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Restoring relationship between former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide against Tutsi in Rwanda through reconciliation villages

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Abstract

Throughout the 20th century, genocide has claimed many lives across the world. In Rwanda, the Genocide against the Tutsi was perpetrated with unprecedented violence and took the lives of more than one million. In the aftermath of the genocide, the interpersonal relationships between genocide survivors and former genocide perpetrators as well as their respective family members was undermined. Through Prison Fellowship Rwanda, former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide were brought together in reconciliation villages as a way of restoring their relationships. Drawing on interviews and focus group discussion with members of five reconciliation villages, this study uses a qualitative approach to examine how these villages contribute to the restoration of relationship between conflicting parties in the aftermath of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. The findings indicate that living together in reconciliation village combined with economic joint activities provided a favorable space in which negative-dehumanizing attitudes were overcome, while positive-re-humanizing attitudes were fostered. Additionally, the village offered members an opportunity for communication, reduced prejudice and fear among them, and generated trust in the community.

Keywords: Reconciliation villages, Genocide survivors, Former genocide perpetrators, Prison Fellowship Rwanda

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1. Introduction

The Genocide against the Tutsi was perpetrated with unprecedented violence and took the lives of 1,074,017 people, of whom 934,218 have been identified by name¹. In the aftermath, Rwanda was left a society of countless victims with deep wounds needing to be healed, as well as a large number of perpetrators. The society was broken and characterized by distrust and fear between citizens and lack of shared national unity². As stated by Sentama (2009), after violence, conflicting parties are separated from one another. Fear, suspicion, mistrust, hatred and misperception are the major characteristics of their relationship. To deal with this problem, the Prison Fellowship Rwanda, which uses restorative justice³ approach, brought together former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide in *imidugudu*, or “Reconciliation villages”. In many cases, offenders live next door to victims whom they directly confronted and harmed in the events of the genocide.

This study aims to explore factors that contribute to the restoration of relationship between former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide in reconciliation villages.

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

The purpose of this section is to discuss some concepts and the theoretical framework on the intergroup contact theory

2.1. Conceptual clarification

2.1.1. Genocide survivor

According to Sentama (2009), genocide survivor refers to any individual, irrespective of his/her ethnic or group background, who, in a way or another, was injured, hunted, or targeted by genocide acts. In this regard, the study chooses to employ the concept of “survivor” instead of the term “victim”, not only because the term “survivor” is familiar and widely used in much of the literature on post-genocide (and, importantly, in Rwanda), but also since the term “victim” could be misleading; “victim” can indicate both the offended against and the offender.

¹République du Rwanda, Ministère de l'Administration Locale, du Développement Communautaire et des Affaires Sociales. (Avril 2004). Dénombrement des victimes du génocide. Rapport final, Version révisée. Kigali, Rwanda.

²National Unity and Reconciliation Commission. “Unity and Reconciliation: Understanding Unity & Reconciliation 15 Years after Genocide.” *NURC Review Magazine*, p 3.

³Restorative justice is an innovative approach that has been advanced in recent years as an alternative way of dealing with offending behaviour by making victims, offenders and communities the key participants in working out how to deal with the aftermath of crime.

2.1.2. Former genocide perpetrator

Former genocide perpetrator is defined as any individual, irrespective of his/her ethnic or group background who, in a way or another, got involved in genocidal acts (Sentama, 2009). In this regard, this study does not consider bystanders' understood as people who did not, or were less likely to, offer help in fighting or challenging genocidal acts as belonging to the category of genocide perpetrators.

2.1.3. Prison Fellowship Rwanda (PFR) background

Prison Fellowship Rwanda (PFR) is a member of Prison Fellowship International, which is an active member of the United Nations Alliance of Non-Governmental Organizations in Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. Organizations under Prison Fellowship International thus have consultative status with the United Nations Economics and Social Council.

PFR was established in Rwanda on 01/07/1995. On 23/10/2002 the organization was officially registered and recognized by the Rwandan Ministry of Justice under ministerial law no 037/17 as a non-profit organization. The official purpose of PFR is promoting community justice through reconciliation of offenders and victims in order to address the causes of crimes in Rwandan society. On the ground, this national Christian movement strives to bring reconciliation, restoration and rehabilitation to all those involved in and affected by crime. Furthermore, it works to promote restorative justice in the criminal justice system and in surrounding communities, and especially among those affected by the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

PFR also "works to install practical reconciliation among all Rwandan people directly or indirectly affected by the genocide and other crimes through economic development and spiritual healing, creating communities of restoration."⁴ In this regard, the Prison Fellowship Rwanda emphasizes the importance of a practical approach to reconciliation, acknowledging that reconciliation can only be achieved through social and economic development; without practical growth, tensions can worsen. PFR thus brings together offenders and victims to work on projects related to this necessary development, such as income generating activities and social activities⁵.

2.1.4. Historical background of Reconciliation villages

In 2003, in accordance with a Presidential decree, former genocide perpetrators who had been willing to tell the truth about their wrongdoing during genocide, who and had confessed their crimes, were released from prison. Rwanda became faced with the problem of reintegrating these self-proclaimed perpetrators into the Rwandan community and figuring out how they would live in peace with the victims they had harmed during the genocide. Prison Fellowship Rwanda undertook the process of bringing together former genocide

⁴ <http://www.pfrwanda.org/> accessed on September 12, 2012

⁵ Idem

perpetrators and survivors of genocide under the “Umuvumu Tree project⁶” in order to find an innovative way of restoring their relationship. Ultimately, the genocide survivors learned about offering forgiveness while former genocide perpetrators learned about acknowledging their responsibility during genocide by apologizing confessions and reparation according to the principle of restorative justice approach.

As both sides faced the problems of poverty and lack of shelter, both were targeted to build their own shelter with the assistance of Prison Fellowship Rwanda. As a result, former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide, who needed shelter started building houses for themselves. According to the views of the leaders of Prison Fellowship Rwanda, practical reconciliation can be fostered through social and economic development⁷. It is paramount to recall that most of former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide lived together at the same hill before genocide. As these conflicting parties’ worked together for their own social and economic well-being in the past, they held the potential to do so again.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The reconciliation villages require former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide to be in contact with one another. For this reason intergroup contact theory is at the core of the framework.

2.2.1. Intergroup contact theory

According to Sentama (2009), intergroup contact theory stands as one of socio-psychology’s foremost strategies used in transforming interpersonal relations by reducing negative-dehumanizing attitudes and behaviors, including prejudice, negative stereotyping, or discrimination, while fostering positive-humanizing ones among conflicting parties. Notably, after the Second World War, researchers such as Robin Williams (1947) and Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) strongly evidenced how intergroup contact can reduce prejudice between opposing social parties. However, they noted that under certain conditions positive change has a greater chance of being achieved. Groups who share a similar status, interests, and tasks had are more likely to foster significant positive change between them.

Similarly, in the Nature of Prejudice, Gordon William Allport specifies the critical situational conditions under which intergroup contact can reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954). He asserts that prejudice may be reduced by equal status contact between two groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom, or local atmosphere). In his conclusion, he emphasizes that prejudice is lessened when: (1) there is *equal status* between the groups within the contact situation; (2) the two groups pursue *common goals and interests*. According to him, contact situation is sanctioned by *institutional supports* (i.e., by law, custom or local atmosphere) (Allport, cited by Sentama, 2009:35).

⁶Umuvumu Tree project it is an approach that contributes to the promotion of justice through teaching on biblical accounts, such as that of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-8, which demonstrate the need for responsibility, confession, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and amends. This project uses also a restorative justice approach, which means achieving an honest settlement of differences between offenders and victims of crime.

⁷ Source: Interview researcher made with leaders of Prison Fellowship Rwanda.

2.2.1.1. Equal status groups

Equal status between individuals or groups within the contact situation tends to decrease prejudice (Allport cited in Sentama, 2009: 35). Scholars hold different opinions on the issue of Equal status between groups. Some authors such as Brewer and Kramer (1982) argue that the groups should be of equal status coming into the contact situation. Others, such as Patchen (1982), stress that equal status in the situation is effective in promoting positive intergroup attitudes even when individuals or groups initially differ in status. For Amir Yehuda (1998), it is critical that both individuals and groups perceive equal status, at least within the context of the contact situation.

2.2.1.2. Having a common goals and interests

Sentama (2009) emphasizes that for contact to contribute to improved relationships participants must be pursuing a common goal, share interests, and respect each other's humanity because prejudice reduction through contact requires an active, goal-oriented effort toward a goal the groups share. In order to improve relationships through contact, conflicting parties must have a common goal—without a goal, nothing can happen. Conflicting parties must participate jointly in a task, building solidarity. In reconciliation villages, former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide are gathered together in different associations aimed at improving their conditions of life.

According to Pettigrew (1971), in order for a contact situation to bring interracial harmony it must involve *cooperative interdependence*. Common interests or a common goal must be present before greater contact can be expected to have positive effects. Emphasizing the importance of a common goal, Sentama states:

“if two groups share a common or superordinate goal that requires a joint effort for its attainment by both groups, then the relations between their members are likely to be better, and their attitudes towards each other more positive, on average, than if the two groups were competing for a goal (territory, power, victory) that only one can have” (Sentama, 2009:35)

2.2.1.3. Institutional supports

As Forbes states, human beings generally tend to follow their leaders and do what they are told (Forbes, 1997). The effectiveness of interracial contact is greatly increased if the contact is sanctioned by institutional support. In reconciliation villages, respondents emphasize the importance of having leaders who provide good examples of how to forgive people who killed their relatives.

3. Findings and discussion

This study was carried out in five “Reconciliation Villages of experimentation on Practical Reconciliation” in Rwanda, especially in Districts of Bugesera (*Mbyo and Batima*), Musanze (*Kimonyi*) and Kayonza (*Kageyo and*

Mwiri) where former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide live together. Data was gathered through individual interview and focus group discussion.

The researcher used a purposive sampling. The population was mainly composed by members of conflicting parties that live in these reconciliation villages. There were 50 respondents. After data was collected, it was transcribed and analyzed using qualitative methods. This entailed classifying, comparing, weighing, and combining empirical material (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) from the interviews and field notes to extract meaning. From this analysis, the researcher gained an understanding of the data and created a description of his findings. Finally, the greater meaning of these findings was evaluated in the context of relevant literature and an imposed theoretical framework.

3.1. Characteristics of the conflicting parties' relationship before joining reconciliation village

Before joining reconciliation villages, the conflicting parties' relationship was characterized by mistrust, fear, suspicion and hatred. Survivors of genocide feared that former genocide perpetrators would come and kill them. Both genocide survivors and former genocide perpetrators were also afraid that survivors might seek vengeance.

The impact of genocide on Rwandan society has been emphasized by the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission magazine, which argues that in the aftermath of 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the society was broken and characterized by distrust and fear between citizens and lack of shared national unity⁸. The hatred and anger characterized survivors towards former genocide perpetrators was due to the killing of their beloved relatives during genocide. This was also coupled with the gravity of poverty among genocide survivors caused by the loss of their properties during genocide.

In addition, shame and traumatism also characterized the relationship of both conflicting parties' before joining reconciliation village. Former genocide perpetrators felt ashamed when they met survivors of genocide. A former genocide perpetrator states: "*After being released from prison, I could always feel ashamed when I met survivors, I could dodge them thinking that they will come and kill me or put me back in the prison*". Survivors of genocide were also traumatized when meet former genocide perpetrators.

Prior to joining reconciliation villages, the relationship between conflicting parties was also characterized by interpersonal divisions and an absence of communication. The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi brought up a deep gap between genocide survivors and former genocide perpetrators and their respective families members. Each side suspected the other of planning to commit further violence—either that survivors would take revenge on former genocide perpetrators, or that perpetrators would begin killing again (specifically with the intention of eliminating witnesses to their genocidal acts). Consequently, individuals from both sides of the conflict could not talk to, and was mistrusting of, each other. However, communication between the two sides was often necessary and thus full of resentment. Former genocide perpetrators could not imagine that one day they would sit and live together with genocide survivors. There was a wall of separation between them.

⁸ National Unity and Reconciliation Commission. "Unity and Reconciliation: Understanding Unity & Reconciliation Profess 15 Years after Genocide". *NURC Review Magazine*, p 3.

3.2. Satisfying material interest: A major reason behind conflicting parties to join reconciliation village

Survivors of genocide and former genocide perpetrators were not motivated to join reconciliation villages by a desire to restore or improve their relationships. On the contrary, they were motivated by a need to get shelter and satisfy their material interests (fighting poverty). Extreme poverty and lack of shelter, which constituted a common problem that both sides faced, pushed conflicting parties to meet together in building themselves reconciliation villages. Statements from a survivor of genocide and a former genocide perpetrator illustrate this phenomenon:

Survivor: *"I was facing a problem of poverty and lack of a shelter to live in. Due to this problem, I could not resist joining others in order to get my own house even though I knew that people who killed my relatives were among person whom we would live together, stated a survivor of genocide"* (Interview with genocide survivor, July 15,2012).

Perpetrator: *"After being released from prison, I found my family in deplorable condition; they did not have shelter to live in and they faced extreme poverty. For this reason I responded positively when leaders of Prison Fellowship Rwanda told me to come and join together with people I harmed during genocide in order to build our shelters even though I had fear of being killed as revenge"* (Interview with former genocide perpetrator, July 15,2012).

Solving these material problems greatly contributed to the restoration of party members' relationships. This aligns with Eugenia Zorbas' contention that solving conflicting parties' socio-economic problems (lack of shelter in this case and poverty in general) is likely to lay the groundwork for the restoration of their relationships (2004). The process of restoring interpersonal relationships becomes much more promising when conflicting parties share a common problem, which necessitates that they come together and work cooperatively to solve it. Furthermore Forbes (1997) emphasizes that if two groups share a common or superordinate goal that requires a joint effort for its attainment by both groups, then the relations between their members are likely to be better, and their attitudes towards each other more positive, than if the two groups were competing for a goal (territory, power, victory).

3.3. Ways in which reconciliation villages contribute to restore relationship

Conflicting parties consider reconciliation village as a tool that facilitates close and frequent contact between them, and as a consequence it contributes much to the restoration of interpersonal relationship through contact, dialogue within workshop and in interactive problem-solving. In this regards, one genocide survivor stated:

"Before coming in the reconciliation village, i could not even meet with someone who killed my relatives, but, because of regular contact and conversation, i came up to overcome fear and suspicion."

Emphasizing on the above statement, a Caritas Training manual (2006) suggests that there are three elements that are important in opening up spaces for the restoration of interpersonal relationship. First, people need safe, hospitable spaces. This means that basic human needs, such as being free from physical harm, and having shelter and food, are met. Without these basic needs being met, conflicting parties may continue to live in fear and anxiety. Second, spaces for reconciliation have to be in places where conflicting parties can act graciously and experience graciousness. Breakdowns in relationships are ultimately about a loss of trust, which is likely to be restored when conflicting parties are reasonably sure that their trust will not be broken again, and when trust is not forced or threatened. Safe, hospitable spaces allow conflicting parties to rebuild trust as they experience graciousness. Finally, spaces for reconciliation are places where conflicting parties can discover or build something new.

Conflicting parties perceive reconciliation villages as an encounter in which they share emotions and experiences. A survivor of genocide stated that in his reconciliation village opposing sides got the opportunity to review their country's history and each one of them got opportunity to express his feelings. John Paul Lederach (1997) emphasizes that in order to build new relationships a social space is needed where people can recount their experiences and share perceptions and feelings with one another through various encounters. We can thus see how reconciliation villages provide an arena in which new positive relationships can form and flourish.

3.4. Factors contributing to the restoration of interpersonal relationship in reconciliation village

3.4.1. *Responsibility of wrongdoers, truth-telling, confession and forgiveness*

The restoration of relationship between conflicting parties in the aftermath of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda was fostered by several phenomena, including wrongdoers assuming responsibility for their actions, truth telling, confession, and forgiveness. Conflicting party members were taught about these phenomena so that they would develop a firm understanding of tools they could use to repair broken relationships. A former genocide perpetrator stated how, after having acquiring teachings about responsibility and truth-telling, he went straight to ask for forgiveness from the genocide survivors whose relatives he had killed during the genocide and they forgave him.

Daye Russell (2004) emphasizes that interpersonal forgiveness necessitates the naming and articulation of harm done. This is followed by an act of apology or confession; and then the offer of forgiveness by the victimized party. According to him, this model does not suggest an automatic forgiveness, but the act of forgiveness is conditional upon the perpetrator offering apology or confession. Willingness of former genocide perpetrators to tell the truth about what happened, acknowledging their responsibility and expressing regrets of wrongdoing, influenced genocide survivors to offer forgiveness.

By apologizing, the wrongdoing party indicates to the other that he is sorry for what he did, that he should not have done it, and that he will not do such a thing again. In acknowledging wrongdoing and responsibility, expressing sorrow, and taking initiative to restore the relationship, he attempts to bridge the gap with the

partner or friend who was hurt. The other will accept the apology only if she or he trusts the wrongdoer enough to regard him as sincere and credible (Govier and Galgary, 2002).

In the line with above statement, genocide survivors emphasized how offering forgiveness was a process and took long time. However, offering forgiveness is possible when basic human needs are met. A genocide survivor stated:

“How can I forgive someone who killed both my parents and relatives while myself I look like a person who is not alive—everything has been destroyed, I don’t have shelter to live in, my children are starving from hunger—you can see how this can’t be possible?”

3.4.2. Working together toward a common goal

A part from the factors cited above, working together toward a common goal greatly contributed to restoring relationships between former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide. It enabled conflicting parties to be in contact and as consequence they overcame fear, suspicion and prejudice among them. They were engaged together to build their houses themselves. As conflicting parties stated, when building these houses, they started to communicate, and, over time, fear and suspicion were reduced.

Working together in cooperatives created also an opportunity for communication. Contact between conflicting parties was improved by having a common goal of fighting against poverty and improving their well-being. According to Forbes (1997), people drawn into networks of cooperation and exchange become tied together by their practical economic interests. Under the influence of these new interests and engagements, they begin to see their clashing commitments in a new and clear light. People gradually learn to see each other as individual members of a family and to recognize their own interest in upholding a common set of basic rights for all. Cooperatives did not only alleviate poverty between conflicting parties, but also permitted supportive communication between them, thus reducing fear and suspicion. They were once again able to talk to each other without mistrust. Thus, as Forbes’ may have predicted, conflicting parties now see each other as members of the same family; they share common problems with a goal of fighting against poverty and improving their conditions of living.

Forbes (1997) goes on to argue that economic development through cooperation reduces ethnic conflict and increases respect for individual rights. The various economic activities carried out by genocide survivors and former genocide perpetrators reinforce their solidarity. These cooperatives also offer forums in which members can freely express their concerns. In this way people are able to transcend the stereotypes formerly attached to conflicting parties and their respective family members, leading to greater mutual acceptance. Conflicting parties’ statements emphasize how these shared economic activities restored trust and hope for the future. They are no longer poor and they have a same vision: to improve their economic well-being.

Yakhyoev (2006) shows how the creation of socio-economic opportunities is vital to prevent the reoccurrence of violence in post-conflict societies and raise hope and trust in people. Walter’s study of civil war emphasizes also on how the improvement in economic well-being, among other things, decreases the risk of experiencing war anew. Reconciliation villages represent the most significant factor that contributed

to restoring relationships between former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide. The reason given by conflicting parties and their respective families members are listed below:

“When you are in regular contact with someone, you finally know him and you can discover if what he apologized for was sincere. The way you interacted with him or her can be a proof of good relation among us and good deeds he manifest toward you can testify the degree of your relationship” (Interview with survivor, June 10, 2012).

In this regard, Forbes (1997) argued that opening channels of communication and interaction is crucial, as it asserts a shared humanity, challenges prejudices, shows opponents that division is not the means of addressing conflict issues, and creates opportunities (offers space) to address relational issues. When channels of communication are opened, hostile people can discover that their enemies do not, in fact, wish them harm, and they come to see the aggression in their own behavior; as a result, they becomes less defensive and hostile (Forbes, 1997).

Survivors emphasize on how it would be impossible to overcome fear, suspicion and mistrust if they were not living in reconciliation villages. The intimate relationship between former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide deepened because they lived together in a reconciliation village. This statement is supported by Govier and Verwoerd’s contention that intimate relationships are characterized by close and frequent contact, and that such relationships require deep trust, a confident expectation that the other is accepting and loving, honest, truthful, caring, non-manipulative, dependable emotionally, loyal, and desiring of closeness and close contact. Additionally, apology, expression of sorrow and forgiveness should be promoted in such relationships (Trudy and Wilhelm, 2002).

Likewise, Amir Yehuda holds that "casual contact, even if frequent, is less likely to change attitudes than intimate contact" (1998:174). Considering work-place contact, Yehuda (1998) claims that superficial interactions between co-workers do not produce any significant improvement in attitudes between groups and individuals, while the formation of close acquaintances and more intimate relations are more likely to reduce prejudice.

4. Conclusion

Reconciliation villages played a major role in the restoration of relationships between former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide in the aftermath of genocide in Rwanda. Although conflicting parties joined reconciliation village as a way of satisfying their material interests (finding shelter and improving their condition of living), living together impacted them positively. Finding solutions to their common material problems offered an opportunity for communication and reduced prejudice amongst community members. Additionally, pre-existing fears were overcome and trust and positive communication were fostered.

Contact between conflicting parties was motivated by the common desire to fight against poverty. These problems could not have effectively been addressed unless conflicting parties worked together. In order to achieve common goals through cooperative work individuals from each side of the conflict put aside their problems, and focused on their shared fight against poverty. Putting aside negative-hostile attitudes did not limit communication. On the contrary, community members found an opportunity for discussing and addressing their problems. Working together enabled conflicting parties to interact, communicate, and advise each other towards a common goal. Acts of solidarity among conflicting parties and family' members reduced prejudice while re-building trust among them. The factor of living together in reconciliation village combined with economic joint activities provided a favorable space in which negative-dehumanizing attitudes were overcome, while positive-re-humanizing attitudes were fostered. In addition to the aforementioned factors of affecting positive change, community members received regular teaching about restorative justice. These teachings impacted most individuals positively.

Since this study was focused on regular and direct interactions between conflicting parties and their respective family members which are living together in reconciliation village, it follows that the study findings do not generalize to those who are not living in reconciliation villages. Further, more widespread research aimed at comparing the kinds of relationships between genocide survivors and perpetrators of genocide needs to be carried out, especially among those members of conflicting parties who have direct and indirect contact with each other.

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