

# Book review

Reconciliation after violent conflict: a handbook (2003). Edited by D. Bloomfield, D. T. Barnes & L. Huyse. Stockholm: IDEA International. Freely downloadable from the internet ([www.idea.int](http://www.idea.int)).

The handbook *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict* edited by Bloomfield, Barnes and Huyse and published by the International institute for Democracy and Electoral International (IDEA) is an outstanding piece of work that is likely to add great value to the sector. The experienced editors and authors tackle this difficult topic at a deep level, showing their understanding of complex conceptual and theoretical aspects. The practical ideas emphasize the richness of their experience in intense situations of conflict.

The handbook describes experiences in a diversity of post-conflict settings: Zimbabwe, Cambodia, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, South Africa and Guatemala as well as practical tools and lessons from these experiences. It is cleverly structured in four sections relating to the context, the people, the instruments and the international community. It opens with reflections on the concept and general principles of the process of reconciliation. It contains chapters about the people involved in the reconciliation processes (victims and as well as offenders). It describes the various 'instruments' of reconciliation: healing, justice, truth telling and reparation, and closes with a chapter discussing the supportive role of the international community in the reconciliation process.

Some of the chapters are illustrated with case histories. The reader can learn about

the challenges of reconciliation in Zimbabwe, get an overview of the process in Cambodia (including the role of Buddhism), learn about the victim-combatant dialogue in Northern Ireland, the merits and limitations of Gacaca tribunals in Rwanda, or compare the truth commissions of Guatemala and South Africa.

The authors sensitively include seemingly irreconcilable paradoxes within reconciliation work. These include:

- the challenge of acknowledging past hurts with the pressure to maintain and develop peace,
- the tension between allowing space for the emergence of 'home grown' reconciliation initiatives sensitive to local contexts and timing, and the need to encourage active processing,
- the conflicting needs for justice and truth versus letting go of some aspects of the past.

The criticism that could be found of the handbook was that it perhaps draws short of addressing practically the challenges of reconciliation initiatives within the contexts of multiple adversities in society. In addition, human interaction takes place in a cyclical process of resurging tensions and prejudices. These involve recurring opportunities to address reconciliation on a number of different levels within the longer-term development of a society. These long-term perspectives are perhaps insufficiently taken into account. Related to this point, the handbook also perhaps neglects the conceptualization of reconciliation as a path to new levels of richness in relationships and integrated identity. Reconciliation can be more than a restoration of a peacefully

co-existing democratic society. In this way reconciliation may be extended to other societies which survived a major period of conflict several generations ago, but which may still be struggling with discrimination and conservatism.

The authors place limited emphasis on understanding psychological aspects of healing and other orientations could have also been included, such as the application of community work in the personal process of coming to inner reconciliation with past traumatic experiences.

However, all of these criticisms maybe unfair since the answers to such multi-faceted issues are elusive, and the handbook never promises to address these issues. More importantly, in producing such

a comprehensive and meaningful coverage of the topic of reconciliation, the handbook paves the way for further debate and development of the sector.

*Reviewed by Berenice Meintjes, regional editor  
of Intervention*

---

### **Acknowledgment**

On the occasion of the ten year anniversary of the outpatient clinic for victims of torture and war, the Swiss Red Cross organized a conference entitled: 'Beyond Violence: Violent Conflicts, Care and Reconciliation Processes' held on April 6 2005 in Geneva. It is with the permission of, and thanks to, the Swiss Red Cross that this special issue of *Intervention* on the subject of reconciliation includes some articles based on the lectures of that conference.