

# Trauma informed restorative justice through community based sociotherapy in Rwanda

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*Restorative justice, when trauma informed, has a great potential to effectively contribute to sustainable peace in post conflict settings. An evidence based example of a programme illustrating such effect is community based sociotherapy in Rwanda. This article documents what this programme has achieved in terms of restorative justice, following the closure of Gacaca, the community based justice system that was in operation in Rwanda nationwide from 2005 to 2012. In total, 155 respondents to 23 focus group discussions and 39 individual interviewees, including former participants of sociotherapy, leaders on sector and district level and government representatives at national level, participated in outcome studies that inform this article. The majority of respondents indicated that sociotherapy generates a process of genuine healing and reconciliation, resulting in peacebuilding at family and community level, as well as wider social change. The challenge is how to scale-up sociotherapy interventions without losing trauma informed characteristics.*

**Keywords:** community based sociotherapy, peacebuilding, restorative justice, Rwanda, social change, trauma informed

## Introduction

Rebuilding a society that has experienced extreme violence on a massive scale, while providing conditions for a peaceful future, is a daunting task. It requires a multitude of initiatives implemented at different levels of society, which each in their own way address the legacy of human rights abuses

### Key implications for practice

- Trauma informed approaches need to be integrated into policies and practices advancing transitional justice processes for sustainable peace
- A trauma informed approach requires a safe environment, choice, a culture of social learning and collaboration and rebuilding damaged capacities
- Community based sociotherapy can be a form of restorative justice that is trauma informed and aimed at sustainable peace in post conflict contexts

during a society's transition away from conflict or genocide. Academics, policy makers and practitioners have coined the term 'transitional justice' as an umbrella term to cover these initiatives. Transitional justice, broadly construed, involves multiple sub-goals that are all interrelated. They include salvaging the truth from suppression or distortion, putting past wrongs right, holding perpetrators accountable, acknowledging victims' sufferings, restoring social relations and healing of individuals. To achieve these goals, transitional justice mechanisms and processes often combine elements of retributive, restorative and distributive justice. Retributive or criminal justice requires the determination of blame (guilt) and imposition of pain (punishment). Restorative or

relational justice considers crime as violation of people and relationships, and involves survivors, offenders and community members in an effort to put things right. Distributive or structural justice is about achieving a fair and moral distribution of the goods, services and opportunities across a society (Coradetti, Eisikovits, & Rotondi, 2015; Llewellyn & Philpott, 2014; Randall & Haskall, 2013). This article addresses the contribution of community based sociotherapy to transitional justice, in particular restorative justice, in Rwanda after the closure of Gacaca, the community based justice system. It highlights the trauma informed characteristics of a sociotherapy approach and argues that other programmes aimed at peacebuilding in the country will be enriched in terms of their effectiveness by becoming more trauma informed.

Community based sociotherapy was initiated in Rwanda in 2005 (Richters, Dekker, & Scholte, 2008). It uses a context driven group dynamic approach. From the start, its objectives have been to foster feelings of dignity, safety and trust following the 1994 genocide and its aftermath, reduction of mental and social distress, and overcoming disturbed socio-economic development. In due course, more emphasis was put on reconciliation between adversaries in the past political conflict and its aftermath (Richters, Rutayisire, Sewimfura, & Ngendahayo, 2010). The overall aim of sociotherapy developed into contributing to psychosocial recovery from a history of political violence and facilitating social change for the promotion of sustainable peace across the generations.<sup>1</sup> To reach its objectives, community members are trained to work as sociotherapists. They invite 10 to 15 fellow community members to participate in a journey of 15 sessions: once a week, for a three hour meeting in a location where group participants feel relatively safe and where an intimate sphere can be established. Sociotherapists guide a sociotherapy group through the six sociotherapy phases of,

respectively: safety, trust, care, respect, new life orientations and memory. It is usually local leaders who identify community members fulfilling the criteria to be met by a sociotherapist, while the final selection is done in cooperation with sociotherapy programme staff. Group participants are recruited by sociotherapists in consultation with local leaders. The programme has been mainly targeting people affected by genocide and its aftermath, namely survivors, perpetrators and their family members, but also other members of the community such as youth, single mothers, people living with HIV and AIDS, returnees, former Gacaca judges, community mediators and local leaders. The programme extended from communities to refugee camps and to one prison in Rwanda. In 2007–2008, the programme was evaluated by a team of independent researchers, for instance, in terms of its effect on mental health (Scholte, Verduin, Kamperman, Rutayisire, Zwinderman, & Stronks, 2011). Subsequently, researchers involved in the programme conducted mixed method evaluation research (see [www.sociotherapy.org/publications](http://www.sociotherapy.org/publications)), using outcome areas such as psychosocial wellbeing, interpersonal reconciliation, civic participation, social cohesion, socio-economic development, improved family dynamics and gender equality.

In this article, the trauma informed and restorative justice characteristics of the sociotherapy approach are underlined. *'Becoming more trauma informed entails becoming more astutely aware of the ways in which people who are traumatised have their life trajectories shaped by the experience and its effects, and developing policies and practices which reflect this understanding'* (Randall & Haskell, 2013, p. 501). A trauma informed approach recognises that effective interventions with people require a safe environment, choice, a culture of social learning and collaboration, rebuilding damaged capacities while building on strengths of people and control

over one's decisions in life. Trauma informed is not equivalent to a specific form of trauma therapy. It does not require disclosure about the traumatic events experienced. In case a trauma response is triggered, the social environment is expected to provide safety through containment (Pool & Greaves, 2012; Randall & Haskell, 2013). Re-traumatisation and doing harm should by all means be avoided. While all this is most strongly taking hold in the mental health and social service contexts, Randall & Haskell (2013) rhetorically ask why it would not also apply to interventions which are legal, in particular, restorative justice interventions.

### **Restorative justice**

In restorative justice, relationships between people are at the centre in a way that each party has their rights to dignity, equality, concern and respect satisfied (Randall & Haskell, 2013). These values, which inform restorative justice, are highly consonant with the principles of a trauma informed approach. Both values and principles are also part and parcel of the sociotherapy approach. Since restorative justice's main focus is the repair of social relations destroyed by the crimes committed, the authors consider restorative justice as a form of peacebuilding, either in its own right or as complementary to retributive and distributive justice. As the findings of the research presented in this article will illustrate, within the context of sociotherapy, restoring social relations and individual psychological healing are interdependent.

The *Community Based Sociotherapy Programme* (CBSP) in Rwanda implemented a new phase of three years duration (2014–2016) in the aftermath of Gacaca, the community justice courts implemented by the Rwandan government, as one of its major transitional justice mechanisms. The general goals assigned to Gacaca courts were: disclosing the whole truth about the 1994 genocide

events, accelerating genocide trials, eradicating the culture of impunity, reconciliation and strengthening unity among Rwandans and proving that Rwanda is capable of solving its own problems (Longman, 2017). Its judges were so-called lay judges, elected by community members based on candidates' integrity, including not being accused of genocide related crimes. After a three year pilot phase, the courts were in full operation nationwide from 2005 to 2012. During these years, more than 11,000 courts across the country dealt with nearly two million cases of alleged participation in the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994. Evaluations of the Gacaca courts' achievements, in the light of their objectives, have had widely diverging conclusions. Some authors portray Gacaca as an innovative response to genocidal crimes by providing justice and laying a foundation for healing and reconciliation (Clark, 2010; Rimé, Kanyangara, Yzebert, & Paez, 2011), while others argue that Gacaca courts, instead of contributing to healing and reconciliation, contributed to the opposite (Brounéus, 2010; Burnet, 2008; Thomson, 2011), or that the justice accomplished by the courts was a justice compromised (Human Rights Watch, 2011). All in all, Gacaca left a mixed legacy (Ingelaere, 2016) as the findings of our research will also demonstrate.

The main objective of the sociotherapy post Gacaca phase was to contribute to the consolidation of what had been achieved by the courts, the follow-up of what had remained unaccomplished by Gacaca, and the processing of the unforeseen consequences of Gacaca, such as re-traumatisation; or the 'leftovers' of Gacaca. As such, sociotherapy focused specifically on the individual psychological, as well as relational, aspects of micro-level peacebuilding (cf. Lambourne & Gitau, 2013). During its past three years, sociotherapy reached eight of the 30 districts in Rwanda, two in each of Rwanda's four provinces.<sup>2</sup> A total of

518 trained sociotherapists facilitated 1841 sociotherapy groups that were attended by 21,391 people, who participated in at least 11 of 15 sessions. These figures exclude numbers reached in the refugee camps in Rwanda.

## **Methodology**

The 2014–2016 CBSP in post Gacaca Rwanda has conducted a number of outcome studies. For the purpose of this article, to outline the contribution of sociotherapy to peacebuilding as different from and complementary to Gacaca's contribution, a selection of these studies was made for presentation herein. The studies selected included a focus on community members' perceptions of the achievements of the Gacaca courts, on their evaluation of sociotherapy's contribution to resolving the leftovers of Gacaca, with a specific focus on psychosocial wellbeing and on the assessments by leaders at different government levels of sociotherapy and its impact. This article explicitly builds on the qualitative data that were gathered in 2015 and 2016. For the selected studies, a total of 155 respondents participated in 23 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 39 individual interviews (IDIs) across the areas in which CBSP was implemented. Community members (i.e. genocide survivors, genocide perpetrators and former Gacaca judges) who had taken part in sociotherapy sessions (sociotherapy participants), programme trained sociotherapists, as well as local leaders and policy makers at national level were purposively selected as respondents. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in Kinyarwanda and transcribed in English by the team of four participatory action researchers (co-authors of this article). The research material was systematically coded and regrouped under emerging themes by two members of the team and cross checked by a third team member. The main themes included: community perceptions on Gacaca courts (knowing/sharing the

truth, repentance, forgiveness and reparation of damages caused), the left overs of Gacaca such as trauma related feelings (anger, mistrust, fear, sadness, etc), disrupted social relationships (mistrust, discrimination, conflicts), lack of inner or true reconciliation and the absence of reparation. The contribution of sociotherapy in resolving the leftovers (confession and reparation of damages caused, reduced trauma and psychosomatic symptoms, forgiveness, reduced conflicts and socialisation) as well as the rationale to scale up the programme as highlighted by the respondents are all reported in the following section.

## **Findings**

Our findings on respondents' evaluations of Gacaca, in particular of what it realised in terms of healing and reconciliation, are presented first. These evaluations serve as a reference point for respondents' perceptions of the contribution of sociotherapy to resolving the leftovers of Gacaca, which will be presented next. Thirdly, respondents' views of the why and how of a scaling-up of sociotherapy are presented.

### **Achievements and leftovers of Gacaca courts**

The majority of respondents recognised the need to set up Gacaca courts as a locally based solution to genocide related crimes. The latter, according to respondents, could well be dealt with by the normal judicial system, but after the genocide that system did not have sufficient capacity to do so. A number of positive achievements of Gacaca were mentioned. Sharing information on what happened in the 1994 genocide was seen as a foundation for providing justice. Through truth telling, some perpetrators used the occasion to confess and, to benefit from a milder sentence, accepted paying for damages they had caused. On the side of survivors, some got to know how and where their family members were killed,

















