

National Reconciliation in Rwanda: Experiences and Lessons Learnt

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Ezechiel Sentama**

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Executive Summary

Rwanda is a country with a troubled history. The pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods have been characterised by power struggles and violence between the Hutu and Tutsi groups. Prior to colonisation the Tutsi ruled a bonded labour class (the Hutu). Colonial powers further exacerbated the divisions between the two groups by enhancing Tutsi exploitation of the Hutu. The Hutu revolution, in 1959, pushed the Tutsi out of power and Rwanda achieved its independence, in 1962, as a Republic under Hutu leadership. These tensions led to a civil war, 1990-1994, between the Hutu government and Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), and the conflict climaxed with a genocide aimed particularly at the Tutsi, April-July 1994. The RPF defeated the Hutu government, and, then, put an end to the genocide.

The victory of the Tutsi-led RPF and its seizure of power, in July 1994, took place in a devastated country. Rwandan society was deeply divided and traumatised and the country had acquired the status of a failed state. The reconstruction process aimed at bringing unity, and reconciliation was a pressing, but difficult, task facing the post-genocide government.

Twenty-seven years have now elapsed since Rwanda, headed by the RPF, embarked on the journey towards national reconciliation. The process has been driven by the government in consultation with elites from all walks of life—members of political parties, senior national leaders, academics, businessmen, development partners, and members of civil society.

To promote national reconciliation, Rwanda privileged home-based processes and mechanisms. These combined universal and local culture-driven approaches and involved preventive and responsive judicial and non-judicial responses: community-based *Gacaca* courts and the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission have been the core instruments. All the mechanisms adopted were essentially government-centred and involved mandatory individual and community participation. They were embedded within facilitating processes involving an inclusive government, military integration, refugee repatriation, constitutional and legal reforms, and socio-economic welfare programmes.

Although Rwandan society is still in a recovery process, its culture has played an important role in facilitating the establishment of useful mechanisms, which have set a solid foundation for national reconciliation. There has been progress towards achieving unity and reconciliation, as a living reality in the country, and the restoration of human dignity and Rwandan values. However, the process is still hampered by the persistence of a genocide ideology, ethnic stereotyping, still open psychological and physical wounds, poverty, and a lack of restitution policy. In particular, the main criticism is that the process of addressing past injustice has been selective: it has been restricted to the genocide committed by the defeated government and the crimes committed by the RPF have been neglected.

Drawing on Rwanda's experience with national reconciliation, the following lessons could be useful for countries that have experienced massive violent conflicts. Firstly, it is the state's responsibility to set the stage and to promote reconciliation. Secondly, successful reconciliation necessitates integrated efforts on the part of the government and non-state actors, and depends on the use of mechanisms that are grounded in a given social context, culture, traditions and customs. Thirdly, for adopted initiatives to be successful, a mechanism for integration and coordination is paramount. Fourthly, successful reconciliation should be comprehensive and not selective. Finally, it is important to regularly track the progress of reconciliation in order to revise the mechanisms and processes, or to create new ones, while addressing persisting challenges.

Introduction

Rwanda has had a troubled history in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period, a history in which ethnicity and politics have always been wound tightly together. Hatred and an accompanying power struggle between the Hutu and Tutsi groups erupted in cyclical episodes of violence and climaxed in one of the most brutal and devastating genocides in history, April-July 1994. The genocide targeted mainly the Tutsi people and it is estimated that around one million people were killed.

The genocide also took place amidst a four year-long civil war (1990-1994) between the Hutu government of Juvénal Habyarimana and the Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) led by Paul Kagame. Despite the Peace Agreement signed between the two warring parties in August 1993, the genocide was triggered by the assassination of Hutu President Habyarimana. This broke the Peace Accords and reignited the civil war. The RPF defeated the Hutu government, and then put an end to the genocide.

However, the victory of the Tutsi-led RPF and its seizure of power, in July 1994, took place in a country that had been devastated. The civil war and genocide had destroyed the socio-economic and political fabric of Rwanda. People had lost all trust in the government, religious institutions and the media, the military and police: these institutions were all implicated in the genocide. There was a deeply divided and traumatised society and a country that had acquired the status of a failed state. The reconstruction of a traumatised society¹ to bring unity and reconciliation was the pressing, but difficult, task of the post-genocide government.

Twenty-seven years have now elapsed since Rwanda, headed by the RPF, embarked on the journey towards unity and reconciliation. This background paper aims to provide a contextual analysis of Rwanda's experience of national reconciliation by answering four overlapping and interrelated questions: (1) What does national reconciliation in Rwanda entail and why was it necessary? (2) What mechanisms have been put in place to promote national reconciliation in Rwanda, why and by whom, and how have the adopted mechanisms been implemented? (3) What have the achievements and challenges of the adopted mechanisms been? And (4) what political and social lessons can be drawn from Rwanda's experience with national reconciliation?

In addressing the above questions, the first section of the paper, after briefly reviewing the history of the conflict and genocide, discusses how, in Rwanda, national reconciliation was understood as a cornerstone for the country's survival. The second section presents the mechanisms that have been set in motion by the post-genocide government and how it privileged home-grown processes that combined universal and culture-based approaches involving mandatory community participation. The last and concluding section reviews Rwanda's main achievements and challenges on the path towards national reconciliation. We suggest that it remains a long, complex, and volatile process. That section also provides lessons for other countries emerging from conflicts, not least the way that successful national reconciliation necessitates integrated efforts involving state and non-state actors exploiting the country's favourable culture.

Methodologically, the paper relies on document analysis. The process involved a careful examination of relevant Rwandan documents on national reconciliation (content analysis). Relevant materials included policy and legal documents, country programmes, strategies and annual reports, evaluation reports, as well as other research reports not least peer-reviewed publications.

1 NURC (2009). *15 Years of Unity and Reconciliation Process in Rwanda: The ground covered to-date*, p. 7.

1. Rwanda's Genocide: The roots of the conflict and the search for national reconciliation

1.1. Historical context of the conflict and the genocide in Rwanda

The history of Rwanda involves centuries of commingling of three identity groups: the Hutu-majority farmers (85%); the Tutsi-minorities, cattle herders/pastoralists (14%); and the small Twa group of hunter-gatherers and potters (1%).² However, the conflict has always been between the Tutsi and Hutu with groups such as the Twa marginalised. Under a monarchical system, the precolonial history of Rwanda reveals a centuries-long succession of interclan fighting and the expansion of a dominant ruling class (Tutsi) over a bonded labour class (Hutu).

Colonial powers exacerbated the division and hatred between the Tutsi and Hutu through a “divide and rule” strategy. Germany colonised Rwanda in 1885, but following World War I the colony became a Belgian trustee territory. The Belgian colonisers created structural changes in the relations between Hutu and Tutsi that greatly enhanced Tutsi dominance and their exploitation of the Hutu, which intensified the Hutu hostility towards the Tutsi. The Belgian administration had given the Tutsi something like European status and declared them to be intellectually superior to the Hutu. By favouring the Tutsi elite, the Belgian colonial administration used them as the administrators of their harsh policies, and the Hutu became increasingly exploited and resentful – not of their colonial masters, but of the Tutsi monarchical system.

The situation changed in the 1950s when the Tutsi elite fought against their Belgian colonisers and claimed independence. The Belgians encouraged the Hutu in a policy turnaround and, in 1959, the Hutu rebelled against the Tutsi monarchy through ‘social revolution’. This culminated in the Tutsi being pushed out of power. The Tutsi monarchy was abolished and much of the Tutsi elite went into exile.³

Rwanda achieved its independence in 1962⁴ and became a Republic under Hutu leadership. The successive two Hutu governments maintained the ethnic identity system instituted by the Belgians and initiated a policy of discrimination against the Tutsi minority who had remained in the country. This was retaliation for the years of subjugation under Belgian/Tutsi rule. The two Hutu governments marginalised the Tutsi through a quota system of majority-minority for employment in the public sector and in schools.

In the late 1980s densely-populated Rwanda was faced with an economic crisis coupled with a highly authoritarian Hutu political system and demands for a multiparty system. The exiled Tutsi and their descendants had formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and, on 1 October 1990, they invaded Rwanda from Uganda, reviving Hutu memories of past periods of exploitation and subjugation under Tutsi domination. The Hutu government sought to counteract the Tutsi invasion by intensified ethnic hostility and propaganda against the Tutsi.

2 Uvin, Peter. (2003). ‘The Gacaca Tribunals in Rwanda’. In IDEA, *Reconciliation after Violent Conflict*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Stockholm.

3 Staub, Elvin. (2003). *The Psychology of Good and Evil: Why Children, Adults, and Groups Help and Harm Others*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 437.

4 Lambourne, Wendy (2001). ‘Justice and Reconciliation: Post-conflict Peacebuilding in Cambodia and Rwanda’ (pp. 311-337). In Abu-Nimer Mohammed. *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory & Practice*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Lexington Books, p. 322.

After 1992, a succession of cease-fire agreements and peace talks had been undertaken in France and other involved African countries. This culminated in the Arusha Peace Agreement,⁵ signed on 4 August 1993, between the Government of Rwanda (GoR) and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). However, the Arusha negotiations were an example of conflict resolution gone wrong. This peace process at the time reflected a successful, almost perfect conflict resolution on paper alone. These Accords were meant to end the armed conflict and at the same time to crown an internal democratisation process.

While the implementation of the Arusha Peace Accords and the installation of a new government including members of the RPF and the national opposition was postponed time and again, an assassination took place. On 6 April 1994, the Hutu president, Juvénal Habyarimana was murdered. This sparked the genocide and the resumption of the civil war between the RPF and the Rwanda government armed forces. The genocide claimed more than a million lives,⁶ mainly Tutsi who were living in the country, but also Hutu opposition members, as well as those who opposed the genocide or who protected the Tutsi. The delay of the deployment of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Rwanda (UNAMIR), as well as the intense ethnic polarization of the post-Arusha era also contributed to the collapse of the Accords and the genocide. The international community failed to intervene despite evidence of planned genocide, and the UN cut back its peacekeeping force after ten Belgian peacekeepers were killed. The civil war resumed and ended with the victory of the RPF, which put an end to the genocide. The defeated government fled to the former Zaire, Tanzania and other countries, as did roughly two million Hutu civilians: and about five hundred thousand exiled Tutsi streamed back into Rwanda. The Tutsi-dominated RPF established a new government on 19 July 1994 under the presidency of Paul Kagame.

1.2. The post-genocide situation and the necessity for national reconciliation

When the Tutsi-led RPF took over, Rwanda had acquired the status of a failed state. The entire infrastructure of the country, ranging from schools, hospitals, factories and government departments, had been destroyed or severely looted. The government's administrative capacity had collapsed as civil servants had either been killed or had fled into exile. The entire population was displaced, having either fled to neighbouring countries or having been internally displaced.

Law and order had completely broken down, all national law enforcement agencies and judicial institutions had ceased to exist, and justice system had come to a standstill. The credibility of the state itself had been undermined as most institutions (public institutions, the army and police), as well as much of civil society (churches, NGOs) and the media had been complicit in the genocide.

The country was left with traumatised and desperate citizens. While the Tutsi, who lived in Rwanda had very painful experiences and felt it was extremely difficult to reconcile, others, who returned from exile after the genocide also had difficult and painful experiences. They or their parents had left Rwanda after earlier massacres and they returned now to a devastated country. However, many of them had understood that the only hope for creating a functioning society lay in reconciliation.⁷

5 Six documents were an integral part of the Peace Agreement concluded between the Government of the Republic of Rwanda (GoR) and the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) (Available at: <https://ucdpged.uu.se/peaceagreements/fulltext/Rwa%2019930804.pdf>):

1. The N'Sele Ceasefire Agreement of 29 March, as amended in Gbadolite (former Zaire) on 16 September 1991 and at Arusha on 12 July 1992;
2. The Protocol of Agreement on the Rule of Law, signed at Arusha on 18 September 1992;
3. The Protocol of Agreement on Power Sharing within the Framework of a Broad Based Transitional Government, signed at Arusha respectively on 30 October, 1992 and on 9 January 1993;
4. The Protocol of Agreement on the Repatriation of Refugees and the Resettlement of Displaced Persons, signed at Arusha on 9 June 1993;
5. The Protocol of Agreement on the integration of Armed Forces of the two parties, signed at Arusha on 3 August 1993;
6. The Protocol of Agreement on Miscellaneous Issues and Final Provisions signed at Arusha on 3 August 1993.

6 Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports and Ibuka Association (2004). *Prevent and Banish Genocide forever, through universal active solidarity*. International Conference on Genocide, Intercontinental Hotel, Kigali, 4-6 April.

7 Staub, Elvin (2003). *Ibid.*, p. 437.

The post-genocide government was thus faced with the challenge of reconstructing the country's socio-economic and political fabric and bringing about national reconciliation. To deal with the legacies of the genocide and civil war, in the words of the new government: national unity and reconciliation "was not an alternative; it was the only option to survival."⁸

In fact, for the government the goal of reconciliation has formed part of a national policy for the future development of the country. To this end, the post-genocide reconstruction process was mainly driven by two expectations: (1) to create a capable, credible and legitimate state; and (2) to promote a united and reconciled people. These expectations had actually been formulated and agreed upon during the pre-genocide 1993 Arusha Peace Accords⁹ between the Tutsi-led RPF and the Hutu Government. The main principles of the agreement stressed power-sharing through the formation of a Government of National Unity, refugee repatriation and reintegration, military integration, the creation of a National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, as well as policy and legal reforms.

By keeping 'unity' and 'reconciliation' as inseparable concepts, the national policy on unity and reconciliation defines unity and reconciliation, as "*a consensus practice of citizens who have common nationality, who share the same culture and have equal rights; citizens characterised by trust, tolerance, mutual respect, equality, complementarity, truth, and healing of one another's wounds inflicted by their dark history, with the objectives of laying a foundation for development in sustainable peace.*"¹⁰ This model emphasises the state's responsibility for creating a culture of rights based upon an inclusive notion of shared identity.

2. Mechanisms and processes of national reconciliation in Rwanda

Rwanda privileged home-based processes and mechanisms, which combined universal and local culture-driven approaches, to promote national reconciliation. To this end, *Gacaca* courts and the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission have been the core instruments. All the mechanisms adopted were essentially government-centred and involved mandatory individual and community participation.

2.1. Democratic governance: Government of National Unity

To exemplify national reconciliation, as one of its overarching priorities, the RPF government named itself the Government of National Unity when it was formed on 19 July 1994 and claimed that its compliance with the pre-genocide Arusha Peace Accords (1993) whereby an inclusive government had to be formed under power sharing and dialogue principles.

a) Power sharing and inclusion

The central idea of the policy of national unity and reconciliation was the slogan 'One Rwanda for all Rwandans'.¹¹ The post-genocide RPF-led government argued that, since ethnic disunity had caused the genocide, the creation of an inclusive Rwandan citizenship as a monolithic identity was the solution to a long legacy of ethnic hatred and violence. The RPF government also claimed that although RPF

8 NURC (2007). *Ingando: Impact Assessment on Unity and Reconciliation of Rwandans*, Kigali, p. 10.

9 Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Rwanda and the Rwandese Patriotic Front, Arusha, Tanzania, 1993 (Preamble and Article 2).

10 NURC (2007). *National Policy of Unity and Reconciliation*, Kigali; NURC (2020). *National Policy of Unity and Reconciliation*, Revised version, Kigali, p. 4.

11 Thompson, Susan (2013). *Whispering Truth to Power: Everyday Resistance to Reconciliation in Post-genocide Rwanda*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, p. 113.

had won the war, it complied with the 1993 Arusha core principle that ‘*the winner does not take all*’. The process has not, however, exactly followed the Arusha Accords’ principle regarding how power was to be shared. The RPF-dominated government only included political parties that had not taken part in the genocide. The RPF also created a forum for political parties and requested all parties to function as part of this RPF-led coalition. Critics stress that this strategy was to maintain “total control over the political landscape.”¹²

b) Dialogue and National Dialogue Council

The first step of governance after the genocide was to organise a national dialogue to discuss Rwanda’s conflict and to agree on the mechanisms for reconstruction. The forums for national dialogue brought together elites from all walks of life – members of political parties (with different political ideologies), senior national leaders and individuals from civil society (academics, businessmen, civil society and development partners...). One of the major recommendations was to create the following structures/institutions: a National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, *Gacaca* courts, the National Dialogue Council (*Umushyikirano* in Kinyarwanda), and to engage in related legal and policy reforms. In particular, the National Dialogue Council-Umushyikirano was instituted as a platform for providing a forum for Rwandans in various social groups to discuss national unity, reconciliation and other social and development issues affecting the country. Its main objective was to cement the unity and reconciliation process by transforming conflicts through dialogue and consensus based on four pillars: history, testimonies, forgiveness, and healing.¹³

In accordance with the principles of the 2003 Constitution, as amended, the National Dialogue Council (NDC) is provided for in Article 168 as an annual event that takes place once a year and that is chaired over by the President of the Republic.¹⁴ The constitution established that the NDC must bring together the President of the Republic, the Cabinet and Parliament, the Governors of provinces, representatives of various constituencies, and other individuals determined by the President of the Republic. It is thus one of the forums whereby the President of the Republic meets with all types of Rwandans to exchange ideas and to debate issues relating to the state of the nation, the state of local government and national unity.

2.2. Refugees’ repatriation and reintegration

Post the genocide the government had to deal with the urgency of ensuring security and stability by repatriating, settling, and reintegrating the millions of refugees (new cases and old cases). There were particularly refugees in neighbouring countries (the former Zaire-now Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya): but there were also the internally displaced. These acts of reintegration were in compliance with the 1993 Arusha Peace Accords although, not all refugees have been repatriated as of 2022. The process involved civic education programmes known as *Ingando* (civic (re)-education camps) through which all new-case returnees and internally displaced people had to go, with the aim of reducing their fears as they returned to their communities.¹⁵ The process thus brought people and communities back together and enabled people to regain hope for a normal life.

12 Reyntjens, Filip (1996). “Rwanda: Genocide and Beyond.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol.9, No.3, pp. 241-251.

13 Doreen, “Umushyikirano Concept – A national debt for development”, quoted in NURC (2014). *Unity and Reconciliation Process in Rwanda: 20 years after the 1994 Genocide perpetrated against Tutsi*. Kigali, p. 95.

14 Article 168 of the 2003 Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, as amended to date, stipulates that the NDC should take place at ‘least once a year’.

15 As detailed later, the *Ingando* were later expanded to include the representatives of the country’s key constituencies (students, teachers, public servants, civil society, business...).

2.3. Military integration

The Rwandan military integration model is unique. The former ‘enemy’ combatants were integrated into the new national army – the Rwanda Defence Forces (RDF), in compliance with the 1993 Arusha Peace Accords. Military integration was also implemented through the Rwandan traditional concept of *Ingando*, civic (re)-education camps or schools dedicated to learning the virtues of unity and patriotism.

This form of problem-solving workshops, implemented by Rwandans themselves, is unlike the traditional models of military integration in peacebuilding with their focus on (1) forced disarmament usually by external intervention, under the United Nations’ mandate; (2) demobilization that excludes former enemy combatants; or (3) mediation-based military integration involving a third party. Military integration in Rwanda included unity and reconciliation training as a process of re-education. The reconciliatory pay-offs included the promotion of stability and initial reconciliation between conflicting parties (former warring combatants).

2.4. Constitutional and legal reforms, and the policy on national unity and reconciliation

In addition to the elaboration of a national policy of unity and reconciliation, constitutional and legal reforms have been vital for national reconciliation. They provided a favourable institutional and legal foundation for all national and local initiatives.

a) Constitutional and legal reforms

The post-1994 government was convinced that Rwanda had never had a constitution with values and principles for creating a united society. The new constitution promulgated on 4 June 2003, commits the government to complying with the promotion of national unity and reconciliation. For example, it makes any form of divisions and discrimination among Rwandans illegal (Article 11).¹⁶ Another important innovation, brought in by the 2003 constitution, has to do with the creation of various institutions responsible for helping in resolving major issues facing the country: e.g., community-based *Gacaca* jurisdictions, National Dialogue Council-*Umushyikirano*, civic education school-*Itorero*, civic education camps-*Ingando* and community work-*Umuganda*. In all these cases, unity and reconciliation have been central. In particular, Article 178 of the Constitution created the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) as a mechanism of coordination and integration of all reconciliation efforts at national and local levels.

Key legal reforms were also effectively implemented. These included: the law punishing discrimination and sectarianism;¹⁷ the Presidential decree for pardon; the abolition of the death penalty;¹⁸ the law encouraging wrongdoers to admit their wrongdoings to repent and to request forgiveness;¹⁹ and the law punishing genocide ideology.²⁰

16 Republic of Rwanda (2003). *Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda*. Kigali.

17 Republic of Rwanda (2002). *Law No. 47/2001 of 18 December 2001 instituting the punishment for offenses of Discrimination and Sectarianism*. Official Gazette. Kigali.

18 Republic of Rwanda (2007). *Organic Law No. 31/2007 of 2 July 2007 relating to the abolition of the death penalty*. Kigali.

19 Republic of Rwanda (2007). *Organic law No. 10/2007 of 1 March 2007 modifying and completing Law No. 16/2004 of 19 June 2004 establishing the organization and competence of the Gacaca Courts which rewards those who confess and penalizes those who failed to do so*. Kigali.

20 Republic of Rwanda (2008). *Law No. 18/2008 of 23 July 2008 related to the punishment of the crime of genocide ideology*. Official Gazette. Kigali.

b) Policy on national reconciliation

In August 2007, a national policy on unity and reconciliation was officially publicised. This policy constitutes an ambitious social engineering project that the RPF-led government believes will forge a unified Rwandan identity, while fostering reconciliation between survivors of the genocide and its perpetrators. Through this policy, which always keeps unity and reconciliation inseparable, national reconciliation is always referred to as 'National Unity and Reconciliation', hence the 'the National Unity and Reconciliation Policy.'

The policy's general objective is '*to build a united Rwanda in which all citizens have equal rights and are free to corporately participate in the governance and development of their country.*' The specific objectives of this policy are: (1) to fight any form of division and discrimination; (2) to fight against genocide ideology; (3) to sensitise Rwandans at all levels, to strive and value their unity; (4) to empower Rwandans with the capacity to analyse their problems and find adequate solutions; (5) to promote a culture of peace; and (7) to promote those values in Rwandan culture that contribute to the social cohesion and to the wellbeing of Rwandans.²¹

Strategies to achieve these goals include: (a) integrating unity and reconciliation in the action plans of different institutions; (b) sharing information and engaging in consultative dialogues on unity and reconciliation regularly; and (c) civic education for all Rwandans, research on reconciliation process (barometers), partnerships, community consultations, combating poverty and ignorance, psychological healing, as well as the monitoring and evaluation of reconciliation activities.

It is through this policy that 'ethnic' identity labels like Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, as well as any reference to them, have been officially proscribed. However, many critics and commentators consider this to be paradoxical as, in 2008, the government convinced the United Nations to officially change the name of the genocide to 'the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi'.

2.5. National Unity and Reconciliation Commission

The mandate to integrate and to coordinate all national and local reconciliation efforts was given to the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC).²² The NURC, a version of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was created in March 1999 with the intention of operating in a participatory way to permit Rwandans from all walks of life to shape and influence the ways and means of how unity and reconciliation is to be achieved and to provide a platform upon which Rwandans air their views on what has divided them in the past, and on how to build a united and reconciled Rwanda.

The NURC began in a wise manner. It gathered groups of people and asked them what they needed in order to reconcile. Three advantages or benefits can be identified in this process. First, people engaged with the idea of reconciliation. Second, they were enabled to help identify what they needed for reconciliation to take place. Third, by expressing their views and then, ideally, actively engaging with each other and with the process, they became creators and actors. This is valuable since reconciliation can only be facilitated. It cannot be created or imposed by others.

The NURC organised several meetings and workshops, conferences, and research on the theme of unity and reconciliation, and collective symbolic recognitions: e.g., genocide memorials, commemorations and educational reforms. With regards to civic education, the NURC tapped into community and solidarity-based cultural institutions of conflict resolution or transformation, namely the *Ingando* (civic re/education camps) and *Itorero* (civic re/education academy) and *Ndi Umunyarwanda* (Rwandanness).

21 Republic of Rwanda (2020). *National Policy of Unity and Reconciliation*, Kigali. p. 5-6.

22 The NURC's mandate ended on 21 November 2021 by a Cabinet decision, which created a Ministry of Unity and Civic Education with the purpose of continuing and consolidating the NURC's mandate.

- **Ingando** referred to a unique moment, in Rwanda's culture, in which the elders or young people had to leave their village, go to an isolated place to reflect and discuss fundamental problems of the community (e.g., famine, conflict...). After the genocide and civil war, the *Ingando* were revived to constitute a civic education school dedicated to learning the virtues of unity and patriotism. Beside their role in refugees and military integration, and before their replacement with *Itorero* (civil education school), *Ingando* continued to be used as a form of problem-solving workshops and a space for dynamic interactions between people, and as a tool of social cohesion, unity and integration. They were also expanded to include school and university students, as well as public servants. *Ingando* was thus a school that provided an exposure to the daily progress of the country's life, a space that created understanding of the relevance of peaceful coexistence and socio-economic integration, as well as, in the view of survivors, a form of therapy and a place of recovery. *Ingando* helped participants: to overcome mutual fear and suspicion, hatred, and the temptation for revenge; to talk about the history of the divisive conflict; to accept responsibility for any harm done to each other; to demystify negative perceptions of each other; and to agree on what the future holds for them.
- **Itorero** is an extended form of *Ingando*. It was established by the Cabinet meeting of 12 November 2007 as a civic education homegrown initiative inspired by Rwandan culture. Traditionally, *Itorero* was a school that was used to instil moral values and the capacity to deal with societal problems. The process generally culminates in convivial parties; that is, social entertainment activities, whereby participants perform cultural songs and dances and share food and drinks. More advanced than *Ingando* camps, the *Itorero* is organised at all levels of administration, from the local to the central levels, as well as in the diaspora. The aim is: to re-introduce the culture of serving the country without financial reward; increase the levels of awareness on unity and reconciliation; encourage patriotism, unity and responsibility, which are believed to be attributes that contribute to progress, social cohesion, peace and reconciliation.

Itorero targets all Rwandans and includes different curricula to suit the various sections of the population, including children of seven years and above. Children are trained in their villages to help them grow up to become responsible and productive citizens. The compulsory category are those aged between 18 and 35 years of age, completing their secondary education. Other categories of the population desiring to participate are given the opportunity to do so according to their professional backgrounds and the established service priorities. In comparison with other countries, Rwanda adopted a blended model (both voluntary and compulsory) for different categories of participants. With regard to the impact of *Itorero* in unity and reconciliation, *Itoero* (*Itorero* graduates) vow to be exemplary in their respective communities where they are responsible for training others on matters pertaining to national reconciliation.²³

- **Ndi Umunyarwanda** is another NURC milestone included in Rwandan path toward unity and reconciliation. It refers to a dialogue-based programme of *Ndi Umunyarwanda* (literally translated as 'I am Rwandan') to emphasise a 'shared citizenship' and 'unity' of Rwandans first, before any references to any 'ethnic' identities. The program provides a forum for Rwandans from various social groups to discuss issues related to national unity, reconciliation and development. By focusing on a shared citizenship – citizenship as a shared fate – the initiative restores the bond and solidarity between Rwandans, as there is no plausible alternative to living together.
- **Memory preservation** is also part of the reconciliation process and is implemented through genocide memorials and commemorations, as institutional embodiments of collective memory. Many memorials are housed in churches – sites of many genocidal massacres. A national day of mourning for the victims of the genocide was also instituted to refresh and foster collective memory. At the national level, each year a new site is chosen from which bodies are exhumed and given

23 NURC (2009). *Itorero Strategic Plan 2009-2012*. Kigali, p.13.

a formal burial. The President of the Republic leads the ceremony, which is broadcasted on state television and radio. The day is also commemorated all over the country at lower administrative levels. One week in April is consecrated for an intensive week of mourning and parties or celebrations of any kind are discouraged. Genocide survivors' associations extend the commemoration activities up to July 4 when the genocide was officially ended with RPF victory. A common criticism is that memorials and commemorations are selective as they only consider the Tutsi victims. They do not include the Hutu victims of the genocide, nor do they include other crimes, notably those allegedly committed by the RPF.

2.6. Socio-economic welfare

Lasting solutions for unity and reconciliation have included community-based programmes of fast socio-economic development. The RPF government has had poverty reduction as its second overarching priority after the fostering of national reconciliation. Therefore, if, as Peter Uvin argues, poverty and inequality, cumulatively 'structural violence', fed into the dynamics of genocide,²⁴ it follows that 'national unity and reconciliation' have, as a necessary foundation, the notion of economic development. The NURC also recognised that reconciliation cannot be possible without focusing on poverty reduction strategies.²⁵ New development projects have thus been conceived as opportunities to bring together and reunite Rwandans at the local level. They refer to social protection actions that promote shared socio-economic goals. Mechanisms refer to *Umuganda* (community work) and social protection programmes targeting the poor.

a) *Umuganda* (community work)

The Government tapped into traditional forms of collaboration such as *Umuganda*, a tradition of voluntary work to achieve a range of societal objectives collectively. The aim was to instil in Rwandans a spirit of self-reliance with dignity. The principle at the core of this community work was that Rwanda's problems are solved by Rwandans themselves through joint efforts. *Umuganda* is institutionalised and compulsory for all Rwandans including the President of the Republic and other political leaders, as well as the security forces. The programme takes place once every month (every last Saturday of the month) and requires everyone to contribute free labour for around two hours in the morning. It involves collective action at community level to achieve a range of societal objectives including the rehabilitation of bridges and water channels, the construction of houses for the poor, schools and health centres and the protection of the environment. *Umuganda* bonds families and is a mechanism that solidifies social cohesion. Through *Umuganda*, people learned to smile again: friends and foes share a joke, exchange ideas and eventually transform conflicts constructively.

b) Social Protection Programmes

Vulnerable people including genocide survivors, orphans, people living with disabilities, returnees, minorities and marginalised people, widows, elderly people, and the poor, have been given special assistance through different social protection programmes, within the 'Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP).' The VUP, which started in 2008, involves: (1) direct financial support, which targets extremely poor people or families without labour capacity or employment opportunities, such as disabled people, families headed by children, the elderly, street children, and refugees; (2) public works, which offer employment opportunities to different categories of poor people, who are able to carry out the job opportunities; (3) credit packages, which provide financial services (micro financial loans) to the extremely poor people; and (4) support funds to genocide survivors – for rectifying the damage caused

24 See Peter Uvin's discussion of structural violence in Rwanda in his *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1998.

25 NURC (2002). *Second National Summit on Unity and Reconciliation in Rwanda*. Report. October 26-28, Kigali.

by the genocide, the Government of National Unity has set aside 5% of the revenue every year to assist genocide survivors.

c) *Educational reforms*

The genocide and civil war resulted in the almost total destruction of the education system. However, after the genocide, the newly instituted government not only had to react to the educational emergency prompted by the events of 1994, notably through educational support (support fund) to the vulnerable. It also had to address the legacies of an educational system that had been based on racial and ethnic inequality and discrimination since its inception in colonial times.

The post-genocide government faced a massive task: not just reconstruction but also, the construction of an education system that would be fair, efficient and capable of combating inequality; something that Rwanda had never previously enjoyed. This approach has necessitated a radical reform of Rwandan education. The well-known understanding is that just as education can be used as a tool to promote division and heighten inter-group hatred, it can also cultivate peace, democracy, tolerance and the rebuilding of social relations.

Under the most difficult of circumstances, the Rwandan government has made massive strides in educational reform since the genocide. The intentions of the post-1994 education policy were to correct past educational injustices in a way that promotes national unity and reconciliation by prioritizing equity of provision and access. There was also a determination to encourage a humanitarian culture of inclusion and mutual respect in education. One important step was to abolish the classification of learners and teachers following Hutu, Tutsi or Twa affiliation.²⁶ A new set of values was to be taught: (1) to highlight the similarities among Rwandans and the policy of inclusiveness; (2) to promote individual responsibility; (3) to focus on a progressive future; and (4) to ensure the relevance and applicability of the curriculum to daily life.

2.7. *Gacaca courts: Community-based justice*

Gacaca courts constituted the second main instrument, besides the NURC, for achieving a unity and reconciliation policy in Rwanda. Just after the 1994 genocide, around 200,000 genocide suspects were already incarcerated.²⁷ In an effort to deal with the overcrowded prisons and the backlog of cases awaiting trials, the government recreated the traditional *Gacaca* system of justice in 2001. It consisted of an informal local system of participatory and restorative justice in which people, especially community elders, used to sit together in the *Gacaca* (the 'grass' or 'lawn') and settle their disputes with the aim of reconciling conflicting parties. Traditionally, when someone did harm to another in the community, the elders gathered to hear what had happened and to decide on punishment, which functioned as restitution, allowing the perpetrator to come back into the community.

The purpose of reintroducing *Gacaca* was to bring together and involve local communities to witness, identify, corroborate, and deliver justice. Under the official slogan of 'a reconciliatory justice', the *Gacaca* courts were mandated to prosecute and to try the perpetrators of the crime of genocide and other crimes against humanity, committed between 1 October 1990 and 31 December 1994. In fact, '*Gacaca Law*' states that the *Gacaca* mechanism has been established "to achieve justice and reconciliation

26 From the Ministry of Education's Education Sector Policy (1996), the post-1994 formal education system aimed:

- To prepare a citizen who is free from ethnic, regional, religion, and sex discrimination;
- To prepare a citizen who is aware of human rights and responsible to society;
- To promote a culture of peace and emphasise national and universal values such as justice, peace, tolerance, solidarity and democracy;
- To promote a culture based on genuine Rwandese culture, free from violence; and
- To promote freedom of formulation and expression of opinion.

27 National Service for *Gacaca* Courts (2012). *Report*, Kigali.

in Rwanda” and is designed “not only with the aim of providing punishment, but also rebuilding the Rwandan society.”²⁸ Participation in *Gacaca* was also made mandatory and individuals were sometimes fined and/or imprisoned for failure to participate. The mission of *Gacaca* was to reveal the truth, speed up trials, eradicate the culture of impunity by punishing genocide perpetrators, release the innocent, provide reparations, create a rhetorical space for dialogue and promote national reconciliation. The *Gacaca* officially operated for 10 years (from 18 June 2002 to 18 June 2012). There were 10,000 courts, and 1,958,634 cases were tried involving about 1,003,227 accused.²⁹ They were presided over by ordinary citizens called ‘*Inyangamugayo*’, meaning ‘people with integrity’, elected from community members, who totalled 260,000 individuals and who were officially called ‘*Gacaca* judges’³⁰. Haller views this significant number of elected judges in *Gacaca* as “perhaps the largest experiment in popular justice in modern history.”³¹ Likewise, Clark describes this significant number as “unique among post-conflict judicial structures around the world in its mass involvement of the population in the delivery of justice.”³² However, *Gacaca* courts have been criticised for having been used as a form of victor’s justice that was selective: it only prosecuted the genocide crimes committed by the Hutu and passed over the crimes committed by the victorious Tutsi-dominated RPF.

28 Republic of Rwanda (2001). *Organic Law No. 40/2000 of 26 January 2001 setting up Gacaca Jurisdictions*, Kigali; Republic of Rwanda (2004). *New Organic Law No 16/2004 of 19 June 2004 establishing the Organization, Competence and Functioning of Gacaca Courts*. Kigali.

29 National Service for Gacaca Courts (2012). *Report Summary*, p. 34.

30 *Idem*.

31 Gasanabo, Jean Damascène; Simon, David. J. and Ensign, Margee. M. (2014). *Confronting Genocide in Rwanda: Dehumanization, Denial, and Strategies for Prevention*, Kigali: CNLG, p. 378.

32 Clark, Phil. (2010). *The Gacaca Courts, Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda: Justice without Lawyers*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 348.

Conclusion

Rwanda is a unique and complex case where genocide, the civil war and related horrendous crimes took place concurrently as a result of centuries of animosity and division between the Hutu and the Tutsi people. Rwandan society is still recovering from this deeply divisive past and rebuilding itself today. However, there has been progress towards achieving unity and reconciliation in the country, and restoring human dignity and Rwandan values.

The country's context, culture and customs have played an important role in facilitating the establishment of useful mechanisms, which have established a solid foundation for reconciliation. Rwanda's experience has emphasised in particular the government's responsibility in promoting reconciliation. All the mechanisms adopted were essentially government-centred, with national consultations, however. They involved mandatory individual and community participation. Homegrown-community based solutions, which combined local cultural and universal approaches of conflict transformation and problem-solving, which opened the possibility of dialogue on the community level, have also been key. Likewise, the adopted mechanisms were backward and forward-looking and with phases that: entailed (a) responsive; and (b) preventive measures. These mechanisms involved a combination of judicial and non-judicial processes in a way that was also unique (e.g. *Gacaca* courts), as well as a mechanism for the integration (i.e. NURC) of national and local reconciliation efforts. Embedded within a strong political will, these various mechanisms achieved important victories in the process of national reconciliation in Rwanda.

Achievements and challenges in national reconciliation in Rwanda

All the mechanisms put in place made unity and reconciliation a living reality in Rwanda. A review of indicators from the NURC barometer studies shows that levels of reconciliation are extremely high (over 90%).³³ However many observers and commentators consider the statistical progress as perhaps only indicating political ('thin') reconciliation, understood as stability and societal coexistence. If that is correct then there is still a long way to go regarding the deeper level of ('thick') reconciliation involving the individual and relationship healing.

The adopted mechanisms have laid a solid foundation that paved the way for comprehensive and sustainable national reconciliation. The establishment of a mechanism for integration and coordination (NURC) has been particularly useful. For example, in light of the report conducted by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (2005), it came out that "opposite to other reconciliation mechanisms in Africa and the rest of the world, the NURC has disseminated national reconciliation and policy at the community level. It has set forth an innovative approach to re-establish and consolidate unity among Rwandans through dialogue, transitional justice, education, mobilization, sensitization and training. It also has laid solid foundations in order to institutionalise reconciliation."³⁴ More importantly, Rwanda moved from a failed state to a capable and functioning state and civil society. A national and shared sense of identity and dignity has been restored through programmes favouring the inclusiveness and dignity of Rwandans, such as the abolition of divisive-and false ethnic identities and the promotion of Rwandanness (*Ndi Umunyarwanda*).

33 According to the NURC's studies on Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer (RRB), reconciliation in Rwanda progressed from 82.3% in 2010 to 92.5% in 2015 and 94.7% in 2020. However, many commentators question whether these figures are reliable and also reflect popular experiences.

34 Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (2005). *Évaluation de l'Impact de la Commission Nationale pour l'Unité et la Réconciliation*, p. 64-65.

Despite these achievements, the process of national reconciliation in Rwanda has faced a number of challenges. There is the persistence of a genocide ideology, ethnic stereotyping,³⁵ still fresh psychological and physical wounds, and poverty. In addition, although the National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation emphasises fighting against all forms of injustice and the eradication of a culture of impunity by ensuring functional rule of law, at the community level, restitution or compensation for the properties looted or destroyed during the genocide remains a major obstacle to achieving unity and reconciliation. Finally, there is the main criticism that the process of addressing past injustice has been selective; it has been restricted to the genocide committed by the defeated government and it has neglected RPF crimes. Citizens' resentment over the adopted mechanisms' inability to address these important issues hampers national reconciliation.

Lessons learnt

Each conflict is unique and addressing it requires sensitivity to its nature. Therefore, in general, there are no 'size fits all' formula or 'easy shortcuts' promoting national reconciliation. However, there are common experiences that people go through across different cultures and contexts if they have committed, suffered, and/or witnessed (extreme) violence in conflict situations. No matter what war, ethnic background or religion has been in play, in the struggle for reconciliation there is much common ground. Hence, drawing on Rwanda's experience with national reconciliation, the following interrelated lessons appear to be useful for countries that have experienced massive violent conflicts:

- ***It is the state's responsibility to set the stage and promote national reconciliation.*** To be effective, leading by example or 'walking the talk' through an ***inclusive and democratic government*** (and military integration in cases of civil wars for example) is paramount. This requires strong political will on the side of the post-violence (new) government whereby the winner should not take all.
- ***Successful national reconciliation necessitates integrated efforts involving the state/government and non-state actors.*** This must involve a ***safe space for dialogue*** between these actors reflecting the national (top), middle range (elites), and community/local (grassroots) levels. Rwanda's experience with national and local summits and the establishment of the National Dialogue Council (*Umushyikirano*) suggests that the active engagement of actors from all walks of life from the top to the grassroots – including state institutions, the private sector, civil society, communities, and the general public – is vital. These actors need to agree on core national reconciliation goals, priorities, and implementation mechanisms. One of the best benefits here is a shared vision of the past and future that is acceptable to all; that is, a shared collective history and future.
- ***Successful national reconciliation depends on the use of mechanisms that are grounded in a society's context, culture, traditions and customs.*** In Rwanda, for example, the country's culture and customs of solidarity and community participation in solving their problems at village level was a practical approach. Home-grown solutions are thus useful and constitute an alternative to universal or liberal mechanisms in the promotion of reconciliation. Rwanda's *Gacaca* mechanisms are a lesson for divided societies. In fact, given their decentralised nature, the importance attached to local and entire community participation, *Gacaca* courts represent a unique form of restorative justice.³⁶
- For adopted initiatives to be successful, ***a mechanism for integration and coordination is paramount***, as was the case with the NURC in Rwanda. The NURC was not a 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'; instead, it was a mechanism mandated to coordinate, monitor, and integrate all efforts at national and local levels, aimed at promoting reconciliation. Actors involved in national reconciliation should thus understand that national reconciliation remains a long, complex, and dynamic process whose success should involve an inclusive and integrated approach.

35 This is often observed in the commemoration period where some genocide survivors are killed or harassed through hate speech.

36 Clark, Phil. (2010). *Ibid.*, p. 355.

- **Successful reconciliation should be comprehensive.** Approaches that are selective (e.g. deliberately considering some injustices to the detriment of others) are a recipe for disaster. All issues and factors related to conflict and violence should be taken into account and all parties' voices heard (victims/survivors, perpetrators, witnesses, bystanders). All national efforts must also resonate and/or concur with popular initiatives and approaches to reconciliation.
- Through research and experience sharing among stakeholders, **it is important to regularly track the progress of reconciliation** in order to revise the mechanisms and processes, or to create new ones, and so address any persisting challenges.

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