

# Ethnic Reintegration in Post-Conflict Development Strategies

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DARIA JARCZEWSKA, APR 16 2014

### **Ethnic Reintegration in Post-Conflict Development Strategies: The Potential of Social Capital Approaches**

There is an overwhelming sense of consensus in the scholarly literature that contemporary conflicts have an inherently social character, affecting civilians and disrupting their lives through the conduct of collective violence (Kaldor and Luckham, 2001; Vorderstrasse, 2012). However, this realisation has not been fully translated into the practice of post-conflict strategies pursuing development and reconciliation. The dominant approach to national and international peacebuilding is focused primarily (and often solely) on re-building the state's institutional capacity (Paris, 2004; Pickering, 2007, p.1; Kostić, 2008, p. 385). The pursuit of reconciliation in this predominant peacebuilding paradigm is realised mainly through high-profile, top-down initiatives: truth commissions, legal processes, constitutional reforms, public apologies (Bloomfield, 2006, p.25). Far from undermining the importance of such processes, this paper will adopt a broader notion of reconciliation (Galtung, 2001) and will attempt to assert the potential of post-conflict strategies, pursuing it through encouraging positive, bridging social capital at the community level (Pickering, 2007, p.111), which involves developing cooperative relations between the divided groups and overcoming the exclusive, bonding capital in the form of increased salience of ethnic identifications.

Furthermore, post-conflict strategies limit their potential of reconciling ethnically opposed groups due to their (mis)understanding of the role that ethnicity plays in conflict. The institutional arrangements undertaken in the aftermath of the contemporary conflicts mostly sought to keep the antagonised groups apart (Simonsen, 2005, p. 303), or to abolish and criminalise them (Purdeková, 2008), hardly progressing towards a true reintegration. In the course of this paper, this essay will assess why such approaches, relying on the notion of ethnic groups as unchangeable, and unreflective about the transformation of ethnic identities during conflict, are not satisfactory.

The choice of Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as case studies was motivated by the fact that both countries experienced violence on all levels of society (Heider, 2009; Ingleare, 2008). Additionally, the functioning of formal, civic association in both countries is impeded (Fagan, 2008; Gready, 2011). The reconciliation initiatives in the two countries were undertaken in challenging economic environments—Rwanda being one of Least Developed Countries and about 50 per cent of the population in BiH living below the poverty line as of 2007 (UNDP 2007, 76). Given those aspects, the potential of informal, community-initiated activities focused on cross-ethnic co-operation and income generating activities is particularly high in terms of improving the prospects of reconciliation.

Before turning to analysing the two case studies, this essay will further look into the theoretical assumptions of post-conflict strategies.

### **Post-Conflict Strategies: Challenges and Potentialities**

Given that reconciliation is a notion that 'has deep psychological, sociological, theological, philosophical and profoundly human roots' (Galtung, 2001, p.21), the currently predominant post-conflict peacebuilding strategies, focused on building state capacity and institutional reforms, seem to be inadequate to attain this goal in the long term.

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Violent conflicts permeate all levels of society, disrupting social bonds, communal links, and mutual trust (Stover and Weinstein, 2004), which are crucial for social stability. Mobilisation along ethnic lines antagonises the relations between ethnic groups (Simonsen, 2005) and strengthens bonding capital in the form of ethnic identifications (Colletta and Cullen, 2000, p. 93). Conflicts that use mass violence against the civilians and strategies of ethnic cleansing (as was the case in both Rwanda and BiH), with most physical violence and suffering occurring at the communal level (Goodhand and Hulme, 1999, p. 18), necessitate approaches that rebuild communities and address their needs (Fischer, 2004, p.5). Rebuilding trust and community networks in groups divided by violence should be pursued additionally to rebuilding state capacity. Thus, reconciliation necessarily ought to encompass a process of rebuilding social capital, namely social relations that bond communities together (Portes, 1998, p.6).

The post-conflict reconciliation strategies are also problematic in their understanding of the salience of ethnic identities and the antagonistic nature of the relations between them as permanent characteristics, rather than problematising them as an outcome of violence that can be reversed. This perception has led to institutional solutions that either keep ethnic groups apart, as was the case in BiH, or criminalise them, as it occurred in Rwanda, which minimised the opportunities for cross-ethnic social interaction.

Thus, post-conflict reconciliation strategies do not fully use their potential because they fail to address ethnic relations at all levels, including the local level, and also because of their perception of ethnic divisions in the aftermath of conflict as permanent. The social capital approach, focused on the ability of individuals to take advantage of the engagement in multiple social networks and positively transforming inter-ethnic relations by encouraging the bridging capital between opposed groups (Pickering 2007, p. 112), has the potential to complement institutional approaches. Such cross-cutting relations, or so called 'weak ties', are, by nature, more networked and spread-out in the community, having the potential to bridge differences such as ethnicity (Colletta and Cullen, 2000, p.6). Since identities are shaped primarily in social practice and interaction (Todd, 2004, p. 432), strategies that address them at the level where such interaction occurs are more likely to be successful in promoting their inclusivity, directly shaping group and individual perceptions and enabling communication. Also, such strategies do not carry the threat of increasing the salience of ethnicity, as they focus on non-ethnic identities in apolitical contexts (Pickering, 2007, p.64).

The two cases analysed in this paper exemplify both the challenges posed by the predominantly institutional approaches which rely on the understanding of ethnicity as irreversibly exclusive and antagonistic, as well as the potential of rebuilding positive social capital at the local level.

## **The Failure of International and National Approaches to Reconciliation**

The post-conflict strategies in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 were shaped by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), with the international community playing rather an advisory role. Despite undertaking a strong reconciliation discourse in 1999 (Waldorf, 2010), the RPF government pursued a process of enforced de-ethnicisation of both political and social space, instrumentally criminalising ethnic identifications (Zorbas, 2004, p.44). However, the increased salience of ethnicity in the aftermath of conflict (Oberschall, 2007, p. 230) makes the implementation of ethnicity-neutral frameworks problematic. The 'enforced ethnic amnesia' in Rwanda (Lemarchand, 2008, p.73) precluded the possibility of a dialogue between antagonised groups and the development of mutual understanding, far from contributing to decreasing the importance of ethnicity. On the contrary, ethnic identifications retained their negative connotation, since the official government rhetoric described them as 'destructive sub-national loyalties' (Purdeková, 2008, p.12). The process of reconciliation encompassed mainly constitutional changes, combating corruption and formal transitional justice mechanisms. Those measures proved insufficient in addressing high levels of social disruption caused by the genocide, which was instrumented from above but shaped at the micro-level (Ingleare, 2008, p.31) and represented a 'perverse manipulation of social capital' (Colletta and Cullen, 2000, p. 90), mobilising groups along exclusionary rhetoric and mutual hatred. Furthermore, as argued by Waldorf (2010, p. 198), the pursuit of truth telling as means of reconciliation is at odds with the Rwandan culture of secrecy. The one-sided nature in which justice was exerted by those means further reinforced inter-ethnic tensions (ibid, p.199). Thus, fostering reconciliation at the community level by engaging both groups in apolitical activities appears to have greater potential to yield positive outcomes.

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Furthermore, the governments' refusal to persecute crimes committed by both sides during the conflict has led to a perception of injustice and victimisation of both groups, strengthening the bonding capital among them (Reyntjens and Vandeginste, 2005). Thus, the main obstacle to achieving reconciliation in Rwanda is the overwhelmingly top-down nature of reconciliation initiatives, as well as the prevalent sense of double standards in the pursuit of justice (Ngesi and Villa-Vilencio, 2003, p.3). Also, the vehement criminalisation of ethnic identities by the government did not transform community relations and failed to rebuild trust and positive dependence among Hutu and Tutsi (Purdeková, 2008).

The persistence of ethnicity as the predominant form of identity (Longman and Rutagenwa, 2004, p. 176), despite a large scale social and political engineering process conducted by the RPF-dominated government, indicates that the top-down discourses can often fail to influence local perceptions of identity and inter-ethnic relations, proving the existence of 'dissonances between seemingly authoritative official meanings and on-the ground popular meanings' (Todd, 2004, p.431). Therefore, encouraging cooperation focused around common issues defined by the communities themselves, rather than re-enforcing the negative connotation of ethnicity, has the potential to be successful in fostering inter-ethnic integration.

In contrast to Rwanda, the international community has been heavily engaged in the post-conflict reconciliation strategies in BiH (Fischer, 2004, p. 15). Building on the belief that ethnically homogeneous states are more stable (Yordán, 2003, p. 60) and that the ethno-national divisions are too strong to overcome, the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (GFA) signed in Dayton in 1995 established the state of BiH, divided into a Croat-Muslim Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Federation) and the Republika Srpska (RS) dominated by Bosnian Serbs. Furthermore, it was expected that the cooperation between leaders of ethnic groups at the state level will 'trickle down to the rest of the society' (Yordán, 2003, p. 61). However, not only did this institutional arrangement fail to foster cooperation, but it also led to high levels of 'ethnic politicking' (Kostić, 2007, p.19).

The establishment of a new state was followed by the building of state institutions, economic and legal reforms, as well as promotion of state identity. This external nation-building project had little resonance among local populations (Kostić, 2008, p. 396). The GFA also called into existence the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, located in The Hague, the Netherlands. Although the Tribunal did achieve justice for many crimes committed during the war, it has largely failed to extend the perception of justice to individual countries. Furthermore, the ethnic framing of prosecutions had led to the understanding of national reconciliation as reconciliation between ethnic communities, obstructing the formation of a sense of solidarity and inclusiveness between them (Humphrey, 2010, p. 501).

The federal consociational power-sharing framework has homogenised the ethnic composition of local communities in Bosnia to a great extent (Pickering, 2006, p. 83), limiting the potential of inter-ethnic cooperation (Yordán, 2003, p. 61). Furthermore, the overly institutional approach to peacebuilding in BiH proved inadequate for the task of addressing the post-conflict legacy of antagonised community relations, simplified identifications, the prevalent lack of social trust (Spencer and Wollman, 2002, p. 141), and leaving the reconciliation in BiH at a nascent stage (Kostić, 2008, p. 396). Far from reflecting local needs, or engaging communities in the process, major initiatives initiated by external peace-builders were designed and implemented by 'technical and administrative 'experts' in Brussels and Washington' (Chandler, 2008, p.2). Leaving the stakeholders outside the decision-making processes proved disempowering and did not allow for any broader sense of common interest to emerge (Chandler, 1999, p. 197). Thus, despite the abundance of external assistance, the reconciliation initiatives in BiH were mainly unsuccessful, failing to incorporate local capacities and to create sustainable systems build upon local ownership (Fischer, 2004, p.17).

The heavily top-down initiatives aimed at proscribing (Rwanda) and separating (Bosnia) ethnic groups whose relations became antagonised in the course of conflict have equated ethnic identities with conflict and largely failed in terms of transforming societal relations. It may seem, therefore, that promoting the non-exclusivity of ethnic identities by encouraging community engagement and inter-ethnic dialogue at the local level has more potential to foster reconciliation. This was partly achieved in some of the local reintegration projects which aimed to re-build bridging social capital in both Bosnia and Rwanda. The potential of such approaches will be explored in the remaining part of

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this paper.

## The Positive Impact of Community Initiatives and the Potential of Social Capital Approaches

The World Bank's Rwanda Community Reintegration and Development Project was among few initiatives fostering inclusive social capital in Rwanda. It was run from 1999 to 2003, targeting twelve vulnerable communities and pursuing 'community-based reintegration'. Ethnic reconciliation was not among the stated goals of the project as it was focused on rebuilding social capital and diminishing cleavages among groups (World Bank, 2002, p.2). Also, the project was conducted in agreement with the Rwandan government and faced *high levels of political resistance*' (World Bank, 2003, p. 10). However, the territorial and social proximity between former adversaries in daily life in Rwanda enabled the projects to develop cooperative inter-ethnic relations (Buckley- Zistel, 2008, p.138). Aimed at fostering an appropriate environment for building communal trust in post-genocide context as well as social and economic reintegration, the project was structured according to the needs identified by participants themselves. It included infrastructure projects (rebuilding roads and schools), income-generating projects, and capacity building (World Bank, 2003, p. 4-5). Such productive, apolitical engagement has the potential to gradually encourage conflicted groups to accept one another as members of the same community and restore communication between them, promoting coexistence indirectly and gradually (Chayes and Minow, 2003, p. xx). It also enables the creation of a budding 'network of reciprocal social relations' (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Such projects, tailored to micro-dynamics of communities, are particularly important in countries like Rwanda, which experienced high levels of violence, of greatly 'intimate' nature and leading to the disruption of communal bonds and trust (Ngesi and Villa-Vilencio, 2003, p.3). The project upon its completion was considered 'a best practice example of promoting the social and economic integration of the poor amid ethnic tensions in a post-conflict situation' (World Bank, 2001, p.1). It also helped to increase the sense of security and overcome a sense of victimisation by the means of economic empowerment. In fact, the Hutu and Tutsi expressed the wish to continue working together on initiated projects, such as housing developments (Afzali and Colleton, 2003, p.11), which indicates the existence of social and economic networks that permeate ethnic divisions in communities participating in the project.

A similar social integration initiative was run in BiH by The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from January 2001 for the course of eighteen months (Babbitt et al, 2002). The project was named 'Imagine Coexistence' and encompassed twenty-six projects focused in two towns that experiences the highest level of post-war minority returns and persistent segregation of communities: Drvar (Federation) and Prijedor/Kozarac (RS). The initiatives included income-generating projects, psychosocial, educational and cultural projects, which aimed at 'overcoming deeply entrenched mistrust, promoting cooperation and (re)building relationships' (Heider, 2011, p.21), namely rebuilding and bridging social capital between conflicted groups. The projects emphasised non-ethnic issues that participants had in common, providing a safe space for a renewed dialogue and challenging the divisive, collectivising perceptions. The sharing of successes and constrains of the projects created a bond among individuals of different ethnicities, often bringing them together for the first time (Burns et al, 2003, p.94). Furthermore, as the institutional solutions increased a sense of social insecurity (Kostić, 2007, p.332), those initiatives were crucial in constructing local 'webs of social support' (Korac, 2009, p. 108). One of the highly successful initiatives involved opening a café run by multi-ethnic staff. The cafe proved to be the first social, family-friendly venue of this kind in Drva and attracted youth and parents of both ethnicities, highlighting their mutual needs (Babbitt et al, 2002, p. 26). Also, activities involving music, sports, and education aimed at inter-ethnic groups of the same age proved successful in establishing lasting connections between them (ibid, p. 40), strengthening the inclusive capital. Twenty-one out of the twenty-six projects continued to function after 'Imagine Coexistence', positively affecting societal attitudes and inculcating patterns of inter-ethnic cooperation in daily activities and in a variety of social domains (Dowley and Silver, 2002, p.113).

Although limited in scope and time frame and affecting participants only, projects in Rwanda and BiH achieved something that national reconciliation processes did not attempt to do in neither of the cases—they brought the opposed groups together and encouraged them to work towards mutual goals, building inclusive social capital and reinforcing the hope for common future.

## Conclusion

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As the cases of Rwanda and BiH prove, reconciliation cannot be imposed, either by proscribing ethnic identification or by building institutions that mirror ethnic differences, since the very point of reconciliation is *reconciling* difference, not eliminating it. Reconciliation will not expand from the high levels of political decision-making to all societal groups, especially in post-conflict societies characterised by divisions and marginalisation of certain societal groups. Reconciliation ought to be encouraged at all levels of society, reflecting the concerns of those most affected by the conflict and aiming to build sustainable networks of communication between the former adversaries. As the positive outcomes of the local initiatives in both Rwanda and BiH exemplify, encouraging apolitical activities focused around common concerns of communities, and doing so in a participatory and inclusive manner, holds great potential to foster reconciliation in post-atrocity contexts. The social capital is particularly useful conceptual tool for the assessment and construction of such projects, as it emphasises the importance of cross-cutting bonds, focusing on what can bring people back together and foster constructive interaction which can become self-sustaining in divided communities. Thus, this approach builds on one of the aspects of divided and war-torn societies that possess great potential for change—the human drive for repair (Chayes and Minow, 2003, p. xx).

It is beyond denial that the initiatives explored in this paper could offer only a partial solution to the question of the reconciliation of ethnically divided societies and that they were not without their flaws. Particularly problematic is the implementation of projects that aim at building and bridging social capital in the current framework of post-conflict strategies, characterised by a short time frame, a limited geographic scope, and insufficient funding for projects of this nature (Barkat and Chard, 2005, p.173). However, such projects do have potential if implemented as part of a combination of interlinked initiatives. Addressing ethnic divisions without increasing their salience or refuelling still existent tensions is clearly a difficult balancing act. Yet it does need more politically courageous approaches which seek inter-ethnic cooperation as well as greater sensitivity towards perceptions of communities whose lives have been affected by violence, if true reconciliation is to be achieved one day.

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