

From less than Zero: The challenge of rebuilding Economies.

**Paper presented by V.K. Lelei of Oxfam GB at the 55th DPI/NGO
Annual**

**Conference, Sept 2002 on Oxfam GB's approaches to rebuilding
livelihoods,**

The case of Rwanda.

**The presentation by *Vincent Lelei will be preceded by a 15-minute
film show on: "*Learning about Livelihoods*". It is a training material
developed by Oxfam GB, on the rebuilding of livelihoods devastated by
pervasive conflicts and natural calamities, based in Southern Africa.**

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**The insights are meant to set the stage for deeper discussions at the end
of the**

show and the talk by Vincent.

***V.K. Lelei is the Regional Director for the Horn, East and Central Africa, Oxfam GB.**

Mr. Shashi Tharoor, Under-Secretary General for Communications and Public Information, and the UN-DPI team, who are the organizers of this conference, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to start by thanking you all on behalf of Oxfam and on my own behalf, for the opportunity to speak at this all- important gathering.

Oxfam Great Britain is an international non-governmental organisation working in nearly 80 countries around the world. It is part of a Confederation of eleven other Oxfams working under the banner of Oxfam International. Our mission is to work with other like-minded organisations in finding lasting solutions to poverty and suffering in the world, which implies a dual mandate of work in both relief and development contexts. We work in partnership with communities and other sympathetic organisations to try to bring about lasting positive change in people's lives.

My work with Oxfam is in the Horn, East and Central Africa and I will try to present some thoughts to you today based on that experience.

For a start I want to concentrate my thoughts on Africa, but thoughts that are applicable to many other countries outside Africa experiencing pervasive conflict, and decline in all indicators of socio-

economic growth. The premise that this paper rests on is that before conflicts exhibit their devastating effects on peoples' lives they will have killed livelihoods almost instantaneously through violent conflict, but could also be killing slowly like cancer does, through hatred rooted in the hearts of people, which then does not allow them to build on their comparative advantages. I was reminded painfully of the September 11, whose sadly, its anniversary of infamy is tomorrow.

I would however want to focus on Africa for now. Africa is at a crossroads. Despite the development efforts of the past two decades, people in Africa are getting poorer. The lives of almost 100 million people in twenty countries moves from a constant struggle, from that of fighting for their lives, to fighting to save their fragile livelihoods. In fact there are currently an estimated 120, thousand child soldiers in the continent.

Conflict is an all-pervasive and ever-present reality in the countries where we work in. Many of my colleagues in Oxfam and our partner organisations have been personally affected. We know the terrible statistics. In fact it is estimated that in sub-Saharan Africa there are eleven million children who have been orphaned as a direct or indirect result of conflict. The social, psychological, economic and

cultural impacts of this are almost too tragic to contemplate. Yet contemplate them we must, because the costs of not addressing the causes and consequences of conflict can only be greater. Today I would like to talk in more detail about some of the challenges relating to conflict management, with particular reference to how conflict-affected people can be supported to rebuild their livelihoods.

Before I move into some detail, I would like to make some comments which I believe are of fundamental importance to appreciating Oxfam's approach.

When I was planning this presentation I was struck by the title of the session I was being asked to speak on. When I saw the heading of the paper, which is in two parts in my view, "From less than zero on rebuilding economies", and "Shared responsibility", my mind kept zooming from the images of ordinary people I meet in my daily life schedules, and the picture I see in the world, written in terms of relationships, relationships between households, between communities in a country, and relationships between countries. The choice of wording interested me. It seems that there are some key assumptions being made here, which I thought I needed to comment on at the outset.

"Less than zero". Conflict is destructive in many ways. Violent conflict disrupts infrastructure and investment, destroys basic facilities such as schools and hospitals, kills or chases away the most educated and the best resourced- those who can afford to leave. Conflicts are a consequence of loss of trust, either between individual households, communities, or countries. This will always never be a one off instance, but over periods of time. The escalating in the loss of trust would then degenerate into pervasive violent conflict, which would then lead to the destruction of tangible assets. Invariably, in the circumstances we have witnessed among populations emerging from conflict, the physical environment is even wounded more:

- Trees have been cut, even roots removed for fuel wood.**
- Grass and other shrubs are all destroyed.**
- Almost all animals both wild and those domesticated have been displaced, killed for food, or simply died from changes they too could not withstand.**

Environmental destruction in part accelerates loss of capacity for faster socio-economic recovery in many parts of the world. Since the natural setting is the custodian of peoples' cultures, beliefs and norms of existence, the psychological healing takes longer than anticipated, for

example if the destruction was only due to natural calamities. The Oxfam GB livelihood programmes are therefore designed to address the immediate livelihood priorities, while focusing on the longer term environmental regeneration and protection priorities as part of long term survival.

It is our experience that the loss of intangible assets, the relationships based on trust that actually erodes livelihoods the most in a systemic and pervasive way.

However, the phrase “ Less than zero” could easily underestimate the resilience of Africa's greatest resource -its population itself. The capacities of communities to survive, recover, and go on to develop are enormous. No livelihood programming with communities starts at zero, no matter what trauma has gone before.

Forgive me if this point seems too obvious. Our experience tells us that it is important to place the people with whom we work firmly at the center of our planning and delivery. The challenge then is not rebuilding economies but lives, livelihoods, families, and communities.

There is also the underlying assumption that conflicts end. That there is a beginning and a middle, and then finally, a resolution, after which time we will start to reconstruct. Coming from the environment I

have just described we have found this to be obviously not the case. Conflicts have causes, which can endure. The impact of violent conflict can itself feed further conflict. If we remember this, then it leads us to recognize that livelihood programming for reconstruction needs to consider the causes and remedies of conflict at its center.

Indeed, a comprehensive review of Oxfam's programme in Rwanda concluded that poverty reduction in communities that have suffered violent conflict would be severely impeded without a minimum level of coexistence as the foundation for development. What do I mean? Coexistence is more than living side by side without incident. Equally it is not quite reconciliation. It is the capacity to resist resorting to violence and destruction, to decide among alternatives to violence and destruction. Without this, economic and social development cannot proceed with any real prospect for sustainability, or indeed, peace.

Rwanda is a country of 10,170 square miles, with a population of about 8.2 million. The country is coming out of a genocide situation, at which time it is estimated that over 800,000 people died in 1994 through an ethnic based conflict and further devastated the fragile economic base. The almost 0.80 million people died in just about one hundred days, between April and June 1994

In Rwanda, Oxfam has been implementing a programme on conflict management and peace building, named “ Imagine Coexistence”.

The initial programme planning raised a number of issues, not least of which was the sense of marginalisation that some communities and groups within communities felt. At the grass roots level communities felt almost entirely excluded from decision-making processes. Women in particular had little space to make themselves heard.

Populations emerging from conflict like those in the Rwanda programme, emerge from loss, the loss of their loved ones, loss of their livelihoods, loss of their ability to be heard, to influence what happens to their daily lives. Recovery, reconstruction, rehabilitation, is the reverse process to attain all the above basic requirements. They even begin to acquire control on what they get told. Unequal power relations are at the heart of the conflicts and violence we have witnessed.

In fact in 1998, after 56 years of working with populations living in abject poverty, often occasioned by conflicts, Oxfam did Fundamental Review of her Strategic intent. The analysis concluded that the decisions on lifting such populations out of their situations lay partially in their hands, but were largely impacted upon by forces form other levels. These are levels they have no say over or very little say. We began to

recognize that poverty reduction and relieving of suffering was not just about the poor working their hearts out. It is about being able to contribute to the decisions on what the products of their sweat is worth, when sold out. For example a peasant family producing coffee from a quarter of an acre of land allotted to them after years of being refugees soon realize that after working so hard to produce the high quality berries, their efforts are worth naught. Therefore Oxfam GB recognizes the importance of attending to the root causes, the reversal of inequity in access to power, at household, community, national, and regional levels, even at global levels. In this specific instance in Rwanda, recognizing the urgent need to support economic development for sustainable livelihoods, but at the same time seeing the futility of proceeding without addressing the conflicts, Oxfam decided to pilot an approach that considered both problems. The learning we put to test in the specific Rwanda programme was therefore based on the fact that there were many levels in conflict that needed addressing simultaneously:

- ❖ At household and community levels in challenging ideas and beliefs on what works and who wields or should wield power in**

terms of coexisting as a people, a nation, and accessing and managing resources as a right.

- ❖ At District and National levels in challenging policies that need to be in place to foster growth with equity as a right, for all households and communities in the country.**
- ❖ At regional and global levels to challenge policies on specific issues like trade and globalization, international arms trade to regulate the arms trade, so that weapons are not transferred to where they might be used to fuel conflicts, and lead to the breaching of international humanitarian law and human rights.**

The programme has two main components: conflict management training and community grants to support the provision of basic services and development of livelihood-related initiatives. The training is aimed at equipping individuals and communities with skills for understanding and applying creative, non-violent alternatives to manage conflict, by breaking the cycle of mistrust, by building credible structures that minimize conflict, while engaging in tangible investments in livelihood reconstruction.

The programme activities involve small community grants of a few thousand dollars at a time given to communities to spend on their

chosen priorities. The primary aim of this grant giving was to help communities put the training lessons into practice. The discussions on priorities and management of the funds saw communities practicing the understanding and skills they had gained. It also allowed communities some decision-making power at grass roots level, and the experience of using it. It supported the development of positive links among community members and with authorities. A good example is a local official in Umutara, who admitted that he had not always exercised the power he had wisely. When I met him during a visit he told me:

“After the first training session we set up a livestock association aimed at uniting us and promoting how we earn a living. I am now the leader of that group and the way I manage the association has greatly changed from what it used to be. We are now able to plan together as a village, and consult the Government officials on how we go about it. In fact before that, the community had been expressing dissatisfaction over the authority I exercise, but I was not ready to change. After the training I understood that there is no shame in changing a decision. ”.

Another example is impact of the programme on one particularly marginalized group, the Batwa. The Batwa are a small minority group in Rwanda, who are like an untouchable group. Traditionally, they have

been segregated from their Hutu and Tutsi neighbors, the two main groups. These neighbors would not even eat with or share food or drink with the Batwa. During one of my visits, one Batwa community member explained to our team when asked what her greatest need was, she retorted that “yes I need medicine for my sick child, and who has not eaten this morning, yes I need food for myself, yes I need shelter for my remaining family, but for today my greatest need is to be able to say hallow my neighbor”. Following the training, the community helped the Batwa to implement an income-generating activity in the local market. For the first time since the market was established in colonial times, the Batwa sell food in the market and the Bahutu and Batutsi community members actually come to their stalls and buy their goods.

So, one of the impacts of this programme has been a positive on livelihoods, in terms of accessing local markets for the most marginalized. The core point is if you can change the way people negotiate a space for themselves in their community, they can then take control, using the same skills and capacities to change their lives in many ways.

One community participant told us: "I have learned more skills through this training. I joined a group developing projects, and as a

result, my family can access maize flour at any time. It is also easier for livestock to get grass and water.” These are small changes that we never underestimate. This is a country in which 70% of people live on less than one US dollar per day. The lives of a number of these people are changing for the better. But is this enough?. There are millions of people living in abject poverty across Sub-Saharan Africa, in fact 300 millions, let alone the wider world. Already Oxfam is working with the University of Butare in Rwanda, linking them with Tufts University in the USA. The programme has exchanged with the UNHCR "Imagining coexistence" programme in Sarajevo, which is expanding into other post -conflict situations. Another example of how this could be duplicated is linking it into the Government of Rwanda led decentralization processes across the country, helping people to participate in important decision-making processes such as poverty reduction strategy development.

However even if we are ready for communities in Rwanda to participate in making choices about their lives, have we really done enough to help less developed countries participate in decision-making on a global level.? Oxfam' s trade campaign notes that in the globalised world of the early twenty-first century, trade is one of the most powerful

forces linking our lives. It is also a source of unprecedented wealth. Yet millions of the world's poorest people are being left behind. World trade has the potential to act as a powerful motor for the reduction of poverty, as well as for economic growth, but that potential is being missed out altogether. Noting that there is a direct correlation between deepening poverty and conflict, it thus means that reforming trade has the impact of reducing conflict and rebuilding peoples' lives, through enhancing livelihoods.

Access to basic services, particularly education, is known to have a direct positive impact in reducing conflict sustainably in the long term, yet in most countries in Africa emerging from conflict, either within a country between her own people or between countries, a big part of their resources that could be directed into education goes into debt repayments. Opportunities for initiating recovery, rehabilitation and putting into place foundations of growth are missed.

For all of us to be serious about the notion of shared responsibility then, we need to recognize the roles that we all play as governments, both from rich and poor countries, and all other institutions alike, in perpetuating a system which prevents populations in less developed countries fulfilling their potentials. We need to make global changes in

the balance of power, equity, and the management of conflicts. Only then will the people of Rwanda and other populations in similar circumstances stand any real prospect of achieving sustainable livelihoods.

In conclusion, I would like to note that the approach Oxfam GB has used in the rebuilding of economies devastated by conflict is designed to address the immediate livelihood recovery priorities, while focusing on the longer term environmental regeneration and protection priorities as part of long term survival. At community levels this entails challenging the ideas and beliefs on access and control of resources by different members of households, by different communities who exhibit unequal power relations, which in turn leads to a vast majority being marginalized. At National, Regional and Global levels we have thought through and taken time to challenge the policies that entrench conflict through unequal power relations, that then deepen poverty. It is also an appeal to the world community to practice the old yet very relevant adage of Confucius, “do unto others what you would wish them do unto you”. Oxfam GB on her part has taken note of the fact that re-building peace in the hearts of people and the fostering of acceptance of coexistence in harmony precedes the building of their economies and

livelihoods after violent conflicts subside. It would then prevent enormous resources being put into peace making and peacekeeping work.

Ladies and gentlemen I want to thank you all for taking time to listen to me. I hope these thoughts, thoughts which in any case are not new, inspire you to take a stand on the core issues that ultimately will make this world secure for all of us wherever we may be, because the world has become one community for all of us.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen.