

Insights

Local Initiatives in the African Great Lakes Region

Community Voices and Sustainable Development

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Partnership Africa Canada (PAC) is a coalition of African and Canadian organizations that work in partnership to promote sustainable human development policies that benefit African and Canadian societies.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The research for this study was undertaken in Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo during the latter part of 1997, three years after the crisis in Rwanda. The study is not an analysis of the crisis of 1994, despite the fact that these events always loom large in the background.

Representatives of roughly fifty organizations, both local and international, were interviewed. Our goal was to give a voice to all those directly involved with justice and reconciliation, development and reconstruction, and with those searching for long-term solutions to the problems of the Great Lakes region of Africa.

The massacres have greatly affected the demographic balance of Rwanda and Burundi; for example, the proportion of women in Rwanda has passed from 51% to 70% of the total population. Because of this factor and because women continue to have a major role to play in the reconstruction of their country, we have given them a special place in our research. They form a new majority and circumstances are forcing them to take on responsibilities traditionally reserved for men.

2 RWANDA, THREE YEARS AFTER THE CRISIS

The ethnic question in Rwanda is not the object of this report, but it cannot be totally ignored since it is still very present in the minds of everyone concerned.

Regarding the reasons for the crisis, the opinions of historians, religious people, sociologists and African leaders varied greatly. But everyone seems to agree that ethnic tensions alone do not explain the crisis. Other factors have to be analyzed, such as: the poverty of the population in the region, the economic tensions caused by international debt and the long lasting effects of the colonial occupation of these countries. The tactics used by the colonial power of dividing people along ethnic lines in order to divide and rule have played a major role in destabilizing Rwandan society.

Three years after the crisis, we find in Rwanda political leaders with little experience in governing and a treasury left empty by the former government. International organizations are still reluctant to offer financial assistance to the government and to local NGOs for the reconstruction of the country. Faced with the need to restore normality in the country, grass-roots organizations have mobilized themselves into action.

Grass-roots action is as diversified as the challenges. Restoration of a peaceful society is undoubtedly the most urgent need, followed by reconstruction and development. The most significant action aimed at bringing peace in Rwanda is probably the restoration of the *Gacaca*. The *Gacaca* was an important part of the traditional system of justice in Rwanda. Wise men were elected by the population in each area to resolve conflicts between people, to protect the rights of victims and above all to reconcile the

parties in conflict. This system was abolished by the colonial powers and replaced by a cumbersome punitive system that does not concern itself with the rights of victims or with the reconciliation of conflicting parties.

UNESCO has adapted its strategy of intervention in Rwanda: it is now sponsoring studies of the traditional legal institutions in Rwanda, and in particular the *Gacaca*. It is also carrying out new programmes aimed at restoring peace in the country: conflict prevention and conflict resolution and seminars on peace. UNESCO has also organized camps for orphans to facilitate their survival and their integration in the community.

At the local level, different organizations are arranging meetings between people to discuss the past events and ways of restoring peace. Lasting peace will not be possible as long as crimes remain unpunished. Gathering evidence, however, to make justice possible is most difficult: the witnesses are often the neighbours of the accused or even close relatives. No one can guarantee the protection of witnesses against possible retaliation.

Traditional discretion regarding sexual matters prevents women from talking publicly about rape. Counselling is usually needed to overcome this problem. International investigators, ill-informed about the reserve of the women in sexual matters, have had little success in gathering evidence against alleged rapists.

So many men have been killed that many women are now heads of families; they have adopted orphan children; many had to rebuild their houses with their own hands (work traditionally reserved to men) and they have to cultivate their fields in order to feed everyone. How can they spend days at the court-house seeking justice and gather enough courage to undertake legal action when they have so many other responsibilities at home? Being largely illiterate and ignorant of the laws makes the pursuit of justice even more difficult for them.

Haguruka, an organization created in 1991 to promote the rights of women, has adapted itself to the new conditions and has organized meetings with women to help them through the justice system. It is also sponsoring travelling theatre troupes to inform and sensitize local populations about peace and justice. The players act out real situations that the public can easily identify with and understand.

Many women are still traumatized by what they saw and endured, and require counselling. Others need financial assistance in order to support adequately the orphans that they have taken into their homes. Many social and political women-leaders were killed during the massacres. Other women will need training to assume the leadership positions that have been left vacant.

The 1994 crisis in Rwanda has left many women without husbands and without male children. The present laws regulating financial transactions, inheritances and legal contracts, can jeopardize the security of the women and their children. Legal authorities are being pressured by women's groups to review the present laws and give women the legal rights that traditionally were reserved to men. Women require legal counselling and assistance to present their cases to the courts.

Existing organizations such as Haguruka, **PREFED** and **CCOAIB** are supporting the numerous organizations that have sprung up to respond to the needs of the population and are addressing issues concerning women and their new place in the Rwandan society. PREFED has dropped its structured education pattern for a more flexible one, responding to the concrete needs of local groups. It promotes literacy, peace, socio-economic development and the emergence of women's organizations in the local communities.

Circumstances have forced women to break many traditions and taboos regarding their role in society. They have tackled new tasks, taken on new responsibilities, they are less afraid to talk openly, they are occupying important posts that give them self confidence. They will never again be satisfied with their previous status in Rwandan society.

Women's organizations are questioning traditional development strategies: should their society invest again in infrastructures and economic development at the expense of moral and humanitarian concerns and adaptation to new conditions?

Most of the media used to be controlled by the State (e.g. *Mille-Collines* radio station and the state paper) or by the church (*Kinyamateka*). New independent papers and radio stations have sprung up and women's organizations are learning to use the media for the promotion of women's issues. New radio stations are needed to counterbalance the negative effects of the hate media controlled by the political parties in power.

The need is being felt by organizations themselves and by the government to coordinate grass-roots initiatives to prevent overlapping and to ensure sustainable development.

3 BURUNDI

The Rwandan crisis in 1994 spilled over into Burundi and contributed to the destabilization of an already fragile political equilibrium. Concerted action by the population was more difficult than in Rwanda or the Congo for the simple reason that Burundi had fewer grass-roots organizations already in operation.

The arrival of thousands of refugees was met by traditional African hospitality: people opened their homes to the displaced persons; it was the moral way of doing things. International organizations ignored these efforts and refused to offer financial assistance to the host families, forcing them to direct their guests towards the huge impersonal refugee camps.

Three years after the crisis some international organizations are still in Burundi, like Medecins Sans Frontieres. Should we not put more effort in developing local capabilities instead of relying on foreign

aid? Local NGOs were, and still are, generally denied financial assistance, international organizations preferring to assist foreign groups. During the crisis, international aid was necessary, but it became big business. Foreign workers were riding in their 4X4s while those of the local NGOs were on foot. After the crisis, certain emergency organizations decided to improvise: almost overnight they became development agencies, benefiting from most of the foreign aid money. But their mode of conflict resolution does not have its roots in local communities and is generally out of tune with local culture.

In Burundi, in 1997, actions similar to the ones in Rwanda were considered. The justice system imposed by the colonial power was incapable of coping with the situation; thousands of prisoners were waiting in overcrowded jails without much hope of a speedy trial. The restoration of the traditional *Bashinganta-he*, similar in functioning and spirit to the *Gacaca* of Rwanda, was considered. Along the same lines, a movement that originated at the University of Burundi was questioning the validity of following foreign ideas and principles and is considering a new wisdom based on traditional values.

Travelling theatre groups sensitize and educate people on issues such as peace, conflict resolution and reconciliation. The radio and the press are utilized to inform and educate the public. The **Association des Femmes Juristes** uses the press and the radio to educate the population on human rights issues and the rights of women. They also use the network of **CAFOB (Collectif des Associations et ONG Féminines du Burundi)** to transmit their information and messages to local groups throughout the country.

The **Ligue ITEKA** has been in existence since 1991. From observing elections it became involved in the work of promoting human rights as a result of the crisis. In certain regions it is training grass-roots leaders.

The **IJAMBO Studio** is conducting training programmes for professional journalists. They now have access to international communications, thanks to their affiliation with the *Voice of America*.

The **Association des Femmes Journalistes** was created in 1996. Its goal is to improve the level of journalism, pave the way for women journalists and give women a forum to express their views.

As a result of the crisis, many organizations have sprung up. Women's organizations promote small businesses, access to credit, formation of credit unions, literacy courses, general education and entrepreneurship. International aid being generally denied to them, they try to manage on their own. Some organizations are associated with UN organizations, such as WFP or UNHCR, and have access to some funding.

The coordination of these local efforts is rendered difficult by the restriction of movement of the people between regions, which is still in effect throughout the country because of the political unrest. Collective organizations, like CAFOB, have to use ingenuity to coordinate local groups and disseminate information throughout the country.

4 DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

It is important to review previous events in order to understand the reaction of the people of Congo following the double crisis of the 90s: the crisis in Rwanda, their neighbour, and the military takeover of their own country.

In the 1980s, the Zairean government was not capable of taking a leadership role in the fields of health, education, agriculture and infrastructure. In response to the demands for action coming from the population, President Mobutu simply told people to use their own initiative. Seeing the inaction of the government, people rallied around local NGOs and church groups. **CNONGD** (National Council of NGOs) played an important role in coordinating local initiatives.

In the same vein, international organizations decided to provide funding directly to local NGOs instead of going through government channels. Embezzlement of funds and political scandals motivated them to take this unique course of action.

After the military takeover in 1997, the new leaders found it difficult to tolerate that international funding for projects would go directly to local NGOs. The militancy of certain human rights organizations with regards to human rights, justice and development issues was another thorn in the side of the new government. The **Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (AZADHO)** was the first one to denounce the massacres against the Hutus in the eastern provinces of Congo and to sensitize the international community to the situation. The military government's reaction was swift and the leaders of AZADHO had to flee to Brazzaville. In 1998, the other human rights associations were given three days to register with the government

The crisis in Rwanda motivated the human rights groups to organize seminars and take action on issues concerning justice, peace and impunity. The **Voix des Sans Voix** looked into the areas of legal assistance, the rights of prisoners to fair and speedy trials, justice for women and children, and the plight of so many prisoners forgotten in jails by an inadequate justice system. It also became involved in areas of social rights, such as the rights of workers. It published a pamphlet dealing with legal issues, which was translated into three languages.

The goal of the **Ligue des Électeurs** was to promote democracy and show that issues can be resolved with democratic and peaceful methods. The recent takeover of the country by force was a big step backwards for the Ligue des Électeurs and its democratic message.

CNONGD has organized seminars on peace. It became involved in finding ways of dealing with conflicts at the local level and breaking the vicious circle of violence. Everyone wants peace but ways have to be found to make it happen. Mediation at the community level has to be implemented.

CNONGD is studying the feasibility of rural radio networks for disseminating information and educating the public. Many papers are published, but the country is so large and the communications so

difficult that radio contact seems to be the ideal solution. Obtaining funding for such a project is the major hurdle at the present time. Another obstacle is that freedom of expression cannot be counted on in Congo. Outspoken reporters are constantly threatened by censure and retaliation from authorities.

Women's groups are very much involved in development projects. They are moving gradually from economic projects to support groups, access to credit and the creation of larger enterprises.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Our readers are aware of the necessity of a general debate while undertaking the reconstruction of these societies. With regard to the theme of reconciliation, some have difficulty accepting this term which has moral overtones, as if conciliation should suffice, when the real problem lies in the acceptance of others with their differences, and of ideological plurality.

Some Main Orientations regarding Women

Accompaniment

- Economic reconstruction must be linked to the rehabilitation of people and in particular of women.
- Women are trying to rebuild their lives in spite of the complexity of the situation. For example, some women were victims of the genocide while others were perpetrators. Others returned from exile in Uganda, Tanzania and Congo DRC.
- Women need substantial support to resolve the questions of ethnicity, of power, of marginalization and of violence against the poorest among them.
- A better understanding of the situation of women will bring partners to become less overbearing and to engage in a process of accompaniment and collaboration.

Ownership

- The international community must favour programmes that correspond to the vision of the women, are identified by them and put into action by them in order to prevent a repetition of the old forms of dependency.
- When we discuss social assets, it is more crucial now than ever to consider the contribution of women.
- By supporting the programmes already created by local communities and credible NGOs, the international community will avoid overlap and promote complementarity.

Global vision

- Help women to maintain a global perspective in all their projects; all programmes should have social change as their long-term goal. This probably signifies the need for a reassessment of the methods of cooperating.
- We will also have to identify and reinforce the alliances that exist between groups with which we work.
- A firm will to affect the status of women will underlie all projects that are economic in nature.

Means

- Reinforcement of human and financial capabilities.
- Beyond management, priority must be given to dialogue and to programmes that promote communications and political lobbying, leadership, education regarding law (with an emphasis on the struggle against impunity).
- The accompaniment required by the situation: the protection of women, and the use of methods adapted to them.
- Take women out of their isolation: it is imperative to valorize and legitimize the experiences of women, especially in the process of reconciliation and in the vision of a pluralistic society.
- Support African initiatives regarding a culture of peace and democracy.

Some General Conclusions

- Initiate and support a programme of reflection on the meaning of reconciliation within the existing political reality, and the development of analytical skills.
- Ensure that humanitarian organizations integrate the principle of sustainable development. To put an end to the cycle of dependency we should question the practice of using outside personnel instead of local persons.
- Consider the financial capacities of the groups in order to ensure continuity, while providing organizational and institutional support.
- Make a systematic inventory of local talents and native expertise in the regions and sub-regions.
- Support the training of managers, keeping in mind complementarity with others.
- Ensure the complementarity of actors and partners, keeping in mind that the primary responsibilities rest with the local organizations.
- Reconsider the role of coalitions as the voice of civil society, as the forum for the sharing of ideas and for organizing on both the national and sub-regional levels. Ensure that these coalitions are a forum for defining the organizational and financial autonomy of their members.
- Establish a network in the regions to promote the sharing of knowledge and experience, to reinforce solidarity and to ensure mediation with both African politicians and international institutions.
- Support the creation of a forum for discussion within civil society around themes and interest groups, in the country and in the sub-regions.

**ADDRESSES OF A FEW ORGANIZATIONS
IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION**

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Burundi

Collectif des Associations féminines et ONG burundaises (CAFOB)

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