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Reconciliation – transforming relationships in divided societies

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Introduction

Reconciliation is a word that is much used at the UN. Almost every mandate for peacekeeping and special political missions includes reconciliation as an objective, and five of the six countries on the agenda of the UN Peacebuilding Commission are undergoing some form of reconciliation process. The word is frequently referenced in the Security Council: for example, in one of the most wide-ranging council debates in recent years, under the Jordanian presidency in January 2014 on “Maintenance of international peace and security: War, its lessons, and the search for a permanent peace,” the word reconciliation was used by speakers more than 200 times.

The concept of reconciliation is also central to the field of peacebuilding. One of the foundational texts of the field, Jean Paul Lederach’s 1998 book on “Building Peace” is subtitled “Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies”, and for most peacebuilding practitioners the concept of reconciliation is fundamental to their work.

Yet the reality is that there is no agreement on anything that might resemble a ‘unifying theory’ of reconciliation, there is no usable handbook on how to do it, and when it comes to the UN there is a lack of coordination and considerable organizational fragmentation. The experience of many of those tasked with guiding reconciliation processes in their own countries is that they are largely on their own in trying to design comprehensive approaches: there may be technical experts available for some short term components (such as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, election mechanics, national dialogues, constitutions and so on) but nothing approaching one-stop shopping.

Towards a definition of reconciliation

Much of the discourse on reconciliation is associated with post-conflict contexts and particular processes (e.g. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions): part of a series of activities that are done after fighting stops. But this view can be misleading, in that it implies that reconciliation is a set of bounded, short term and technical exercises, that is only relevant in the context of war, and that it is backward looking, solely about addressing the past.

An alternative approach might suggest that reconciliation is a multi-generational process, that it is applicable wherever there are divided societies - at any level of development, whether those societies are marked by violent conflict or not - that it has as much to do with prevention as it does with post conflict recovery, with the future as much as the past, and that it is intimately connected with structural issues of inclusion and social justice. That reconciliation is about supporting the evolution of just societies, and provides a lens through which to view social change and all forms of external assistance (including development, humanitarian action and disaster relief) where there are social divisions.

As a starting place, consider the traditional context of post-conflict recovery. Compare a community devastated by civil war, and one impacted by a natural disaster. At one level, they may appear very similar, with widespread destruction and suffering; but the society affected by violent conflict is different in key ways. The damage that has been done was caused by the decisions and actions of human beings. And that changes things. Yes, there are wounds to be bound, bellies to be filled and livelihoods to be restored. But beyond that there is human trauma to be addressed, there is trust to be rebuilt, before those communities can know peace. Peacebuilding is about people, and restoring and transforming relationships is a core part of that.

It is in this context that some of the key working definitions of reconciliation have emerged over the last 15 years: for example, in the Northern Ireland context, Brandon Hamber's analysis from 2004, which sets out 3 propositions: reconciliation is a component of peacebuilding; reconciliation moves from the premise that relationships require attention to build peace; and reconciliation is the process addressing conflictual and fractured relationships

This insight, that *peacebuilding is about people and the relationships between individuals, their communities and their governments*, and that *reconciliation is the process addressing the strengthening of those relationships* was very helpful. The lessons learned from work within divided societies in recent years adds some additional dimensions.

First, the *timescale* for significant social change in such societies is multi-generational. The World Development Report of 2011 on Conflict, Security and Development noted that the fastest transformations from state fragility to stable governance have taken 25 to 30 years – and that is measuring change just at the institutional level: the experience at a relational level suggests that these transformations can take generations. And it should be noted that we are still far from developing tools to address multi-generational trauma, such as the impact of generations of violence in the Congo, of slavery or of centuries of oppression of women. But how much of our planning and priorities reflect such timescales?

Secondly, reconciliation relies on, and goes hand in hand with, addressing underlying issues of *structural inequality* and exclusion. To illustrate this, take an extreme example: can there be reconciliation between a slave and the slave owner, or between an occupied population and the occupying force? Well, there can be dialogue, and that may be useful in itself in fostering mutual recognition of the others' humanity, and trauma healing at all levels can take place to some degree, but until the underlying structural inequity and injustice is addressed, the slave set free and the occupation ended, then the reconciliation remains a distant dream.

Thirdly, these issues of transforming social relationships in divided societies have much broader relevance than just as one form of post-conflict intervention. For example, in recent years the topic of *resilience* has taken center stage in a wide variety of policy discussions, from disaster relief to development to climate change adaptation. It seems that the international community has seized upon the challenge of how to assist communities and societies to become more robust, to be better able to process and withstand external and internal stresses and shocks. But a more resilient society is one with strong social cohesion, is one where decisions can be made inclusively and effectively – one, that is, where divisions have been addressed and relationships strengthened:

Using a reconciliation lens in divided societies

A consequence of this approach to reconciliation, as transforming social relationships, is that it can become a lens for many different activities in divided societies. One way to think about this is to use the concept of a Theory of Change, which is simply an articulation of program logic, the rationale that connects a set of programmatic actions with a desired outcome. This concept is used in development and peacebuilding practice as a way to focus programmatic actions on the attainment of an agreed goal. In this framework, the cross-cutting Theory of Change for national priorities and for external assistance in divided societies is that all interventions should address those divisions, should be designed to strengthen and transform relationships between individuals, their communities and their government. In less technical terms, this means that this becomes a lens through which any programmatic actions are viewed, and against which they are measured.

For example, the American Friends Service Committee has supported communities in Burundi with developing micro-savings and lending programs which were designed not only to support livelihoods, but were managed by villages as communal activities which crossed gender and ethnic divisions. To make it work people needed to come together, and where necessary these activities would be supplemented by communal trauma healing. So here is an example of an approach that on the face of it is economic, but which is designed to have a relational impact.

Using a reconciliation lens can transform the approach to other issues which are common to many societies. For example, land issues: the reality of land ownership in many less developed countries is that there are layer upon layer of conflicting ownership claims, encompassing traditional claims, colonial and post-colonial dispensations, layers of displacement, seizure and refugee return that are in many cases almost impossible to unravel. Conventional legal mechanisms may be irrelevant or inaccessible. The typical UN response to such situations tends to be technical, supporting work on land registers for example, but the reality on the ground is often that what is required is a whole series of mediated judgment calls to identify the ‘most just’ of a set of possible agreements: the intervention that might be most welcome would be extensive mediation training rather than technical land experts.

Another example of the use of such a lens is an alternative perspective on the timing of elections. An early move to elections is a frequent demand by some donor countries following a breakdown of state authority: holding an election is often seen as a key milestone along the road to stability and recovery. But the reality of many elections in fragile situations is that they can end up exacerbating divisions in an already divided society, rather than healing them. Viewing a proposed political track in the light of how it will contribute to addressing divisions within a society, rather than in accordance to some externally imposed timeline, can help make such processes more robust.

Conclusion

Reconciliation can be usefully viewed as the process of transforming relationships in divided societies.

It is a multi-generational process, applicable at any level of development, whether societies are marked by violent conflict or not. It has as much to do with prevention as it does with post conflict recovery, with the future as much as the past, and is intimately connected with structural issues of inclusion and social justice.

Reconciliation is about supporting the evolution of just societies, and provides a lens through which to view social change and all forms of external assistance. Reconciliation, as the transformation of relationships, is also a core concept in developing resilience.

Reconciliation is a central and indispensable component of the efforts of the international community to attain the aspirations of the UN Charter to prevent “the scourge of war”. Although, in the final analysis, sustainable peace is built from the inside out and from the bottom up, the international community has a vital role in accompanying and nurturing the myriad activities of local communities, civil society organizations, religious groups and many other state and non-state actors who day in and day out are patiently moving ahead the process of reconciliation within their own societies. Although there are many examples of successful UN work on reconciliation, that work tends to be fragmented, uncoordinated and under-resourced, and deserves a sustained focus from the UN system and member states alike.

Thank you

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