

The challenge of recovering from war trauma in the African great lakes region: an experience from Centre Ubuntu in the Projet Colombe Network

Emmanuel Ntakarutimana

Introduction

The African Great Lakes Region has been impacted by various wars since 1990. Although peace agreements are now in place, the region is still unstable and recovery is very slow. As a result, there are large numbers of refugees and internally displaced people, often severely traumatized by war, in the region. Most are living in degrading circumstances, which contribute to escalating incidences of alcohol and drug abuse, domestic and sexual violence, child abuse, prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases. A climate of fear, suspicion and hatred between ethnic groups also needs to be addressed in order to rebuild trust, reciprocity and a sense of social values, and belonging to a network. This applies to groups within the countries, as well as to the relationships between countries, such as Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania and the DRC have similar social groups influencing each other. The issue of armed groups and refugees is therefore a cross border problem requiring networking and working together towards solutions.

Centre Ubuntu¹

Ubuntu is a common word in the Bantu linguistic groups in the eastern and southern parts of Africa. In Burundi, it refers to the synthesis of all values that make a human being different from all other creatures and beings. Ubuntu philosophy has become a foundation concept for national renaissance and solidarity in South Africa. Centre Ubuntu is a project of the Roman Catholic religious congregation of the Dominican Friars of Burundi. The centre has several objectives, including: to help Burundi reshape its vision of institutions and people on the basis of Ubuntu values; to promote peace and reconciliation; to encourage exchange about, and reflection on, non-violent communication; to assist people who have been traumatized by violence; to carry out research on trauma; and to organize community activities aimed at developing resilience².

Training of staff

The centre has a team composed of nine members. They are trained in basic listening skills and 'community approaches through narrative theatre' (Sliep, 2004). In 2005, a number of

training activities were conducted to improve the psychosocial skills of the staff. The trainings were organized in Burundi with the help of expatriate trainers.

These trainings included topics and skills such as:

- 1) a systematic approach to counselling traumatized individuals within the context of a community approach, personal reflexivity and caring for the self as counsellor;
- 2) conducting at least six individual counselling sessions per week, with a minimum of 30 sessions overall, to enter the next level of training;
- 3) using Narrative Theatre and inter-relational reflexivity as strategy to deal with traumatized communities;
- 4) conducting at least five community interventions as primary facilitator, and to assist in at least five other community interventions with the presentation of reports;
- 5) introduction to participatory evaluation of activities with further deepening of knowledge and skills in community approach geared at reviewing organizational behaviour while creating short and long term action plans; and
- 6) conduct at least five community interventions, deepening facilitation skills.

The trained staff members have, in turn, trained local psychosocial facilitators. Among the facilitator trainees, 33 have already completed the first phase, which includes counselling and community approach. In total, Centre Ubuntu has been working with four groups from local communities in rural areas; two groups from prisons including jail administrators, police officers, social workers, and three groups from secondary schools. Within the schools,

Ubuntu clubs have been created, which include students and some of their teachers who are in charge of cultural activities, human rights issues or justice and peace awakening. There is also one group from a network of Catholic religious congregations involved in training youths. The plan is to train 120 local psychosocial facilitators.

Project locations

The project targets five areas and covers 36 local rural communities in various parts of the country, with around 5000 people to be reached directly. To facilitate access, and to increase sustainability, the entry into communities always involves the local administration, the local traditional or informal leadership, and possible non-governmental partners working in the area. Since the conflict in Burundi is about controlling political power for economic benefits and follows ethnic lines, the sites include places where one ethnic group (Hutu or Tutsis) suffered heavy fighting or massacres, places where armed groups (army or rebels) were continuously active for 10 years or more, as well as places where no fighting occurred, but people shared events through the mass media. These last sites were included to provide the possibility of comparison.

Project activities

Centre Ubuntu personnel are currently involved in a six-fold project including; research on the ongoing changes in society, strengthening of a value base, media communication, strengthening the resilience capacity of grassroots communities, caring for trauma (war traumas in particular), and training in Project Cycle Management.

While research on the ongoing changes in society helps us understand the context of all our activities within the new social and

political paradigms, the strengthening of a value base has been the core of our philosophy and our activities. It would be impossible to succeed in the healing of trauma if this value base were not restored and strengthened. As a result of ongoing conflict, the value base of the communities has been shattered and this constitutes the biggest loss in the region. Losing this value base, in turn, has created the loss of the foundation of all values; the Ubuntu value, as well as the sense of humanness. Unless this base is rebuilt, there can be no lasting change, because of the need for a new culture creating new horizons in life, shaping a system of values. In spite of the impact of globalization, which has shaken the value base in different parts of the world, we returned to the basic concept of values according to different community cultural archives to understand how cultures can prevent gross human rights abuses. People have to regain value systems in order to ground life enterprises. We encourage this awakening in the general population through two radio programmes; one on National Radio and one on the radio of the Catholic Church.

As well as the activities mentioned above, we have been involved in psychosocial programmes helping to regain and develop the resilience capacity for individuals and communities. This is also rooted in the rediscovery of a traditional Ubuntu value system. This is done both through counselling for individuals and couples. We also have developed field activities related to community mobilization using the narrative theatre methodology we have learnt from Prof. Yvonne Sliep from the School of Psychology in the Kwa Zulu Natal University. This community facilitation has been shown to be an efficient tool for local communities on the hillsides over the country. This

has allowed people to reflect on problematic behaviour undermining the Ubuntu values in their region, map the main problem they wish to change, analyze the root causes and the effects, and externalize it through plays. After deconstructing the problem story as a community, people can shape together a more desirable story, discuss what components may be required using the local motivations and resources, and through acting out the desired story allowing the process to see how realistic is that outcome.

Community facilitation normally ends with asking participants how they want to organize a follow up using their own local strengths, after they have expressed their desired story. They usually set up a local committee for the follow up. Our task is then, in cooperation with that committee, to review how things have evolved after three to four months. Positive changes were rarely seen in places where repetitive and massive massacres occurred, like in Bugendana, a place where more than 200 Tutsi were massacred at one time in July 1996, or in Itaba where more than 300 Hutus were massacred in September 2002 by the army. In areas where people have deeply held traditional beliefs in sorcery, it is difficult to effect change because of different frameworks used for interpreting phenomena. In the case of these two difficult contexts, it requires more patience and more frequent visits. They constitute a challenge in the ways Centre Ubuntu must adjust to cultural contexts.

In our 6 years of experience, we have witnessed the awakening of inner energies in traumatized communities. In places like Itaba, Ruhororo, Ruziba or Butezi, where massacres and various types of violence happened, we were amazed to see local people setting up local associations for development, strengthening their social capital and increasing trust, and the sense

of networking, within a few weeks after our sessions with them. With the help of the CMC religious organization from the Netherlands, we could undertake yet another step with those organizations by training them in the Project Cycle Management. We are now testing the process by giving each association 4000 Euros to see how they would set up a small development project from conception through management to evaluation, while continuing within the Ubuntu value system. The aim is to assist them to become self-reliant again.

Results of an internal evaluation

From April to July 2006, an internal evaluation was carried out in the 36 communities where Centre Ubuntu has been active. Those communities are located in nine of the 15 Burundian provinces. We produced a questionnaire covering the promotion of peace and reconciliation based on the Ubuntu value system and the strengthening of the social capital. We gathered 420 respondents' copies (275 men and 145 women). The evaluation process was comprised of half of respondents who participated in Centre Ubuntu community activities and the other half of respondents who did not participate in these activities. The questionnaire covered problematic behaviours that had begun since war started, the problems dealt with during the community approach, the knowledge people had of the project activities (direct or hearsay), any improvement noticed following the community mobilization, and the prevailing problematic behaviour at the moment of the inquiry. Results showed that the methodologies used brought about positive change in 81% of cases. Concerning the bad behaviour dealt with, 78% confirmed there was an improvement. Respondents confirmed that concerning behavioural problems that

existed since war broke out (problems we dealt with during our community approach), there had been positive changes that occurred after our interventions.

Lessons learnt

The main lesson Centre Ubuntu has drawn from this experience has been a new and heightened awareness of the level of the war trauma in Burundi and in the African Great Lakes region. Within a repetitive rhythm, people experienced deep psychosocial wounds during the past 48 years, with killings and massacres in 1959, 1961, 1965, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1988, 1991 and 1993 up to 2007. For political reasons, people were not allowed to mourn those who had been abducted or killed. The massacres were referred to in a symbolic language that did not allow people to directly name what had happened. The perspective of setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission today brings mixed feelings of both fear and hope. Unless the trauma environment is handled properly, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will not succeed.

Reference

- Sliep, Y. (2004). Narrative Theatre for Social Action: A skill for psychosocial workers. *Intervention*, 2, 193-209.

¹ Centre Ubuntu is part of the regional network *Project Colombe* that created in January 2005 with the objective to increase capacity building in counselling. The network connects four organizations 'Love in Action' from Bukavu (Democratic Republic of Congo), SOS-JED from Fizi (DRC), TAMEPRA (Tanzanian Mental Health and Psychological Relief Agency) from Western Tanzania and Centre Ubuntu from Burundi.

² The activities of Centre Ubuntu benefit from funds provided by various partners including the Dominican Community from Bujumbura, FONCABA from Belgium, CORDAID from the Netherlands, IDRC from Canada, MISEREOR from Germany, and TROCAIRE from Ireland. War Trauma Foundation (WTF) from The Netherlands funded the theoretical aspects and

some of the practical training of staff. The training activities were done in the context of the Projet Colombe network with our partners from the DRC and Tanzania.

Emmanuel Ntakarutimana.
email: agateka2004@yahoo.fr