

The Challenging Road to Reconciliation in Rwanda

Written by Ervin Staub

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ERVIN STAUB, JAN 17 2012

In the genocide of 1994 in Rwanda, Hutus killed about 700 hundred thousand Tutsis. The killing was done by parts of the army, by militias called the Interahamwe, and by neighbors. In some mixed families relatives killed Tutsis, sometimes parents killing their own children. The perpetrators also killed about 50 thousand Hutus, because they were regarded as unwilling to go along with the genocide, or as political opponents. Violence expands over time, and some Hutus were killed simply due to old conflicts.

The genocide was stopped by a Tutsi group, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) that had been fighting the government before a peace accord and resumed fighting when the genocide began. In the course of the resumed fighting the RPF killed perhaps as many as 45 thousand Hutus (des Forges, 1999). The defeated genocidaires, and other Hutus, about one and a half million, escaped into Zaire, now the Congo. Genocidaires continued to attack Rwanda from the Congo, killing more Tutsis there as well as in the Congo. Under the now Tutsi led government the new Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) invaded the Congo twice to fight the genocidaires and the militias they created. According to a U.N. report published in August 2010 the RPA also killed a very large number of Hutus noncombatants, according to Prunier (2009) over 200 thousand people. I will discuss institutions and processes of reconciliation since the genocide, discussing both their positive and problematic aspects.

The government established a National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC). In 1999 this commission held public meetings around the country with various categories of people, for example, women in Kigali, the capital (a meeting I attended). Here people could say what they believed was necessary for reconciliation and what they needed to be able to reconcile. For example, some women said: "I lost everything, including my husband, I need to feed my family and be able to send my children to school". At that time this cost money at all grade levels. One subsequent positive act of the government was to make education free up to high school. There are plans to expand this through grade 12. Another positive step was to eliminate discrimination, at least official discrimination, in admitting students to schools and universities, as well as in employment.

Strong economic development in the country, which improves people's lives, also contributes to reconciliation. The government has been very successful in promoting economic development. However, as it is usually the case in newly developing countries, the benefits are uneven and have not yet reached large segments of the population.

The gacaca: truth and justice.

The justice system was destroyed by the genocide. Many judges and lawyers were either killed, or were accused of perpetration. For a number of years about 120 thousand accused perpetrators were in prison. In 2003 President Kagame ordered the release of prisoners who were old, or were young teenagers at the time of the genocide. This was beneficial in many ways, for example, by relieving the burden on family members who had to take food to the prison. After a study of other situations of violence between groups, such as South Africa, the government created a process, the gacaca, based on traditional Rwandan practice, intended to serve both justice and reconciliation. All around the country in 9-10 thousand communities popularly elected judges led weekly meeting which community members were expected to attend. Perpetrators were categorized, and except for those judged most culpable were judged in these gacaca courts.

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The gacaca had complex effects. In line with the traditional practice, it was to decide what people who have done harm need to do to be accepted back into their community. In a process of many stages it was established who lived in the community the day before the genocide, what crimes were committed, and by whom. Testifying before predominantly Hutu communities, with the relatives of the accused there, was emotionally challenging both for survivors, and for Hutu witnesses. Many were negatively affected (Broneus, 2008). A few potential witnesses were killed. Still, crimes were laid bare, truth was established. Most perpetrators were sentenced for a combination of prison and community labor.

One significant issue is that there has been no justice process about the killing of ordinary Hutus in Rwanda and the Congo. Such a justice process could implicate the current leadership. But since people who are harmed deeply yearn for truth and justice, addressing this is essential for reconciliation.

Before they are released into the community, perpetrators go through reeducation under the auspices of the NURC, which focuses on the vision of the new Rwanda and how people are expected to behave. Such prescriptive reeducation is in line with Rwandan culture, which stresses respect for and submission to authority. It is likely to lead to compliance, but not necessarily a transformation in people's beliefs, values, and in the emotional orientation of members of groups toward each other. However, some people may accept and adopt the vision or ideology. In addition, acting in certain ways can lead people over time to develop values and beliefs consistent with their actions.

Government ideology and political processes.

The RPF created a seemingly positive ideology, according to which the division between groups was created by colonialists. This is partly true. The division between Hutus and Tutsi was greatly enhanced by the racial ideas and practices introduced by Belgium (des Forges, 1999; Mamdani, 2001; Staub, 2011). The ideology holds that there are no Hutus and Tutsis, only Rwandans. It was developed before the genocide, and was probably well intended as a means to overcome antagonism between Hutus and Tutsis. In addition, with Hutus about 85 percent of the population, and a history of persecution of Tutsis, creating a larger common identity makes new violence against Tutsis, which they understandably fear, less likely. But while a common identity is desirable, a double identity is more realistic to achieve, (e.g. a Rwandan Hutu; see Dovidio et al, 2009). But such identities cannot be proclaimed; they have to evolve or be generated.

While the ideology is essentially positive, its uses are problematic. The government strongly discourages talking about Hutus and Tutsis. It also uses it to make political opposition difficult. At least in part inspired by the ideology, new laws have been created and are used to punish with prison sentences vaguely defined "divisionism" and "genocidal ideology." It is unclear whether these practices are the result of the government wanting to maintain its power, or fear of the consequences of Hutus gaining power or of just the disorder of open communication in a society where language was used to generate genocide. But with power held by Tutsis, with the shame of the genocide and fear of and obedience to the government, Hutu are unlikely to express their thoughts, feelings, grievances. Limiting the discussion of issues between the two groups limits opportunities for reconciliation. However, there are indications the government is reviewing the laws about genocidal ideology.

Reconciliation activities.

Back in their communities, former perpetrators and former victims now live side by side, with many emotional challenges in this situation. Some films that have been made of their interactions show painful steps as they move toward forgiveness and reconciliation, suggesting reasonable success. Others show deep and continuing fear and pain underlying coexistence in everyday life. However, documentaries are only snapshots, not ongoing reconciliation activities or their evaluation.

There are many ongoing reconciliation processes led by local and international groups. The NURC has organized many conferences that aim to help people understand the roots of genocide, and how to proceed with life in the aftermath of genocide. There are many memorials to the genocide. At the Kigali Genocide museum the exhibits include one on rescuers, Hutus who endangered themselves to save Tutsis. Rescuers have also been getting

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increasing attention in other ways. This can help both groups see something positive about the other, Tutsis seeing moral actions by some Hutus, and Hutus seeing that Tutsis acknowledge this. The museum also conducts workshops for secondary students: Learning from the past; Building the future workshops (see www.journeyrwanda.blogspot.com).

My associates and I have been working to promote reconciliation in Rwanda since January 1999. First we conducted workshops/ trainings with members of local organizations who work with groups in the community. These were about the influences that lead to genocide—the societal conditions, culture, the psychology of individuals and groups, and the evolution of increasing hostility and violence (Staub, 1989, see also Staub, 2011)—as well as the impact of violence on people (see Pearlman, 2001, Staub, 1998). The information was elucidated by examples from other countries. The participants then applied the information to their own experience in Rwanda, leading to what appeared to be a deep “experiential understanding.”

Some of them then led newly created mixed community groups. An evaluation study showed a variety of positive effects on members of these groups, over time and in comparison to control groups. These included more positive orientation by Hutus and Tutsis toward each other, reduced trauma symptoms and “conditional forgiveness” (Staub, et al., 2005). In later trainings with members of the media, national leaders, NURC members, and other groups we also included information about and engagement with approaches to preventing group violence and reconciliation.

To reach the broader population we developed educational radio programs, in collaboration with Radio LaBenevolencija, a Dutch NGO created for this purpose, using and expanding the approach we developed, the “Staub-Pearlman approach,” in our trainings/workshops (see Staub, 2011). These were first introduced in Rwanda, and the expanded to Burundi and the Congo (DRC). A radio drama in Rwanda, Musekweya (New Dawn), a story of two villages in conflict, became extremely popular already in its first years, 2004, and is still ongoing. An evaluation after one year showed again a variety of positive effects. These include more empathy for others, more willingness by people to say what they believe, greater independence of authorities, more participation in reconciliation activities (Paluck, 2009; Staub and Pearlman, 2009). People in the hills of Rwanda are affected. One young man, 14 at the time of the genocide, was inspired by Musekweya. Members of his Hutu village listened to the program, and he in turn inspired them to go to the neighboring Tutsi village, join them working their fields, and ask them for forgiveness for the violence they perpetrated on them during the genocide (Ziegler, 2010). (Staub, 2011, includes descriptions of the trainings, the educational radio programs, their extension into “grassroots” activities involving members of the population, and the evaluation of each of these projects).

Conclusions: where does reconciliation stand in Rwanda.

Reconciliation means mutual acceptance, and the creation of institutions, part of civic society, which maintain and promote changing attitudes by the parties toward each other. Mutual acceptance after the genocide and the subsequent violence against Hutus requires both time, and active promotion of the processes required for reconciliation. These include truth; justice in relation to past violence as well as just societal arrangements; acknowledgment by each group of its past harmful actions; humanizing each group in the eyes of the other and increased trust; a constructive vision/ideology that can bring people together; at least attempting to create and moving toward a shared history of past events in place of conflicting histories held by the two groups. Understanding the roots and impact of violence can contribute to more positive attitude by members of the two groups of each other, and empower people to resist the influences that lead to violence and to engage in reconciliation activities (see Staub, 2011).

Some of these things are in progress in Rwanda, others need to be developed. Our radio drama, which most people listen to, helps with understanding the origins and impact of past violence. Recognizing and acknowledging rescuers helps to humanize Hutus in their own and in Tutsis' eyes. Justice, as I noted, is incomplete. Acknowledgement by both groups of its actions, and assuming responsibility for them, is limited or absent. Some Hutus outside Rwanda have attempted to deny the genocide. The absence of acknowledgment reduces the possibility of moving toward a shared history. The society has been moving toward more just social arrangements in its laws and practices, which is of great importance, although its extent in practice is unclear. There is a constructive vision, embracing all groups,

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but the leaders, the government, needs to use this vision more constructively.

In everyday life, Hutus and Tutsis, in talking to a foreigner like me, often identify others as either Hutu or Tutsi (sometimes incorrectly). But in a training of leaders in 2001, many seemed to genuinely believe the ideology they have created, that there are no Tutsis and Hutus, only Rwandans. Only slowly did they acknowledge the social and psychological reality of people holding different identities (Staub & Pearlman, 2006; Staub, 2011). The challenge for them is to create the conditions that lead people in Rwanda to identify themselves as primarily Rwandans.

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