

Dialogue in the Social Integration process
Scope for intervention – Reconciliation and social integration
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Introduction

Relationships are a complex mesh of social, economic, personal and political processes. How power is used and abused at each level of society further complicates relationship dynamics. The way our societies and diverse contexts are structured and the nature of the relationships that are forming and disintegrating within them lie at the heart of a discussion on social integration, dialogue and reconciliation.

How we understand and analyse these relationships to be today, and how we envision them being in the future, determines how we plan and act to intervene. This analysis and vision help to ensure that the intervention has purpose and impact and that it embodies the values and principles of the future we are trying to influence.

It is this common emphasis on relationship building that links dialogue, reconciliation and social integration. Each concept depends on and aims to deepen and strengthen the relationships amongst people and between people and the systems and structures they create around them.

This short paper will explore the different contributions and approaches that each concept brings to a social transformation process and examine in more depth what reconciliation means to different people and in different contexts. It will begin by exploring what is meant by an intervention and some of the sensitivities that need to be considered in an intervention process and then build on the working definition and understanding of social integration.

It will then attempt to contextualize the dialogue aspect of an intervention with specific reference to reconciliation, both as a goal and a process, and explore, using examples, further aspects of reconciliation pertinent to understanding its scope in relation to social integration. Finally it will try to derive some insights, and make observations, about what conditions narrow and broaden this scope.

Exploring intervention

An intervention that aims to contribute positively to a social integration process needs to be sensitive to the potential for any intervention to have unintended negative consequences that can undermine or even overshadow any positive outcomes. This is particularly true in a tense situation or in the aftermath of violence when relationships are

often fragile. An in-depth analysis and knowledge of the context are essential starting points that can minimize the potential for harm.

It is often difficult for outsiders to properly understand the complex social dynamics of a context and this increases the risks of inadvertently causing more harm than good. This is one of the reasons why it is so important for an intervention to be focused on recognising and valuing initiatives that are already in place and then building on them. Whether as an outsider or an insider it is crucial to define any intervention as a contribution that strengthens local capacities and enables existing resilience factors.

The impact of an intervention will be determined by the clarity of its intended purpose and the principles and values that guide how it is conceptualized, planned implemented and assessed. If the goal of the intervention is to contribute to social integration then the way relationships are affected at each stage and at all levels needs to be carefully considered.

Social integration

The working definition of social integration as a “dynamic and principled process where all members participate in dialogue to achieve and maintain peaceful social relations¹” provides a useful starting point. The importance of a principled approach resonates strongly with the above understanding of sensitive interventions. Within the same summary coexistence, collaboration and cohesion are introduced as the conditions of social integration. Although these concepts mean different things to different people there appears to be some consensus that they are mutually reinforcing ways of describing the nature of the relationships between people, referring to different degrees of cooperation and the pursuit of common goals.

Also important to note is the addition of the concept of justice into the understanding of what peaceful social relations will look like. This is linked to an understanding of peace that goes beyond the absence of war. The summary refers to the need for harmony and cooperation as essential elements of a deeper peace but when linked to the concept of justice, and socio-economic justice in particular, the deeper peace becomes far more profound. A social transformation agenda that recognises structural and systemic obstacles to social integration is paramount in moving an understanding of social integration processes beyond dialogue.

Without this shift in understanding, social integration runs the risk of superficially suggesting that marginalisation, exclusion and fragmentation, can be changed through dialogue alone. As will be examined more deeply, in the section on reconciliation that follows, it is often structural and systemic injustices and inequalities that lie at the root of the tensions and violence that characterise parts of society. Unless these root issues are addressed the focus on dialogue could be perceived as an attempt to convince people to live harmoniously and ignore those issues that allow power imbalances to be maintained and abused.

In an African context characterised by chronic poverty, gross economic inequalities and struggling or fragile governance systems, this would be highly inappropriate. The global economic and political systems and the dominance of western cultural values provide additional challenges that impact negatively on social integration processes aimed at marginalised groupings. Governance systems at all levels that fail to include people in meaningful policy formulation and implementation mechanisms contribute to social disintegration. People's estrangement from authority and the resulting sense of powerlessness and frustration severely limits the ability of an intervention to contribute significantly to social integration. This aspect introduces another complex set of relationships that need to be included in a social integration process, namely the relationships between organs of government that make decisions that impact on people, and the people themselves.

It is this contextual reality that makes it essential to design social integration processes that contribute to a social transformation agenda. While dialogue must remain an essential component of any process focused on people and relationships, without the transformation agenda social integration will be limited in its impact, and remain constantly under threat from the tensions that structural inequalities and systemic injustices generate. As outlined in the working definition of participatory dialogue, processes are needed that "provide people with safe space and opportunity to engage in communication and action based on rights and responsibilities"ⁱⁱ This engagement and action needs to incorporate the impact of systems and structures on relationships and serve to develop action strategies around how to influence and transform them.

This understanding also informs the approach to examining more deeply the concept of reconciliation.

Reconciliation

Introduction

Reconciliation can be seen as being both a goal towards which an intervention is trying to influence events as well as a process that begins to nurture the basis of reconciliationⁱⁱⁱ. While there is strong evidence that reconciliation as both goal and process has different meanings in different contexts this is not unexpected given its focus on relationship building and the diverse nature of relationships across different cultural and social contexts. What appears to be common within these different understandings is that reconciliation depends on counteracting social disintegration and building cooperation between antagonists.

However it is also sometimes used in a very superficial way that equates the cessation of open hostilities with reconciliation regardless of the injustices and disintegration that often still flourish. Alternatively it can refer to a much deeper process and outcome, which links back to the social transformation agenda. It acknowledges systems and structures both as lying at the root of the violence and tension that creates the need for

reconciliation, as well as impacting on the extent to which adversaries are able to reconcile.

In this sense a transformatory reconciliation process locates dialogue within a far more complex psychosocial and integrated understanding of relationships and the dynamics that affect them. It also acknowledges the inter-connectedness of different levels of society and of the need for complementary reconciliation processes at all of these levels. Each process is guided by common principles and values that articulate the transformation agenda.

It is this value-based and transformation focused approach to reconciliation that offers the most scope as an intervention that can practically and meaningfully contribute to social integration. A focused approach to relationship building that uses dialogue to find common ground and influence attitudes, behaviors and perceptions, but that also unifies people to analyse and construct new systems and structures that strengthen and add value to the process.

Perspectives on reconciliation

Hizkias Assefa gives us the following as core elements of reconciliation^{iv}:

- ❖ an honest acknowledgement of the harm or injury each party has inflicted on the other
- ❖ readiness to apologise for ones role in inflicting the injury
- ❖ sincere regrets and remorse for the injury done
- ❖ readiness of the conflicting parties to 'let go' of the anger and bitterness caused by the conflict and injury
- ❖ commitment by the offender not to repeat the injury
- ❖ sincere effort to redress grievances that caused the conflict and to compensate the damage caused to the extent possible
- ❖ entrance into a new mutually enriching relationship

Within these core elements are contained three central concepts of truth, mercy and justice as outlined by John Paul Lederach^v. The way these concepts are interpreted and understood informs the nature and effectiveness of a reconciliation process. "It is the unique way in which each society, or each community, chooses to interpret and pursue [truth, mercy and justice] that reconciliation will become meaningful and peace will become more than just a vision."^{vi}

Truth

Judge Albie Sachs, a prominent participant in the debates preceding the establishment of the Commission and now a Constitutional Court judge, made a useful distinction between what he called 'microscope truth' and 'dialogue truth'. 'The first,' he said, 'is factual, verifiable and can be documented and proved. "Dialogue truth" on the other hand, is social truth, the truth of experience that is established through interaction, discussion and debate.'^{vii}

For the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission four notions of truth guided thinking behind the purpose of dialogue and truth telling that characterised the public hearings and statement taking of the TRC. Factual or forensic truth, personal and narrative truth, or story telling, the social truth described above, and healing or restorative truth, a truth that focuses on human relationships.

Mercy

Many of the reconciliation interventions in Africa, including South Africa, Rwanda and Sierra Leone, have relied heavily on truth telling and amnesty to guide the reconciliation process. Amnesty is linked to the concept of mercy and forgiveness and in most cases is accompanied by an element of remorse in line with the elements outlined by Assefa.

However in some cases remorse and apology are seen as added bonuses that are neither linked to the granting of amnesty nor seen as essential to the process. Strong evidence suggests that in many cases this absence of apology or perception that remorse is not genuine, takes away from the potential for truth telling to contribute effectively to reconciliation.

Furthermore if the aspect of amnesty and remorse is not linked to a process that collectively agrees on reparations it often fails to provide the healing that is needed. In a research report on the impact of reparations in the South African TRC process Oupa Makhalemele states in his conclusion that, “The respondents we spoke to express bitterness and a sense of betrayal on the part of government. There is a strong feeling amongst them that the failure of government to consult with survivors before deciding on the R30 000 grants reflects government's arrogance and lack of sensitivity to their needs.”^{viii}

Psychosocial interventions aimed at healing old wounds, and recognizing and processing individual and collective traumas, forms part of the search for both truth and mercy. This includes methods that can be informed by both modern and traditional knowledge, memorialisation and other social processes, and the establishment and strengthening of long-term coping mechanisms.

Justice

It is in the element that speaks to a ‘sincere effort to redress grievances ... and compensate the damage caused’^{ix}, that reconciliation reaches more deeply in its search for understanding social integration as part of a social transformation agenda. This is the element of justice.

Justice itself is a contested notion and is often interpreted very differently by people with access to different amounts of power. Conventionally criminal justice systems are retributive and are aimed at protecting the lives and property of people and punishing those who digress from laws that provide this protection. When linked to reconciliation though, justice becomes more complex, and more controversial.

The notion of restorative justice, aimed at healing relationships and addressing the realities of economic and social imbalances attempts to find a way forward that subverts a cycle of revenge. Often though, without linking to deeper transformation agendas, the sense of injustice that remains can become a dangerous fault line for violence. It is on this level that rebuilding systems and structures needs to become part of the reconciliation process. This includes political systems of governance that involve people meaningfully, economic systems that share wealth more equitably and legal systems that enshrine and protect the individual and collective rights of everybody. Without this, a reconciliation process lacks meaning for most people and runs the risk of becoming superficial and counterproductive.

Examples

In South Africa perpetrators were granted amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in exchange for full disclosure of their crimes. Desmond Tutu, chair of the South African TRC describes this as restorative justice ‘that embodies recognition of the humanity of both offender and victim, and holds as a primary goal the healing of old wounds^{xv}. But the controversy surrounding the TRC and its limited efforts to compensate victims of apartheid crimes have often left it accused of perpetuating injustice to the detriment of reconciliation^{xi}.

After a visit to Rwanda, Tutu, said, “We must break the spiral of reprisal and counter-reprisal... I said to them in Kigali: ‘Unless you move beyond justice in the form of a tribunal, there is no hope for Rwanda.’ Confession, forgiveness and reconciliation in the lives of nations are not just airy-fairy religious and spiritual things, nebulous and unrealistic. They are the stuff of practical politics^{xii}.

In Sierra Leone a local initiative called Partners in Conflict Transformation (PICOT) have developed intervention strategies in response to an analysis that the local justice systems in villages across the country are at the root of the violence that brought nearly 10 years of war and violence^{xiii}. The dominance of these systems by chiefs and elders and the perception of biased and unfair treatment of youths in particular, as well as allegations of corruption, led to high levels of frustration and the estrangement and exclusion of youths from their communities. This left them vulnerable and available to being organised into anti-government militias. During the war militias often returned to the villages they had fled from to unleash acts of horrific violence and retribution.

Many of these ex-combatants have now begun to resettle. The PICOT strategy is to work through community activists and leaders to build and strengthen local village development committees that balance the power of the chiefs through the participation of women, youth and other elders, and that serve as a point of accountability for chiefs in their dealings with the community. Dialogue forums that use participatory processes of analysis and perception sharing lay the basis for planning and strategizing by the community.

Almost as a by-product of the organising and discussion processes relationships are built that contribute directly to reconciliation and social integration. The primary focus of these discussions is on how to overcome the overwhelming poverty by working together on joint strategies that require the collective input of all sectors of the community. This appears to provide a useful example of how dialogue can link reconciliation and social integration in a way that does not lose sight of the need for transformation and structural and systemic change.

Particularly at community level there are many excellent examples of how reconciliation interventions have assisted adversaries to find cohesive ways of coexisting and working collaboratively towards common goals. In Wajir, Kenya, the Wajir Peace and Development Committee involved people from all sides of a violent and protracted conflict in establishing better relationships and working towards common development goals. Traditional symbols and conflict resolution mechanisms were invoked that strengthened the commitment to dialogue and consensus building^{xiv}.

In Burundi the ACTION Support Centre based in Johannesburg, working with a local NGO, MiParec, from Gitega, introduced a similar approach in preparation for the return of refugees and ex-combatants. Activists were trained in conflict transformation skills and approaches; they developed an integrated intervention strategy and began engaging communities in preparation for the inevitable disputes over land, the residue of violence and the crucial need for reconciliation and transformation.^{xv}

In Gulu, Northern Uganda, ceremonies that involve singing, dancing and performing ancient rituals are part of the reconciliation process used by organisations like local community based organisation, Peoples Voice for Peace, returned child soldiers and ex-combatants of the Lords Resistance Army and the communities they are part of^{xvi}.

Principles and values

The difference between a reconciliation process that might contribute to social integration and one that might not is outlined in the principles and values that underlie the approach. In his analysis of the “Competing Strategies and Conceptualisations” of the South African TRC, Hugo van der Merwe, of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, discusses five reconciliation principles that can be interpreted in ways that inform the validity or invalidity of a reconciliation process^{xvii}. These principles are:

❖ The locus of the initiative

Whether it is initiated top-down or from the bottom up

❖ The main factor bringing about reconciliation

Whether it is structurally imposed or initiated by people themselves

❖ *The nature of an envisioned 'reconciled' future*

Whether it is made up of a unified humanity or tolerant but autonomous groups

❖ *The central form of relationship in a "reconciled" society*

Whether people live communally and in community or coexist as separate groups and groupings of individuals

❖ *The best way of pursuing social change*

Whether through a harmonious process of gradual change or through confrontation and the surfacing of latent conflicts and injustices

The ways in which each of these principles will be applied to reconciliation processes between individuals and across whole societies will be informed by the dominant values of those who design and implement them.

Ultimately it is these values, and the principled commitment to applying them that limit or expand the potential for a reconciliation intervention to impact positively on a social integration process.

Challenges

Bottom-up reconciliation processes are often undermined by outside interference or by those with interests in perpetuating violence. They are vulnerable to being overtaken by larger processes that communities have little or no influence over. Structural impositions over the way a reconciliation process unfolds often introduce inappropriate methods that need to be adapted to suit local contexts.

Groups within society that have benefited from the past are often reluctant or unable to become part of a unified humanity. This is often interpreted as resistance and undermines the relationship building process.

Different values are often associated with groups of people who have had different experiences of violence and these differences inevitably lead to different interpretations of how far a reconciliation process needs to go. Often it is those most directly affected by violence that feel the need for the most change but who are also often the most marginalised and the most likely to be disappointed by a reconciliation process.

Social transformation is also usually a slow process and the time lag between expectations and the ability to meet people's needs results in frustration and action that can take a reconciliation process backwards. Active resistance to social transformation can also lead to further outbreaks of violence.

Scope of reconciliation

Reconciliation has much in common with the goals of, and approach to, building cohesion, coexistence and collaboration. However in order to ensure a process that addresses the roots of fragmentation, exclusion and polarization, reconciliation needs to recognise, and be committed to, social transformation. This social transformation is dependent on integrated and sustainable change that makes material, psychological and structural differences to people's lives and to their security, and that transforms the relationships between people.

These relationships will be more durable and resistant to violence, they will see dialogue and other nonviolent processes as essential to coexistence, they will be formed around the need to work together towards a common vision and they will actively promote and model a culture that embodies the values that are linked to that vision.

As an intervention that contributes to social integration, reconciliation has the potential to transform social relations and society itself. If it remains driven by principles and values that recognise the interconnectedness and interdependence of people and the systems and structures that define and influence their relationships, and if it combines a commitment to social change with the capacity and political will to implement and deliver on these changes.

ⁱ *Summary of E-dialogue on Peace Dialogue in the Social Integration Process: Building peaceful social relationship by, for and with people 1 – 24 June 2005*

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ **Hugo van der Merwe**, “*The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Community Reconciliation: An Analysis of Competing Strategies and Conceptualisations*”, <http://www.csvr.org.za/papers/paphd1.htm>

^{iv} **Hizkias Assefa**, “The Meaning of Reconciliation,” in *People Building Peace*, Utrecht: European Centre for Conflict Prevention in cooperation with the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Coexistence Initiative of State of the World Forum, 1999, pg 42

^v **John Paul Lederach**, “*Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*”, UN University, 1994

^{vi} **Fisher et al**, “*Working with Conflict*” 3rd Impression, Zed Books, 2005

^{vii} **Albie Sachs** in Alex Boraine and Janet Levy (eds), “*Healing of a Nation*”, Cape Town: Justice in Transition, 1995, pg 105

^{viii} **Oupa Makhalemele**, “*Still not talking: Government's exclusive reparations policy and the impact of the 30 000 financial reparations on survivors*”, Research report written for the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2004.

^{ix} **Hizkias Assefa**, “The Meaning of Reconciliation,” in *People Building Peace*, Utrecht: European Centre for Conflict Prevention in cooperation with the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Coexistence Initiative of State of the World Forum, 1999, pg 42

^x **Desmond Mpilo Tutu**, “*No Future without Forgiveness*”, York: Doubleday, 1999.

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- ^{xi} **Brandon Hamber & Steve Kibble** “From Truth to Transformation: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, 1998, <http://www.csvr.org.za/papers/papbhsk.htm>
- ^{xii} *Final Report of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, 1998
- ^{xiii} *Partners in Conflict Transformation Orientation Session*, for Implementation Team, workshop report, Kenema, Sierra Leone, 2004
- ^{xiv} Video production: “*The Wajir Story*” Responding to Conflict and the Coalition for Peace in Africa, Trojan productions, 1998
- ^{xv} **Kristina Bentley and Roger Southall**, “*An African Peace Process, Mandela, South Africa and Burundi*”, Nelson Mandela Foundation, HSRC press, Cape Town, 2005, pg 158
- ^{xvi} **Rosalba Oywa**, Advanced Conflict Transformation course input, Johannesburg, 2005
- ^{xvii} **Hugo van der Merwe**, “*The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Community Reconciliation: An Analysis of Competing Strategies and Conceptualisations*”, <http://www.csvr.org.za/papers/paphd1.htm>