

# 104th Great Lakes Policy Forum

## Meeting Report

### March 4, 2004

#### *Introduction*

In addition to the visible destruction of war and violence, there is also considerable invisible damage to people who have survived. Adrien Niyongabo, Regional Coordinator, Trauma Healing and Nonviolence Training at African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI), Friends' Peace Teams, and Paul Simo, Africa Program Director for Global Rights: Partners for Justice, discussed the topic of healing and reconciliation in the Great Lakes region from complementary ends of the spectrum at this month's Great Lakes Policy Forum. Learned Dees, Senior Program Officer of the Africa Program at The National Endowment for Democracy, moderated the forum.

#### *Trauma Healing and Reconciliation*

In the aftermath of violent conflict, peace is not simply the absence of violence. Those who have experienced violence and war need also to experience healing. To remain unhealed is to remain traumatized. Healing in this case implies more than economic or political empowerment - it has to take place in relationships amongst both victims and victimizers. Whole communities are often traumatized and suffer from a kind of paralysis. Individuals and family members are estranged from each other. Even authorities and the general population fear and mistrust one another. Difficult as it is to deal with the resulting problems, they need to be addressed. Generally, much time and effort is placed on political reconstruction and combatant reintegration, yet not enough money or importance is placed on the psychosocial manifestations of prolonged conflict.



**Left: Paul Simo, Center: Learned Dees, and Right: Adrien Niyongabo discuss the importance of trauma healing and reconciliation from a community and institutional level.**

The paramount activity of AGLI is creating awareness and facilitating processes of healing and reconciliation, concentrating particularly on key actors in local communities in the Great Lakes such as youth, former child soldiers, and internally displaced persons. The main format used is based on the "Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP)" curriculum that stresses cooperation, community skills, communication, and nonviolent conflict resolution in which 20-30 participants engage in group dialogue and role-plays. Combatants and non-combatants, perpetrators and victims often sit side-by-side in the workshops for the first time. Although reluctant at first, they many times become friends. The objective of the workshops and group meetings is to provide a forum for people who have usually been too afraid to meet in other situations because of their bad experiences in the war. The meetings thus create a starting point for the healing and reconciliation processes. The basic themes in the program are understanding the conflict, and the benefits of forgiving and seeking forgiveness for the violent acts that took place during the war, thereby enabling people to restart normal life and put the past behind them.

For many of the participants, the word "trauma" is unknown. They do not realize how they have been changed by their experiences. At the beginning of any given forum, participants, on opposing sides of the conflict, are usually reserved and hesitant to even sit or speak with their adversaries, but by the end of the three-day workshop foe has become friend. Very often, "common ground" is found in that both sides, whether victim or victimizer, have suffered. From this place, genuine healing begins.

One of the insights guiding the work of the AGLI is that building peace and achieving reconciliation is a long process, not the result of a single decision; and that genuine reconciliation and healing require the active involvement of the people themselves. In many countries, such as the DRC and Burundi, conflict has been widespread and prolonged for periods of 20-30 years. AGLI works with many varied populations in different countries throughout the Great Lakes Region. For example, they work to train *gacaca* judges in Rwanda, as well as work with young adults in Burundi who were given arms during the war to protect their communities. AGLI is now training these Burundian young people to teach them ways other than fighting. AGLI also works with IDPs in Uganda and Burundi as well as prisoners and genocide survivors in Rwanda.

#### *The National Truth and Reconciliation Process in the DRC*

The Democratic Republic of Congo epitomizes the case of regime change without real change. Successive, different regimes have not fundamentally changed the way the government operates, but on the contrary, have repeated and sometimes even aggravated the abuses of their predecessor. For example, the DRC has never, since the time of King Leopold, had a military that acted as a public protection force. Perfected under Mobutu, the military and police has been exploited by the ruling regime as a tool of civilian repression. Secondly, patronage has remained the only means of allocating resources and has been the sole means of social mobility. For these reasons and many others, it is vitally important for the national reconciliation process in the DRC to be institutionalized and to be given state support. A true national conversation on the past, including both its dynamics and consequences is essential to creating sustainable, positive peace.

Truth and Reconciliation Processes (TRPs) are tantamount to taking stock of what has led a country to its current state. They involve engaging a country in a frank conversation about the past, fostering a civic consciousness, and unpacking the various layers of the conflict – such as local, ethnic conflicts that have been manipulated and have thus spilled over onto the national landscape. TRPs ideally create a public space to build confidence in the government, create a sense of order and stability, and promote healing. One of the great risks of TRPs is the tendency to overlook the complexity of the situation. To avoid doing so, TRPs need to be inclusive (excluding no one), politically acceptable, credible, and owned by the citizenry. To this end, although the international community, most specifically the ICC and the UN, can provide invaluable expertise and assistance to TRPs, it is important for them to take the backseat to an internally driven process. Finally, TRPs must operate within some sort of defined timeframe created by a peace agreement or other framework that does not prolong reconciliation, but also does not cut short this necessary course.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in the DRC has come out of the peace agreement that emerged during the intense peace negotiations from 2000-2002 and is based on the formula prescribed by similar TRCs in Sierra Leone and South Africa. Unfortunately in the DRC's case, the TRC seems to have two main flaws. First, the peace agreement allows for political actors to designate the members of the commission, making it politically subservient. It will take extremely credible, strong leadership to bring legitimacy to the process. Second, the time limit that has been mandated on the creation of the TRC, thirty days after the new government is set-up, is too strict of a time frame. One of the ways to remedy these flaws is for civil society to facilitate open broad consultation allowing the population, in both the cities and the rural areas, to dictate what they want and to create a momentum and demand for the process. Also along these lines, a change in power dynamics in government is necessary.

#### *Grassroots and National Reconciliation: A symbiotic relationship*

Initiatives by sub-institutions, such as the Church, NGOs, and the media, become vitally important in garnering support and understanding for TRPs and the TRC specifically. Conversely, an institutionalized TRC and TRP can create an enabling environment, a space without risks, and for some a validation for

the community processes. Reconciliation must happen at both levels of society in order for true healing to be realized. In this light, and looking to the future, it is of utmost importance to address the impacts of conflict on children who have matriculated in a culture of violence, to provide them with opportunities to address psychosocial issues. At the same time, healing and reconciliation need to be complimented by the provision of economic and educational opportunities for youth so that there may be lasting healing and peace.

End.