workshop took place on 29 – 31 of July 2015. It took place at the meeting hall of Ngoma Primary School, one of the schools that are supported by GNI/R in the Ngoma cell, Kamonyi District of Southern Province.

### **1.3. Workshop Participants**

A total of 40 individuals participated in the workshop. They were:

- 15 members of CDC in Ngoma CDP (8 males and 7 females)
- 17 Cell and village leaders (9 males and 8 females)
- Country director and 4 staff members of GNI/R (4 males and 1 female)
- 3 GNI's country directors (1 male and 2 female) from Cameroon, Niger and South Sudan.

#### **1.4. Training Team**

The main trainer was Mrs. Diane Kantarama from Christian Action for Reconciliation and Social Assistance (CARSA) assisted with three other CARSA trainers. Dr. Penine Uwimbabazi from CRASPD assisted the team from CARSA by presenting the overview of the training and mostly facilitated the last half day of the closing discussion.

## **2. WORKSHOP SESSIONS**

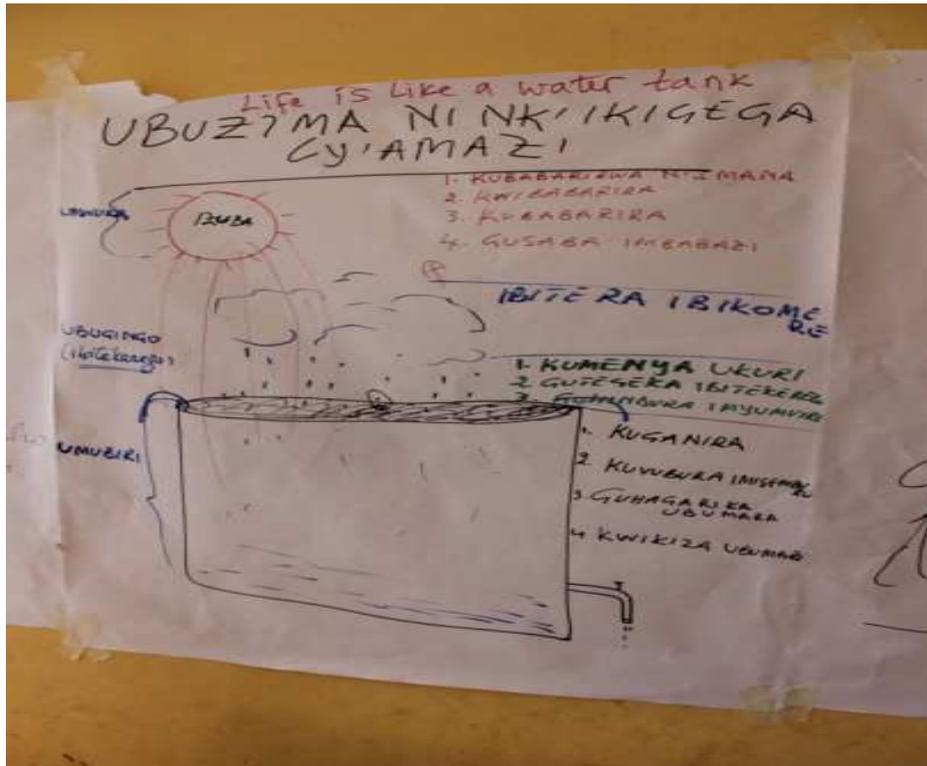
During the first two days of the workshop, participants were equipped with concepts and strategies of dealing with hurt and unforgiveness as well as the benefit of choosing to forgive. Using different illustrations, mostly with artistic gift of drawing, all sessions were grounded from spiritual orientation which helped people to understand that a human being is made of three elements;

- Spiritual elements (God's forgiveness, self-forgiveness, forgiving others and to request for forgiveness)
- Emotional elements (to know the truth, to control idea, and changing of perceptions)
- Body/flesh elements (communication, creation of good moments, stopping poisoning, and dealing with or healing the poison)

These three elements were the focus and guideline for the two and a half days of the training. Participants were given training handbook, and everyone was expected to read it and focus their discussions from what they have just read.

## 2.1. Day I

The first day started by introducing the needs for trauma healing. The trainer started the session by visiting different Bible scriptures as a ground which in turn prepared people to understand more why trauma healing is a requirement for everyone. The trainer described a human being's life as a water tank, when the water is full, it will overflow no matter how hard the tank is sealed.



*Life illustrated as water tank*

As explained earlier, a human being is made of three elements; a spiritual element, an emotional element and a body/flesh. On the drawing above, the sun symbolizes the spiritual element in understanding that God's light shines on us unconditionally. The sun also symbolizes the unconditional grace found in God (1Thessalonian 5:23). According to the trainer, the spiritual part has in turn four elements; to be forgiven by God, to forgive, to ask for forgiveness and to apologize. The clouds symbolize things or people that cause us pain. What causes us pain is usually, knowing the truth, challenges in controlling our thoughts and changing our perceptions. The trainer explained that just like the clouds will always be there, people who hurt us will always be there too. What is required is to protect ourselves. When it is about to rain we often look for shelter to protect ourselves from the rain. The same thing needs to be done to “protect

ourselves from being hurt”. Lastly is the water tank itself and it illustrates a human being’s life. In order to control our pained emotions we need to talk about what is hurting us. This strategy will reduce our depression and will eventually be a cure for the hurting heart.

After getting this general understanding, people were grouped into three groups, each with one assistant trainer, where participants had a chance to read through a provided training manual and discuss on the related topics. However each group had to make a vow, raising up their hands that;

*I agree to participate in this program to lean new skill to help me overcome challenges and improve my life. By attending this program, I agree to respect the views of other people even if they differ from mine. I will not judge anyone for what they have experienced or the choice they have made, and I also agree to keep the stories that that people may share in this group confidential. I also expect others to respect my need for confidentiality by not sharing my personal stories with anyone outside of this group.*



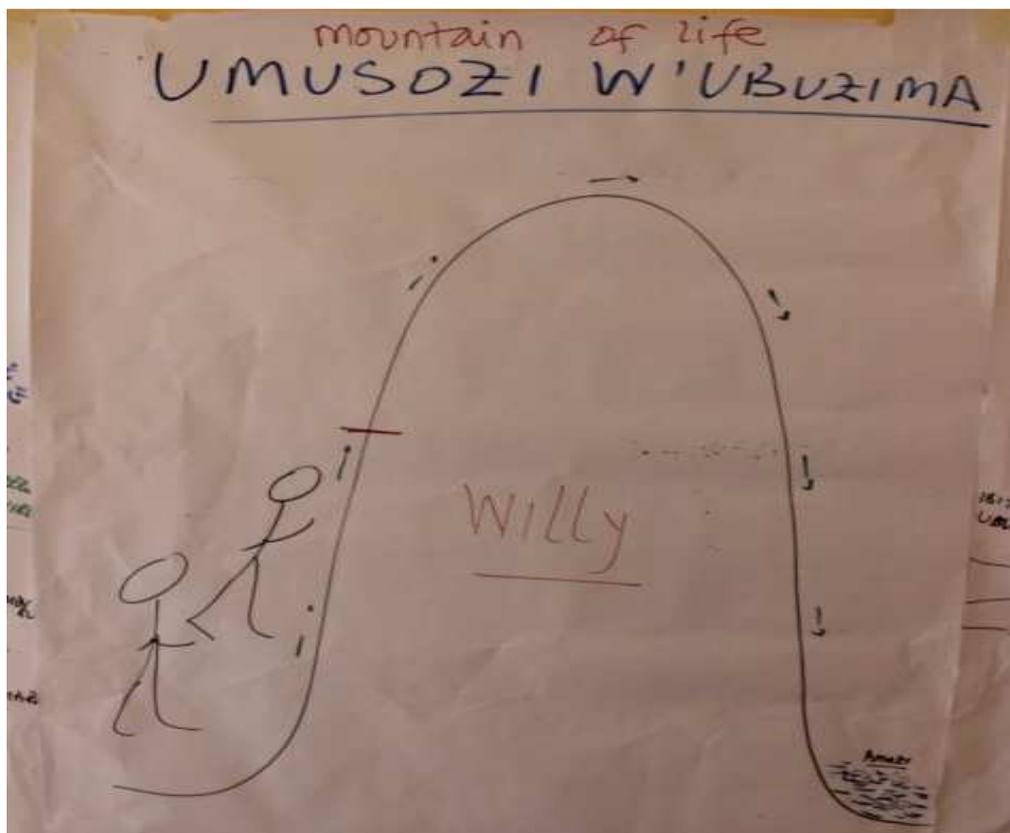
*Participants in small groups*

#### ❖ Exploring stress and trauma

Participants were comforted by knowing that stress and trauma is experienced by everyone. Even though some may experience stress by witnessing, while others may directly experience a terrible events, the feelings of trauma are real and are felt at different level by different

individuals, and therefore, they may invite different reactions. In all these, however, participants were asked to “be a friend of yourself”. This requires listening to your inner-self. A good example is given from the training handbook “If you don’t understand what your body is trying to tell you, you don’t know how to help. If you don’t listen to your body telling you to go to toilet, you could find yourself in troubling and embarrassing situation. The same is true for stress and trauma.” The trainers explained to participants different symptoms of stress and trauma, such as feeling like you don’t want to talk, feel hopeless and loneliness, sometime pain and headache, having bad dreams or find it difficult to sleep. By learning different symptoms, participants realized that “we are all actually traumatized”. One of the participants eloquently expressed what she learned in this session as follows:

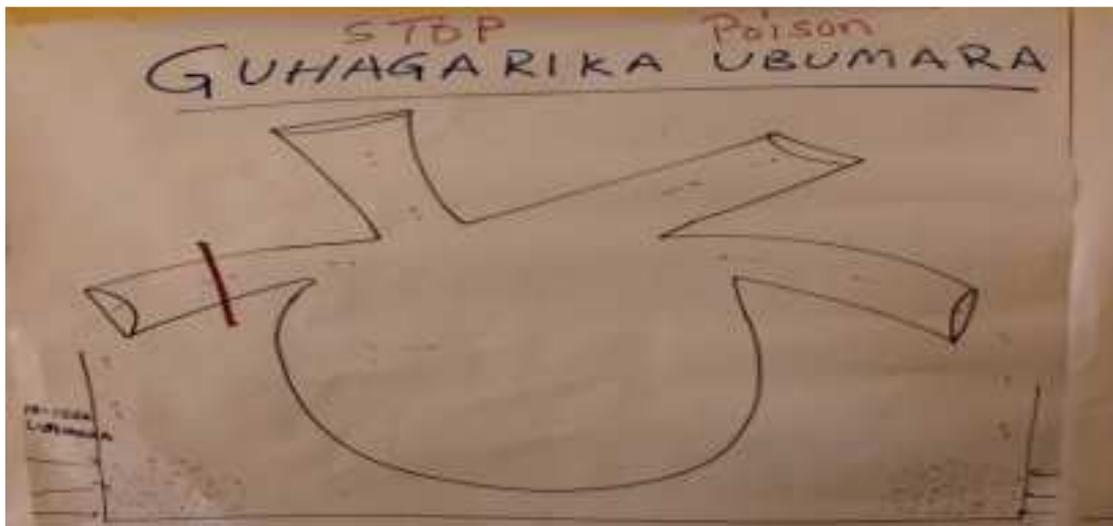
Participants then in each group learn how one may identify challenges in life that sometime forces us to give up. This was done through reading the ‘Story of Willy’, the story of ‘mountain of life’ as an illustration of how one may help others or even self in times when one faces challenges. These are found in the training handbook manual given to all the participants.



*The mountain of life*

Through this session, different illustrations were used. For example, a person bitten by a snake was used as a metaphor of a person suffering from trauma or stress. With the facilitation of assistant trainers, participants in groups learned three important things that one can do to recover from stress and trauma experience (which is related to poisonous bites). These are;

1. Lower heart rate and remain calm
2. Get rid of the “poison” in your body
3. Make sure you don’t get bitten again



*Stopping poison from a snake bite*

Different exercises were used in order to explain to participants how they can deal with the “poison” of stress and trauma. These include doing some simple exercise like jumping up and down or body stretch from specific parts of the body.



*Tips of exercise that would help someone with the problem of sleeplessness*

Participants were encouraged to use this exercises as the only way of dealing with stress and trauma or “make sure you are not bitten again by a snake”. However in order to deal with stress and trauma repeatedly, one need to deal with bad thoughts.

❖ **Dealing with bad thoughts**

Reading from the handbook training manual, “it is important to learn how to take your mind away from the unhelpful and stressful thoughts.” Participants were also taught the importance of choosing when, in terms of time and place, it is appropriate to focus on thoughts. For example, it is not OK to dwell on negative thoughts and memories at night when trying to sleep, because negative memories produce bad chemicals in one’s body (poison) which make it hard to rest and sleep.

Participants also learned that it is not good to focus on bad memories early morning, because it interrupt one’s ability to rest well and affect the start of the day and performance during the whole day. When a person feels worried, frustrated, angry, sad or stressed, he/she know that it is not a good time to focus on negative thoughts, because this may negatively affect personal

decision making at that moment. Participants were rather encouraged to focus on thoughts during mid-day when not busy and to make most important decisions when one can focus, and that should take 15 to 30 minutes.

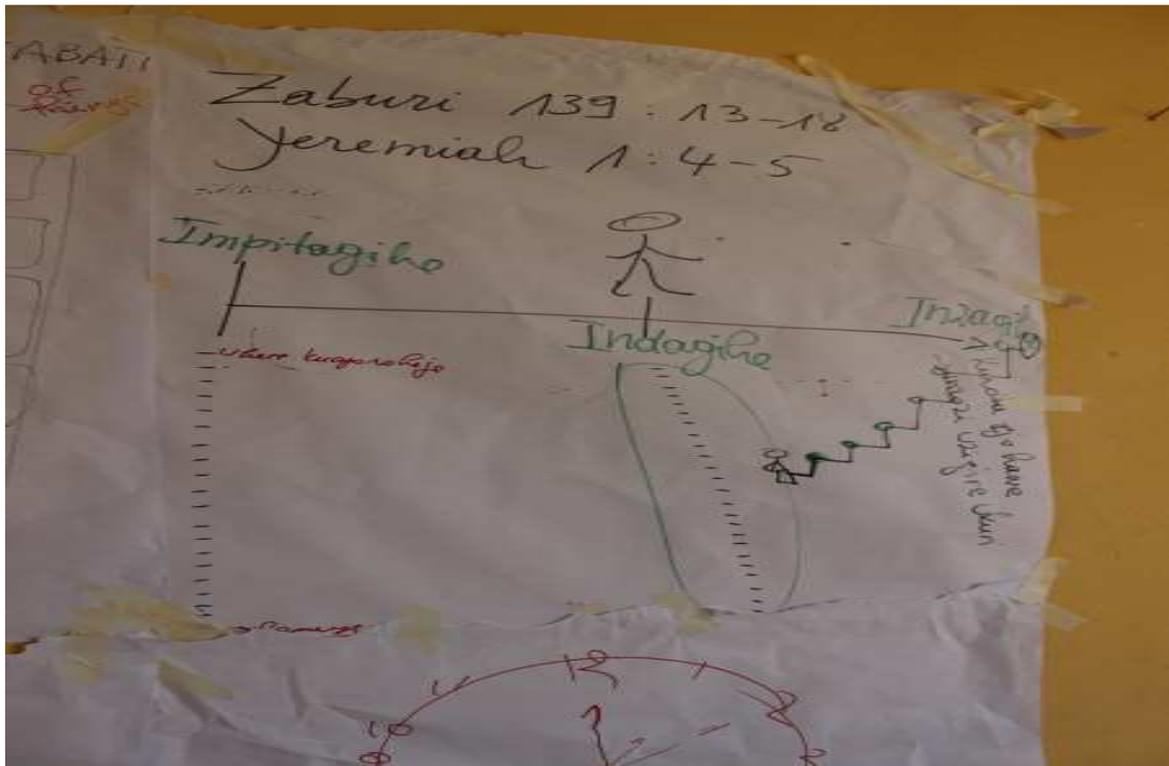
Participants found it difficult to understand this lesson easily because of their belief that no one has control over thought. One of the participants said, *“When they come they just come and nothing you can do about it”*. This was echoed by many other participants, but trainers encouraged them to use all the tips given above in case of sleepless night. This also means that people have choices to what to think and what not to think about.

One good choice is to know that the purpose of life is not making one-self happy but also sharing happiness with others. This can be done through thinking of doing something different but good to someone. Participants were given a chance to think on what they are going to do differently and good for other people. These are different skills which help one to control his/her body, feelings and thought. With this strength, participants learned that they can overcome stress and trauma.

## **2.2. Day II: Overcoming Fear, Stress and Trauma**

Day two started with the devotion combined with deep explanations of who a human being is and purpose for life. The main trainer is skilled in using biblical verses combined with short songs here and there throughout the explanations. Emotionally this strategy prepared participants to start a session with open heart to the subject. After the devotion participants joined their groups for reading and discussion on different stories related to the subject of the day. Participants were given an example of a balloon that is yet to be filled with air.

*“Before the balloon is inflated, it is soft and floppy in texture, but when you blow air into it, it becomes tight and stretched. When the air is kept inside, the outer surface of the balloon becomes stressed. If no air is let out, and more air is continually blown in, the balloon will eventually burst. If you are to let the air out, the balloon would return to its original relaxed state”*. From this illustration, participants learned that just like the balloon, fear, stress and trauma need to be let out rather than keeping inside, so that we can move forward with life.



*An illustration that life should continue*

The trainer emphasized that overcoming distress and trauma is not something that can be done all at once. To illustrate this point, the trainer used a metaphor of cupboard that is full of things. Unless it is opened very carefully, many things will fall and some may be broken down. Thus, the trainer advised them to go through a step-by-step process to deal with distress and trauma. On this note, participants were asked to write down at least five stressful or traumatic situations that come to their mind. After having the list, they were asked to identify the least stressful or traumatic one.

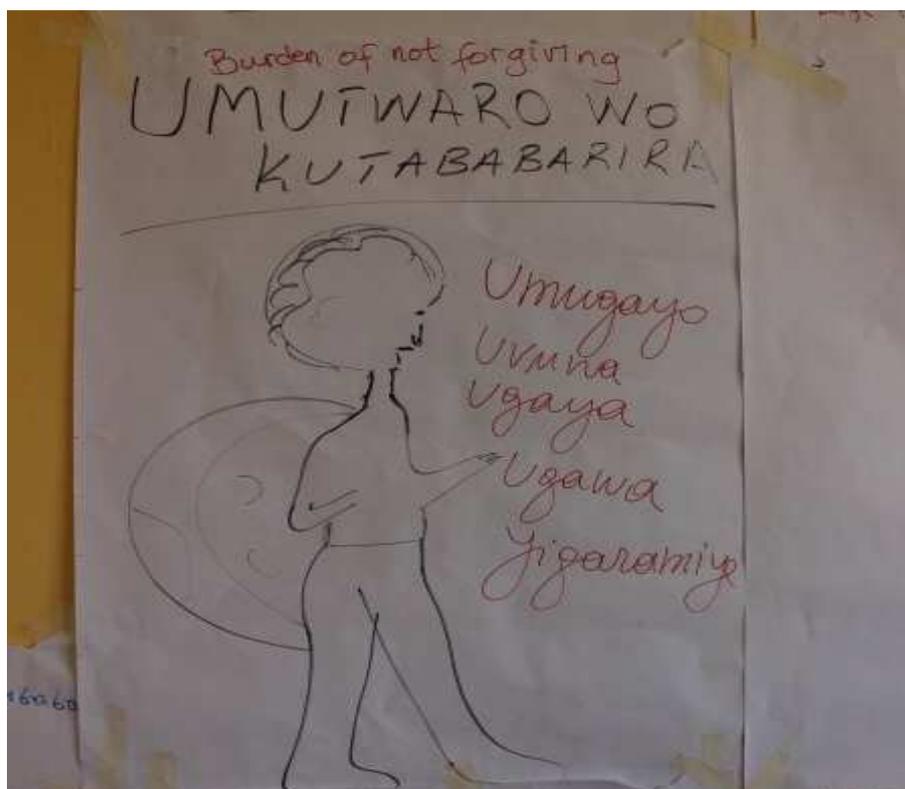
Participants learned that, if one feels distressed whenever he/she thinks or talks about a particular negative event in the past, that is a sign that he/she is still traumatized by that event. But when he/she is able to remember the past event without having negative emotions or bad dreams about it, he/she has overcome the trauma caused by it.

Reflecting on different traumatic events in the past in this session was not an easy experience, since it brought up strong emotions that people do not talk but weep. Nevertheless, within the group sharing participants managed to open up gradually and talk about various traumatic events

in their life. To some it was the first time to talk about and that brought a release and hopefully a breakthrough for their life.

Participants were then asked to come together in the meeting room where they learned the concept of **forgiveness**. This session focused more on acceptance and letting go of hurt. Participants learned that acceptance means *“to acknowledge what has happened, and come to the realization that there’s nothing that can be done to turn back time and make the negative events never to happen again. Rather than minimizing, excusing or justifying what happened, you must acknowledge what was real, painful and unjust”*.

Participants were reminded that since we are forgiven by God, then we should forgive others and be able to ask for forgiveness. Using Bible verses, the trainer emphasized that, in times where there is sin, ask for forgiveness, and where there is hurt take it to Jesus because he has accepted to carry that for you.



***Burden of not forgiving***

Moreover, participants also learned that when people accept the situation, then a person is in good process to forgiveness. *“There is no middle ground on forgiveness; either you forgive or you don’t”*, said the trainer. One cannot heal if he/she is still hurt. Understanding these processes, participants were encouraged to choose to allow the healing process to begin. When a healing has not taken place, we are usually tied with those who have hurt us; thinking of what they have done, questioning why they have done it, which usually results in living with a wounded heart.



***What happen when you have not forgiven someone?***

The trainer explained that forgiveness does not mean;

- to excuse the person for what they have done
- that you should be friends with the perpetrator
- to continue being abused by the perpetrator
- to forget what happened

But forgiveness means;

- to accept what has happened and choose not to dwell on negative experiences

- a conscious daily choice to let go of our own hurt, pain, bitterness and resentment
- no longer hurting someone
- no longer wanting to take revenge against someone for what they did against you
- a gift that is even if it is undeserved. It does not depend on apology, remorse, or even acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

Through a visual illustration, participants learned that, if you have not forgiven someone, it is like choosing to carry the person wherever you go. Forgiveness then, means to let go of that person who hurt you and choose to carry on your life. After learning the importance of forgiveness, participants were given a moment to think of someone that they need to forgive, someone who offended and caused damage or wounds to them.

After learning from the scripture (John 1:29) about Jesus who takes our pain and our sins, participants had the time to write down the list of traumatic experiences and then take it to the cross of Jesus.



*Nailing all our pain and worries to the cross*

To make it real, a symbol of the cross was brought (See the picture above). Participants were encouraged to take all their traumatic experiences, pains and worries to the cross of Jesus and nail them on it. Afterwards, all the pieces of papers were burnt down as a sign that “it is finished”.

This was not an emotionally easy but worthy exercise for the participants. One participant said, “I felt released as if a heavy stone has just dropped off me”.

### **Day III: Experience of the Willingness to Forgive**

A half of the third day focused more on sharing experiences especially from the previous day. This was done after a devotion which focused on the importance of forgiveness and the exchange of forgiveness that we get when we take all our burdens to the cross. It was a good moment of sharing after a long reflection especially for those who were not able to share during the previous day. From observation, participants were touched and eager to continue in the same mood. During this sharing session, one participant expressed;



This is the feeling that one could feel. However, like the illustration of “life as a water tank”, it is a process, where one chooses to take and drop one by one of worry and hurt for the healing to occur.

In the afternoon of Day 3, participants joined their small groups for evaluating the three days they spent together and envisioning the way forward. As they engaged in this evaluation session, participants were reminded about the main issue that had emerged during the previous training workshop on conflict management: the problem of poisoning caused by jealousy and hatred among family members. Accordingly, participants were asked to reflect on what had been

achieved since the first training workshop in order to evaluate themselves and identify gaps that still need to be filled.

In general participants highly appreciated the trainings that GNI/R and CRASPD had prepared for them. Many of them expressed with great enthusiasm that they would practice what they learned. One of the exciting outcomes of this workshop is that out of the three groups, two groups expressed their determination to form an association or club for peace-building through which different issues related to conflict will be resolved. However, even though these groups worked separately, they all came with one concern that even though they are well equipped but they were not sure if they are equipped enough to help others in their communities. Therefore, the following recommendations came from the participants;

- ✓ Organize more trainings on conflict management and healing and reconciliation with the specific purpose of training trainers or members who will serve in the community
- ✓ Organize another training which will include their partners. This is due to the fact that, even though participants are trained, since they have left their partners at home, sometimes it is difficult to practice what their partners do not understand.
- ✓ Organize another healing workshop with the focus on how to help others who are traumatized. Since healing from trauma is a process, participants fear that they are not healed enough to the level of assisting others.
- ✓ Organize training on domestic violence so that Ngoma community can be a role model for other communities. The training may focus on gender and conflict management, communication for conflict management, and peace education for both parents and children. Both husband and their wives should be invited to the training.
- ✓ Support an association or club for peace-building with special trainings after they establish it. They expressed their desire to set it up by October this year.

The workshop was ended with the handing over of certificates to all the participants.



### **3. REFLECTION ON THE OUTCOME OF THE WORKSHOP**

Rwandan society is generally hurt by different historical events and their consequences. Participants have already learned that healing is not a one day thing. Even though hearing from traumatic experiences in the past is inevitably a long-term and difficult process, one thing for sure is that participants have learned something that will help them to focus on the future rather than dwelling on the past.

Listening to testimonies of participants, observing their behaviors and considering the historical facts of division in Rwanda, there needs to be continual focus on the challenge of forgiveness and reconciliation not only for those who participated in the workshop but also for the wider community in Ngoma CDP. As we learned from the story of mountain of life, we need one another to climb the mountain. Participants could have been able to share their stories and determined to change, but their neighbors may not make things easier for them and consequently demotivate others who are in the changing process. Therefore, an ongoing support and a training for the wider community, particularly, community leaders at all levels is crucial. It is indeed very exciting to see workshop participants expressing heartfelt commitment to create a club that would assist community members in their daily conflict management and journey towards healing and reconciliation. This community-based peace-building initiative surely deserves support from GNI/R.

