

Forums for Reconciliation in Rwanda: Challenges and opportunities

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Summary

Two decades after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, there are many things to celebrate at both the political and socio-economic levels of Rwandan society. The country has made many efforts to respond to various challenges related to the post-genocide context. Among other initiatives, the Government of Rwanda established the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC), with a mandate to foster unity, build trust and move Rwandan society towards sustainable reconciliation. The Commission has recorded some great achievements in relation to its mandate. This Policy Brief highlights some of the challenges that persist. The policy recommendations are inspired by, and learned from, a four-day consultative workshop that was conducted in Rulindo district (Rwanda Northern Province) and comprised district-level and sector-level leaders of the Forums for Reconciliation established by the NURC. All policy implications that are recorded here are drawn from the workshop participants' views.

Introduction

This Policy Brief is orientated towards advocacy for strengthening the capacities of the Forums for Reconciliation, and in strong favour of promoting dialogue at the grassroots level. The Brief is informed

by lessons learned during interactive training workshops conducted in Rulindo district (in Rwanda's Northern Province) on 18 and 19 August 2014 with Forum for Reconciliation sector representatives, and on 21 and 22 August 2014 with Forum for Reconciliation district leaders. In the first round of training, the participants were from the Rulindo district Forum for Reconciliation, while the second round of training brought together members of the executive committees of the district Forums for Reconciliation. Representatives came from the following ten of thirty districts that comprise the five provinces of Rwanda: Huye, Nyamasheke, Musanze, Rwamagana, Kirehe, Kicukiro, Gicumbi, Ngororero, Bugesera and Kamonyi. The workshops were organised by the non-profit NGO Shalom Educating for Peace, in partnership with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and the Rwandan National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC).

This Policy Brief is divided into four main parts. The first part is positioned upfront in this document and comprises policy recommendations for operationalising the Forums for Reconciliation in Rwanda. Section 1 (on page 2) introduces the conceptual background to the reconciliation process in the country. Section 2 presents the





POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This Policy Brief proposes sector- and actor-specific recommendations for policy formulation and actions. The following recommendations were made by workshop participants:

To the Government of Rwanda

1. Allocate sufficient budget to the Forums for Reconciliation and improve their management systems.
2. Take seriously and invest in the trauma healing process.
3. Create space for dialogue at every level of society – from the village up to the national level – which will help people to overcome fear, speak the truth, and freely express themselves.
4. Find ways of building a justice system that delivers effectively, minimises delays, and ensures that victims are granted access to reparations.
5. Develop strategies that encourage justice for all and enable people to resist forms of corruption, which serve to undermine the process of reconciliation.
6. Eliminate social and economic inequalities, such as unequal access to financial assistance provided to children in need.

To the NURC

1. Prepare toolkits or educational guidelines for the Forums for Reconciliation, or at the very least print information leaflets.
2. Permanently mobilise the wider community towards reconciliation, and create self-help

programmes that contribute to reconciliation.

This could entail using different approaches such as art and sport, as well as promoting Rwandan cultural values that are in line with reconciliation.

3. Decentralise and establish Forums for Reconciliation mobilisers from the village level.
4. Ensure that a factually accurate and truthful history of Rwanda is taught.
5. Enhance guidance and monitoring systems to ensure the effectiveness of the Forums for Reconciliation.
6. Ensure ownership among local leadership of reconciliation processes, and the establishment of channels of communication for feedback at all levels of government.

To Rwandan Civil Society

1. Develop practical capacity-building strategies that boost confidence and skills in the process of reconciliation, such as training of trainers for reconciliation, preparing study tours, empowering *abunzi* (community mediators), and enhancing people's capacity to find solutions to their own problems.
2. Promote synergy between partners of Forums for Reconciliation.

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challenges – both those faced by the reconciliation process in general and those faced by the Forums – based on the workshop findings, while Section 3 discusses the prospects for the Forums for Reconciliation process in Rwanda. The conclusion highlights three main issues requiring urgent consideration.

1 Background to and concept of reconciliation in Rwanda

1.1 Background

Rwanda's history is marked by multifaceted violent conflicts, wars and a genocide committed against

ethnic Tutsi in 1994. The NURC has illustrated how the atrocities of 1994 shredded the Rwandan social fabric that had provided social cohesion prior to the genocide. In its aftermath, the country was left with a collapsed system of governance, a highly polarised society characterised by mistrust and fear between citizens, and a lack of national unity.² The turbulent and tragic turn of Rwanda's recent history has required initiatives that will enable the country to respond positively to those wrongs and to build a promising common and shared future. Formally instituted in 1999, with the broad mandate of promoting and fostering unity and reconciliation among Rwandans, the NURC is one such initiative. Since its creation, the NURC has been making efforts to promote and sustain reconciliation and pro-peace actions. Its work has been framed

historically both by the 1994 genocide and by other conflicts often fuelled by a combination of bad governance, corruption, the 'instrumentalisation' of ethnic and regional identities, nepotism and marginalisation.³

The launch of the reconciliation process in Rwanda has been a significant milestone in stabilising the country after the genocide. However, challenges continue to inhibit the overall success of the process. One such challenge relates to truth-telling and the creation of spaces for free expression. Reconciliation in Rwanda has been challenged and affected by the post-genocide context, which is characterised by a general lack of trust between citizens, the marginalisation of 'ethnicised groups', and feelings of 'woundedness' on the part of many members of society. These have become a major hindrance to building trust among Rwandans.⁴ A number of mechanisms have been established to address these challenges. One such mechanism is the Forums for Reconciliation. These can be understood, in this context, as a gathering of people from different levels of society with the purpose of promoting reconciliatory initiatives, especially at the community level. The NURC describes the Forum for Reconciliation as a 'permanent decentralised structure that facilitates the process of reconciliation at the community level'.⁵

The Forums for Reconciliation established at the district level to serve the Rwandan reconciliation process are composed of representatives from different sectors of community life, including:

- representatives from district leadership, NGOs and local community-based initiatives intervening in the area of reconciliation;
- committees of reconciliation mobilisers at district level;
- educators/teachers and religious leaders;
- representatives from Ibuka (the coalition of the survivors' associations);
- representatives from AVEGA (the Association of the Widows of the 1994 Genocide);
- the agent in charge of good governance in the district;
- representatives from the National Council of Youth and the National Council of Women at district level;
- representatives from the military services operating in the district;
- representatives from the National Police;
- representatives from *abunzi* ('community mediators') at sector level; and
- members of the district's private sector.

In the past, a representative of the Gacaca court at sector level was also a member of the district Forum. It is worth noting that, in addition to the members listed above, the district leadership could invite other members whose inputs they thought to be consistent with and relevant to the process of reconciliation in the district. The Forum is coordinated by a committee of 10 to 14 people elected by the district leadership. The establishment of such a Forum is expected to be extended to sector, cell and village levels.

Among other strategies developed in order to move towards its mission, the NURC has established the district Forums for Reconciliation as a way of ensuring permanent consultations with the grassroots, interacting with local communities, and exchanging ideas and information with actors in reconciliation, and as a means of decentralising the process by encouraging local leaders and communities to own the process of reconciliation. In addition, the establishment of the district Forums is expected to contribute towards improving coordination between different actors in the process of reconciliation in Rwanda, developing practical strategies for monitoring and evaluating the impact of community-based reconciliation initiatives, avoiding duplication in implementing reconciliation-related projects, strengthening the capacities of partners in reconciliation through the Forums, and establishing mechanisms of sharing information and resolving conflicts, wherever escalated.

1.2 The concept of a reconciliation process in Rwanda

The concept of reconciliation is very complex and encapsulates a multitude of principles, variables, dimensions and meanings.⁶ For this reason, at the academic level there is still a lack of consensus on its definition. Nevertheless, reconciliation is a comprehensive process that uses key instruments such as justice, the search for truth, and healing and reparations mechanisms as a means of facilitating a smooth transition from a divided past to a shared future.⁷ As indicated by the NURC, unity and reconciliation processes have been guided by a number of principles. These include:

- promoting the spirit of Rwandan identity and putting national interests first instead of showing preference or favour based on ethnicity, kinship, gender, religion and/or region of origin;
- combating the ideology of genocide along with any form of divisionism and discrimination; and
- making efforts to heal one another's physical and psychological wounds, while building future interpersonal trust based on truth-telling, repentance and forgiveness.

Reconciliation is conceptualised by the NURC as:

*a consensus practice of citizens who have a common nationality, who share the same culture and have equal rights; citizens characterised by trust, tolerance, mutual respect, equality, complementary roles or interdependence, truth, and healing of one another's wounds inflicted by history, with the objective of laying a foundation for sustainable development.*⁸

According to the NURC, this definition should be understood as a political dimension of the reconciliation process. During the consultative workshops held in Rulindo district, it was noted that reconciliation at the individual/interpersonal level faces significant challenges as a result of issues central to the process still being sensitive to talk about. Some of the views from participants are presented below.

2 Challenges and policy implications of the workshop findings

This section presents data collected from the consultative workshops that were carried out in Rulindo district and that brought together numerous reconciliation actors, including reconciliation practitioners, local authorities, educators, religious leaders, security-sector agents, members of civil society, and members of the private sector. Based on discussions from the workshop, this section is divided into two parts: the first part presents general challenges for the reconciliation process in Rwanda, while the second shows the challenges faced more specifically by the Forums for Reconciliation.

2.1 Challenges for the reconciliation process in Rwanda

Challenges for the reconciliation process in Rwanda can be understood in five distinct but related categories. The first relates to historical fact; the second to a lack of trust (vertical and horizontal); the third to balancing and prioritising reconciliation and justice initiatives; the fourth to leadership; and the fifth to capacity-building.

2.1.1 Reconciliation and historical facts

While efforts have been made to cultivate a spirit of 'Rwandanness' (via, for example, the Ndi Umunyarwanda programme) and build national unity, and while work-shop participants recognised the positive impact of these efforts and shared success stories, ethnic divisions and considerations persist. According to the 2013 *Rwanda Reconciliation*

Barometer, Rwandans still view themselves 'at an alarming scale/level' through ethnic stereotypes.⁹ Participants indicated that ethnic stereotypes are commonly expressed in everyday life, either openly or more secretly in the company of the individual's family or relations from the same 'ethnic' background. Workshop participants pointed out that ethnicity-shaped mindsets are still a challenge to the process of reconciliation. In its telling, Rwanda's history is often distorted by different and diverging interests, yet trauma caused by such historical distortion is seen as a hindrance to reconciliation. Participants also spoke of the denial among many Rwandans of the facts of the genocide.

2.1.2 Reconciliation and trust between people

Owing to Rwanda's violent past and deep social divisions, a lack of trust and high levels of suspicion are common among citizens. As a result, people feel afraid to voice the truth about the country's history – especially with regard to events that took place during periods of violence – thus creating a culture of silence. There is concern that this lack of trust also inhibits people from being able to apologise for their actions during periods of conflict as they are not sure what will happen to them if they speak publicly about those actions. Although the individual should be accountable for what he or she has done, workshop participants suggested that there are many who live with the shame of what their relatives did during the genocide. These are consequences of the genocide, and these work as barriers to the reconciliation process in Rwanda.

Participants noted that many Rwandans have learned to pretend that violent periods in the country's history never occurred, as a way of bypassing the realities of the past. Mutual suspicion is common among neighbours as a result of mistrust between perpetrators and victims, or among perpetrators themselves. This has challenged the effort to facilitate effective dialogue within and between communities. Moreover, there is a sense of hypocrisy active whereby people present 'double faces' in their conversation, often with a social/political motive based on fear and a lack of trust.

2.1.3 Reconciliation and justice

Since the 1994 genocide, the Government of Rwanda has invested in building an efficient justice system and finding creative ways (such as the Gacaca courts) to deal with the crimes committed during this period. However, workshop participants identified gaps in the national approach, such as a lack of policy on reparations to genocide victims. It was expressed directly that 'there are people who have been convicted of genocide crimes but are still free – not in prison. There are perpetrators who are back in

the communities and are persecuting the victims once again'.¹⁰

Although the country has recorded progress in terms of controlling corruption,¹¹ the existence of this problem in daily interpersonal interactions has been identified as one of the main factors undermining the reconciliation process. In addition, workshop participants highlighted what they called *inda nini* (greed) as a hindrance to reconciliation. It was understood that fighting against greed and corruption could significantly contribute to the process of reconciliation.

Economic justice and restitution are two central components of the process of justice and reconciliation. In the case of Rwanda, these two components are significant challenges.

Economic justice

Despite efforts made by the government to alleviate poverty and offer equal opportunities to Rwandans, workshop participants voiced concern over inequality in salaries and an enduring gap between rich and poor. Unemployment was identified as a cause of discontent, as it leads people to attach little value and pay little attention to the reconciliation process – and especially among the youth, where levels of unemployment are highest. Poverty was also identified as a stumbling block for reconciliation initiatives as many individuals simply lack the means to make reparations to victims.

Restitution

Restitution has been identified as another key challenge to the process of reconciliation. Workshop participants explained that in some cases where people fail to pay back what was taken or destroyed during the genocide, this is due to a lack of will to pay – but in others it can be due to a *lack of means*. It was also noted that there are no follow-up and enforcement mechanisms that would help to ensure that individuals pay the required restitutions. The absence of national policy on restitutions should be considered a central challenge to reconciliation.

2.1.4 Reconciliation and leadership

There has been considerable investment in improving governance systems and promoting efficient leadership in Rwanda. However, workshop participants stressed the need to increase/improve cooperation between leaders and ordinary community members involved in the reconciliation process, and to encourage communities to take ownership of reconciliation initiatives. Low levels of cooperation and ownership might result from the fact that leaders have multiple priorities and do not consider reconciliation-related activities to be as important as activities that produce

more tangible outputs. Furthermore, instead of a considered and cooperative, consultative approach being taken, reconciliation activities are sometimes simply imposed on a community. It was also mentioned that issues of inferiority and superiority among leaders and ordinary community members serve to impede the kind of 'listening to others' that is a central component in effective dialogue.

Local government leadership was also found to be lacking in commitment to promoting reconciliation. This was expressed by sector-level workshop participants. One participant explained that they lack support from district leadership, even those personnel in charge of Forums for Reconciliation.¹² Furthermore, the opinion was expressed that leaders not directly involved in Forums for Reconciliation do not feel obliged to engage at all in promoting reconciliation.

Also recognised by workshop participants was the persistence of a negative perception of government programmes, and the inability – on the part of many Rwandans, who are living with deep emotional wounds from the past – to recognise *any* positive government achievements. This observation is of critical importance, as it further suggests the disunity in Rwandan society.

2.1.5 Reconciliation and capacity-building

Lack of capacity and capacity-building were regarded as being among the key hindrances to reconciliation. Workshop participants identified insufficient training and a lack of knowledge regarding the reconciliation process, as well as varying understandings of the concept of reconciliation, as being especially problematic. Also discussed was a persistent lack of educational materials and financial resources required by Forum for Reconciliation leaders.

2.2 Challenges faced by the Forums for Reconciliation

According to the participants in the consultative workshops, the following are challenges faced by the Forums for Reconciliation in Rwanda:

- ***Insufficient time for meetings.*** Participants argued that leaders who form the Forum for Reconciliation have little time to meet. This was highlighted by a participant who stated that 'we do not have time for meeting because we are usually caught up by other government duties, and therefore do not get enough time to meet and discuss or share ideas related to reconciliation'.¹³
- ***Lack of coordination between the Forums and local leadership.*** This is also related to the above challenge. There was a general feeling of disconnect identified as existing between local leaders at

the sector level and Forum for Reconciliation representatives. Participants raised issues related to the 'questionable partnership and collaboration between the Forum and district as well as sector leadership'.

- **Prioritising activities at the sector level.** Community members displayed a lack of ownership with regard to the process of establishing reconciliation initiatives, as they argued that it is 'uncommon to organise activities without the intervention of local leadership at sector level'.
- **Lack of required means.** Workshop participants detailed challenges relating to a lack of means that would help them more effectively respond to the needs of the population, such as transport, means of communication, and educational toolkits with guidelines for training and educating others. Moreover, concern was expressed that Forum for Reconciliation representatives are not trained for what is expected of them, further illustrating the need for capacity-building. It was also felt that budgets and allowances are inadequate, and that there is a general lack of consultation/coordination on allocated means that should enable effective and efficient functioning of the district Forums. Ideally, there should be a budget allocated for the Forums for Reconciliation at the district level; the lack of coordination mentioned is a major concern as it exposes an absence of trust between the point at which the budget is distributed and the point at which it is used.

3 Prospects for the Forum for Reconciliation process in Rwanda

Based on the challenges discussed above, it was identified that, at the political level, reconciliation is progressing satisfactorily. At the individual and inter-personal levels, however, there is still a long way to go. Workshop participants argued that there is a need for continued efforts towards establishing a range of strategies throughout the reconciliation process. Specifically, participants mentioned the need to continue implementing inclusive social development activities, such as cooperatives, which may help to reduce the gap between rich and poor. This would have the dual benefit of helping to fight poverty while promoting reconciliation. Participants also suggested creating large spaces for dialogue, and a need to support local initiatives for reconciliation. There is also a need for more involvement among civil society and Diaspora communities in search of truth through the process of reconciliation.

To ensure the sustainability of the Forums for Reconciliation, and for the sake of achieving reconciliation at both individual and societal levels, workshop participants argued that telling the truth about the past and making sure that the youth are well informed about the history of Rwanda and what has brought division are key.

Reflecting on the prospects for the current Forums for Reconciliation in Rwanda, participants expressed their support for the Ndi Umunyarwanda programme. They highlighted the need to further promote '*Ndi umunyarwanda*' as a concept and expand the programme into all segments of Rwandan society. A fear was expressed, however, that most people do not have a good understanding of what the programme is about and that some leaders who are sent to explain it seem disconnected from what they are talking about.

Conclusion

Based on lessons learned from the four days of training in Rulindo district and on shared information from sector and district Forums for Reconciliation, three main issues need urgently to be taken into consideration.

Firstly, there is a need to combat the persistence of suspicion among Rwandan citizens and the lack of truth-telling surrounding historical facts. This lack of trust applies both to relationships between leaders and ordinary community members, and to relationships between ordinary community members themselves. To address this issue there need to be increased efforts to create environments conducive to facilitating community dialogue.

Secondly, it is necessary to address the problem of Forums for Reconciliation that are put in place without first ensuring that the capacity exists to run them properly and efficiently. Leaders need to understand and engage in the process of reconciliation – and not simply take and pass on information as 'orders from above' without understanding that information. We cannot expect ordinary community members to learn and implement reconciliation processes while their leaders do not understand key reconciliation concepts.

Finally, it is necessary to address the *disconnect* that exists between district leaders and Forums for Reconciliation. This will call for a renewal of collaboration and teamwork among local leaders and ordinary community members.

NOTES

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- 2 NURC (National Unity and Reconciliation Commission). 2010. *Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer*. Kigali: NURC, 11.
- 3 NURC, 2010, 16.
- 4 Interview with Jean de Dieu Basabose, August 2014.
- 5 NURC, 2010, 16.
- 6 NURC, 2010, 13.
- 7 Huyse, L. & Salter, M. (eds) 2008. *Traditional justice and reconciliation after violent conflict: Learning from African experiences*. Stockholm: DEA.
- 8 NURC, 2010, 16.
- 9 NURC, 2013, 56.
- 10 Opinion expressed by a participant in the Rulindo workshop, August 2014.
- 11 The Ubupfura Project, initiated by SPE-Rwanda, defines corruption as a 'rotten and distorted mindset that leads people to living without truth and is characterised by actions aimed at gaining or accumulating wealth, power, honor and/or pleasure without humaneness and integrity'. *Ubupfura* is a difficult Rwandan word to translate, but means something akin to 'integrity'.
- 12 Opinion expressed by a participant in the Rulindo workshop, August 2014.
- 13 Opinion expressed by a participant in the Rulindo workshop, August 2014.



ABOUT SHALOM EDUCATING FOR PEACE



Shalom Educating for Peace (SEP) is a non-governmental, apolitical, non-profit organization working for building and sustaining positive peace through education. SEP envisions a human society where injustices are righted, enemies are reconciled, hurts are healed, fear is calmed and communities prospering. SEP pursues the following strategic objectives:

- (i) educating for peace,
- (ii) researching for peace and
- (iii) cultivating the culture of non-violence.

Currently, SEP is basically operating in Rwanda through its locally registered branch, SEP-Rwanda. The organisation is establishing branches in Kenya and Burundi. Located at the interface between academicians and practitioners, SEP considers peace as a way of life committed to nonviolent means of resolving and transforming daily conflicts and striving for personal and social justice. Walking alongside communities, SEP applies a holistic approach: the organization seeks to work with the whole community, on every level, bringing peace to young people, educators, parents, leaders and other community groups in a variety of ways.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) was launched in 2000 by officials who worked in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with the aim of ensuring that lessons learnt from South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy are taken into account and utilised in advancing the interests of national reconciliation across Africa. IJR works with partner organisations across Africa to promote reconciliation and socio-economic justice in countries emerging from conflict or undergoing democratic transition. IJR is based in Cape Town, South Africa. For more information, visit <http://www.ijr.org.za>, and for comments or enquiries contact info@ijr.org.za.

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