

HEALING WOUNDS

APPROACHES TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION & RECONCILIATION

Recently the international peacebuilding community has relied on a practise known as “conflict resolution” to assist countries and groups recovering from the internal tensions and personal hostilities caused by war.

This unit provides an overview of these methods. It begins with an interview with Sasa, CARE Bosnia and is followed by a comparison of western and African reconciliation methods, written by Luis, IECA Church, Angola.

1. CONFLICT RESOLUTION WORK WITH YOUTH IN BOSNIA

We are doing conflict resolution (CR) training because of the nature of the war that took place here in the early 1990s. It was an ethnic war and so now we are doing CR training to help groups overcome prejudice and national hate against each other.

The conflict resolution training is a first step in working with these different groups. It is a foundation to promote good relations especially if you want to do networking or joint projects.

In this training we want to help them realize that what has happened has happened, that it is over and that they need to try to forget it and to focus on their future. We want them to see that they will have a better future if they work together on the restoration of the country. We also want them to understand the influences from their environment (their parents or the community) and to think for themselves in a positive way.



The training is also to give them skills for resolving conflict. They learn techniques on how to deal with conflict in a straightforward way of how to discuss it and to try to resolve it. In doing this, sometimes we refer to the ethnic conflict but it also refers to relationships amongst people or conflict within a youth organization.

Q. How is the training organized?

A. Usually there are about 15 people. It is an interactive workshop where youth talk about their problems, put that on the table. We often have a workshop with different ethnic groups so the facilitators ask some very tricky questions about ethnicity. This gets the group participating as they start to discuss these complex situations and begin to understand what is going on with other nationalities.

Q. Does it work best at the community or personal level?

A. In our case, it is working at both levels. Partly this is because of the nature of our conflict, an ethnic conflict. We find that youth who have received this training can work more effectively with other people.

For example, a big issue at this moment is the question of the returnees – of people returning to their hometowns and villages. Youth who have had conflict resolution training are more open to supporting the return of ethnic minorities into the community.

Of course, this is a complex issue. It is a bit difficult at the level of authorities or politicians and this can influence people's views. We find that youth who have had CR training will be more open and have their own view on this, a different view from that of some of the politicians. And some of these youth are taking an active role in trying to resolve these questions in a positive way.

Q. Do youth enjoy the training?

A. Yes and it has grown so that now we are working with mixed ethnic groups. I remember two years ago the training team was working with a mixed ethnic group. It was a three-day training.

The first day was very difficult because they were discussing what happened during the war. Every ethnic group had to have a different story, a different view on the past and they felt very defensive. Each group wanted people to understand how hard it had been for them. So it was tense. But by the third day they were comparing their experiences during the war in a different way, one of learning rather than competing.

Q. What happened to change that dynamic?

A. You have to realize that it is not common to have discussions amongst youth from different nationalities. So at the beginning they felt very depressed. But as they realized that other nationalities had also suffered, it made them feel less badly about their situation and also less defensive. This helped them to think that they should look into the future and let the past go away.

2. APPROACHES IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

There are two main approaches in conflict resolution work. The most common form was first developed in the North and so reflects that culture's understanding of human interactions. Other conflict resolution methods, notably those in Africa, are based on a more communal way of being.

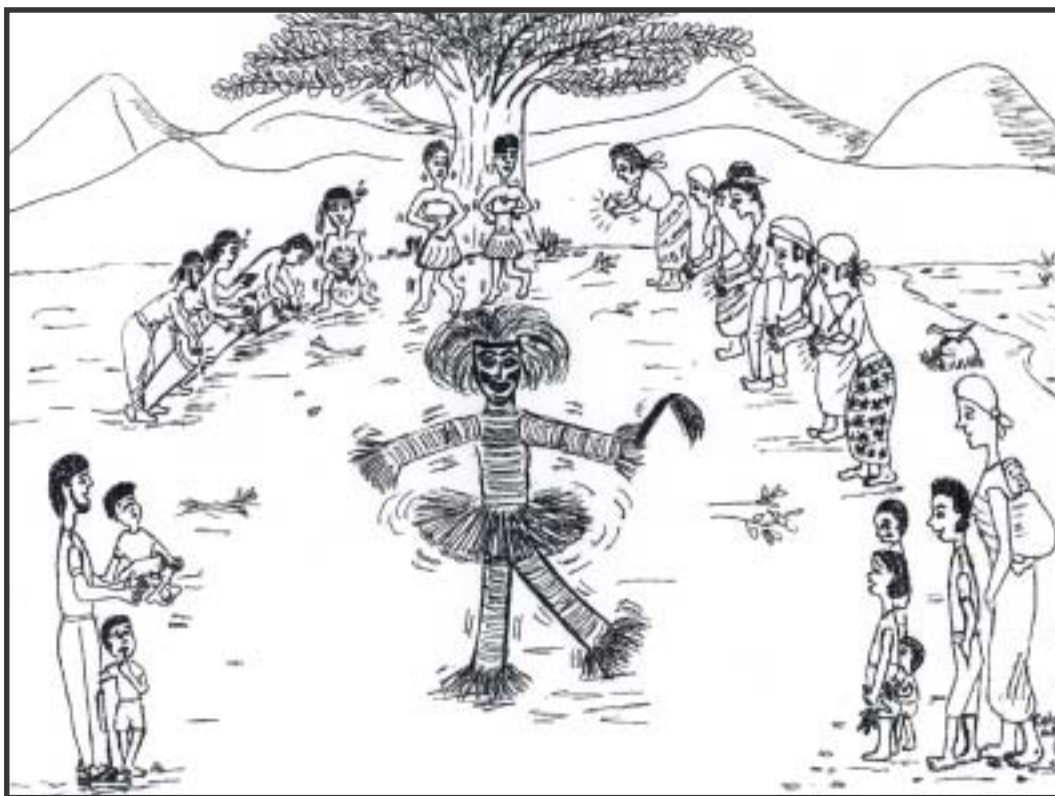
Luís Samacumbi, Program Director for IECA Church in Angola, has studied both methods. In the following pages he outlines strengths of each approach. Luis's descriptions on African traditions are largely based on Angolan culture.

2. 1 AFRICAN TRADITIONS

Africa's conflict resolution methods are based on values associated with communal living, a commitment to solidarity and the importance of peaceful conduct and relationships. It calls for consensus building, negotiation and reconciliation.

Angolan society provides a good example of these traditions. In Angolan villages there are rules that govern behaviour and help ease people's relationships with each other. Respect and obedience to the elders is central to this. This is seen as an important way to lessen people's tendency to become rebels. Conflicts are understood as communal problems so the resolution must also be collective.





ANGOLAN CULTURE AND RITUALS OF PEACEMAKING

Each culture has its own reconciliation rituals that promote and perpetuate traditions from generation to generation. Some examples of Angolan rituals are:

The Bill – This is the payment given to compensate Sobas (traditional leaders) for their assistance in solving the problem. Both disputants pay this bill. It can be a traditional drink or a certain amount of money and is given at the end of the meeting.

The Blood — As soon as the village court committee has finished its work, the perpetrator is expected to compensate his victim according to the penalty applied by the judges. The perpetrator is also asked to sacrifice an animal. This animal is killed in the solving problem place and each participant takes a portion of it home. Traditionally, the blood from the animal signifies salvation, forgiveness, fault paid and acceptance to be re-inserted again into the village.

Village Party — A celebration is always organised at the end of any village judgement ceremony. The elders invite all villagers to assemble at a church path or football field to enjoy the act of reconciliation of the sons of the village through the music of drums and other cultural instruments as well as drinking and eating.

The Hot Coal – In this traditional ritual a hot coal is put into a big pot filled with cold water. Both disputants and their families drink a glass of this drink that has a high meaning of reconciliation.

Problems are sorted out in a circular traditional house called 'onjango' where elders meet to discuss issues related to the community. It is seen as a place of peace for the village and its importance is reflected in the fact that it is usually located in the centre of the village. Traditional leaders encourage parties involved in a conflict to come to these centres to discuss their concerns. Both traditional leaders (Sobas) and elders would normally participate in these discussions. Traditionally, women and young people are not allowed to speak in the onjanjo. They can only give their opinions from the outside.

Wherever there is conflict, all parties are involved so that offenders can be restored back into the community. Community interests are the first priority in the resolution of conflicts. The emphasis is on reconciling rather than passing judgement on the guilty.

The disputants are expected to seek a solution that suits both sides. Normally they begin by identifying the root causes of the conflict. These discussions are guided by the wisdom and advice of the Sobas and elders. The solution is identified through open dialogue. It requires the voluntary agreement by both parties, in keeping with community values.

Once a solution is reached, the rest of the village is invited to participate in the final resolution statement. This is seen as a good way of teaching people so they avoid making the same mistake. It is taken as a lesson learned.

In the reconciliation process, disputants are working to restore broken relations and to heal wounds. They are trying to forgive each other and to recognize the mistake that was committed. With support from the community, both parties atone for their wrongs and work to make one those things that were apart.

If disputants are reluctant to meet, the elders will intervene to try to bring the perpetrator and victim together. Traditional conflict resolution emphasizes the value of discussion and the need for people to recognise their faults and mistakes. The stature of the Sobas and elders in the community ensures that their participatory leadership creates an atmosphere where people can express their opinions and listen to those of others. This process is essential to reach an efficient conflict resolution.

2.2 Western Conflict Resolution Methods

Western conflict resolution methods focus on facilitation and analysis to promote a better understanding of conflict and how to respond to it. Writers such as Wilmot and Hacker (1998) and Chrislip and Larson (1994) distinguish between competitive and collaborative approaches in conflict resolution work.

A competitive approach uses aggressive, verbally assertive and uncooperative behaviour. It satisfies one party's interests at the expense of others. This approach can be useful in situations where decisions need to be made quickly and options are restricted. It is most appropriate where there is nothing to lose by pushing parties who do not want to cooperate with each other or where the future of their relationships doesn't matter.

A collaborative approach has an entirely different style. It emphasizes the benefit of active listening; issue identification and focussed discussions that aim to satisfy the interests and concerns of both sides.

2.2.2 Western Intervention Strategies

Conflict Analysis: Conflict analysis is a process to examine the different aspects of a conflict: the background history, the important factors contributing to the conflict, the roles of the stakeholders, power dynamics, responses of groups and the effect of war on the community.

Conflict mapping is one tool that can assist in this analysis. In this method the mediator or facilitator uses diagrams to represent the views of the parties involved in the conflict. The mediator must listen to both sides carefully to identify their needs, goals, concerns, facts, fears, interests and positions.

Negotiation: Negotiation is the process whereby disputants try to reach solutions through face-to-face discussion. While they may disagree on the reasons for the problem, both sides are committed to finding solutions.

In these discussions the focus is on the problem, not the individuals concerned. It is an exercise of problem solving where both sides are fully involved and participate in the decisions. The ideal is to achieve a joint decision that satisfies both sides. As

they negotiate this agreement, they may begin to recognize the commonalities, differences and needs.

There are several steps in this work. The first is to set some basic ground rules, to establish an atmosphere of open and frank, but respectful communication. It is important to clarify the perceptions and expectations of both sides. Both parties need to have a sense of power and of using this power to achieve a result that accommodates the needs of each side, at least to the extent that they feel those needs have been recognized. A successful resolution is one where both sides benefit and both sides compromise.

Mediation: Mediation involves the use of an impartial third party to assist in the negotiations between people in the constructive resolution process. An important role of the mediator is to encourage the disputants to explore a variety of alternatives and to foster an atmosphere of openness and respect. A good mediator is a skilled communicator who can structure a discussion in a collaborative and positive way, even in tense situations.

Mediation goes through a number of stages. It often begins with presentations from both sides. As it continues, the mediator strives to create a base of trust between the opposing groups. To do this it is important to go through a process of information gathering and problem definition by both parties. This allows the two sides to identify common issues and they may come to share some common objectives.

In mediation, the responsibility for the final agreement rests with the disputants. Both parties retain control of the resolution of their dispute. For mediation to be effective, all participants must agree to this process and the selection of the mediator.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO METHODS?

In comparing the western and African/Angolan methods of conflict resolution one main difference is quickly apparent. Where the western methods are based on technique and neutrality the African approach involves close ties of community accountability and cultural rituals.

Both methods rely on good communication but where the western approach uses an impartial outsider to channel the discussion, the African way is vested through the authority of traditional leaders. The nature of the conflict, its context and history and the experiences of the people living inside a war will determine which approach is more effective.

References

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