

Towards a culturally sensitive peacebuilding approach in Africa

A paper prepared and presented by Moses Monday John, Executive Director, ONAD S.Sudan in War Resisters International (WRI) General Assembly –Seminar, Cape Town, S.Africa June 2014.

Introduction

Africa is perceived differently by many people from all around the world. There are those who see Africa as a continent of hope where the people are hospitable, flexible and simple with plenty of natural resources most of it un-explored. On the other hand, there are those who see Africa as a continent of senseless conflicts, violence, poverty, ignorance and the likes. The truth is there are opportunities and challenges in Africa. One way to invest in Africa is to embark on peacebuilding to transform conflicts and negative relations to the potential for peace and prosperity.

The term peacebuilding was popularized after 1992, when Boutros Boutros Ghali, then United Nations Secretary General, presented the report: An agenda for peace. In his report Boutros defined **peacebuilding as a range of activities meant to identify, and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse into conflict (B.Ghali 1995)**, and distinguished it from peacemaking and peacekeeping.

However, it was not Boutros-Ghali who invented these terms but the peace researcher Johan Galtung 20 years earlier ((Galtung1976) who called them “approaches to peace”. Together, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding formulate a general theory of achieving or maintaining peace. As Mialletal (1999) have written:

“With reference to the conflict triangle, it can be suggested that peace-making aims to change the attitudes of the main protagonists, peace-keeping lowers the level of destructive behaviour, and peace-building tries to overcome the contradictions which lie at the root of the conflict.” (Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse 1999:22)

There are many approaches and techniques to peacebuilding such as peacebuilding through arts and music, dialogue and reconciliation, sports and nonviolence education. Each approach has its uniqueness, significance and challenges. Peacebuilding according to Lisa Schirch in her book, “Strategic Peacebuilding” says that:

“Peacebuilding seeks to prevent, reduce, transform, and help people recover from violence in all forms, even structural violence that has not yet led to massive civil unrest. Strategic peacebuilding recognizes the complexity of the tasks required to build peace. Peacebuilding is strategic when resources, actors, and approaches are coordinated to accomplish multiple goals and address multiple issues for the long term. Therefore, Peacebuilding requires multiple and well coordinated approaches to transform violence and conflict into more sustainable, peaceful relationships and structures.” (Schirch, 2008).

Why culture is important in peacebuilding?

In our experience; peacebuilding projects can be more effective when designed and adapted to the socio-cultural, economic and political context and needs of the local people. There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution to African problems. This is because every context in Africa is unique and finding “African solutions to African problems” requires thorough analysis and understanding of indigenous complex African culture, values, norms and traditions. Furthermore, even within a given African country there are diverse cultural differences to the extent that; what works in community “A” may not work in community “B”. For example; in some communities in South Sudan beating a wife may even be

considered an expression of love while in another community its violence. That's why the need to carry out regular researches and conduct exchanges for experience sharing and trainings is important in order to widen our understanding of local culture for building a culturally sensitive and coherent peacebuilding approach.

Peacebuilding is not new in Africa. History tells us that Africa is the cradle of humanity, an assertion that suggests the existence of rich and diverse indigenous resources and institutions of conflict resolution and peacebuilding dating back centuries.

What is new is the exportation and imposition of peacebuilding and development interventions based on the liberal peace project. Peacebuilding has nowadays entered into the agenda of international agencies, and in the form of "post-war peacebuilding", based on the concept of "liberal peace" made a standard concept of international wars and military interventions.

The idea of liberal peace, according to Mark Duffield (2008), combines and conflates liberal (as in contemporary economic and political tenets) with "peace" (the present policy prediction towards conflict resolution and societal reconstruction). This view reflects the notion that war-torn societies can and should be rebuilt through the utilization of a number of interrelated strategies for transformation. The emphasis is on conflict prevention, resolution, institution-building including so-called democratic elections, and strengthening civil society organizations. A review of existing literature (Ali and Mathews 2004; Reychler 2001, Rupesinghe 1998) on the subject of peacebuilding in Africa, however, reveals a limited analysis restricted to the post conflict phase of armed conflict, which has very limited short term prescriptions for a return to order and stability in a country that has experienced violent armed conflict (David, 1988).

Why peacebuilding matters??

Since the end of the cold war, Africa has suffered its share of violent wars and armed violent conflicts. In Africa, there are many ongoing inter-ethnic and political armed conflicts aimed at achieving political and economic power. Countries emerging from long civil wars often experience challenges in managing former combatants, militia groups and armed civilians. Hence, violent conflicts have become a major obstacle to peace and development particularly in fragile and post-conflict countries. While maintaining the rule of law, good governance and delivery of equitable basic social services are equally challenging. The results are continued wide spread violence ranging from physical to psychological, cultural to structural. However, violence is not restricted to one country, continent, one region or religion. It is universally used to achieve certain objectives; sometimes brutally as sheer naked aggression, or at other time subtly, covered in the grab of legislation and legitimacy as a tool to maintain law and order (2011). For women, this takes many forms including; rape, forced domestic labour, men beatings their wives, detention and denial of widows to inheritance and discrimination from economic benefits. Elopement of girls ("hijacking girls for marriage") is perceived a legitimate cultural practice in many Africa countries. Therefore, peacebuilding interventions are needed to build safe and secured environment where people can pursue happiness without fear.

So our thesis is: Peacebuilding is indeed needed. But not in form of import of abstract recipes coming with the liberal peace paradigm. As Africa faces challenges of importation and imposition of peacebuilding and development interventions, this weakness can be addressed by encouraging and building local capacities to conduct baseline assessments, researches or studies and make relevant recommendations to the both local and international peace actors as well as policy makers for improved engagement. Peacebuilding involves building democratic structures through participation of citizens and other stakeholders in democratization processes without which peace will be meaningless. It further means equitable sharing of resources. There are significant challenges in many African countries when it

comes to alignment and fair distribution of resources to expenditure priorities. Economic growth and revenues generated from oil and other natural resources are not being channelled to address poverty.

This creates a situation where peace dividends are hardly enjoyed by the impatient and impoverished civilians forcing them to question the meaning of peace? In our experience, many people think, peace means the absence of violence and the maintenance of law and order. However, the reality tells that it is not only the guns that kill. Lack of access to basic means of life, dignity and enjoyment of rights can be as destructive as weapons. Meaningful peacebuilding is not an end by itself rather a means to a safe and prosperous state where every person enjoys basic rights and life in dignity. Therefore, addressing structural violence (see Galtung 1996) aiming at creating fundamental state reform where equitable social and development services are provided to the population without discrimination is critical if we are to build Africa that's safe for all.

The role of peace stakeholders

There are enormous actors working on peacebuilding in Africa. In the heart of these organizations are social and peace movements affiliated to WRI, IFOR, COPA (Coalition for Peace in Africa) and other regional movements. The African Centre for Constructive Resolution of Dispute "ACCORD" is based in Durban with regional offices in other countries of the continent. Women Action Network for Peace (WANEP), Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) but to mention a few.

At the same time, newer research into peacebuilding strategies and effects teaches us that while civil society has an important role to play in peacebuilding, also the state actors (with their so much larger access to resources) cannot be neglected, and peacebuilding works best where the various actors manage to cooperate (see Paffenholz ed. 2010). Hence, the role of regional and sub-bodies; such as the African Union (AU), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) is important. Although sub-regional bodies were originally established to promote socioeconomic welfare of the region, they ended up playing greater roles in peacemaking as an entry point to economic development.

There is also, especially from the side of international donors and agencies, an over-emphasis on certain activities and a neglect of others though these others may have much wider impact. For example, to look at another region, in the Balkans after the wars of the 1990s, everyone talked about and paid for "reconciliation" while lack of adequate education and professional perspectives caused a whole generation of youth to remain without any meaningful perspective what to do with their lives.

Conclusion

The theme group will begin with interactive session on; what do we mean by peacebuilding as an introduction to the meaning of peacebuilding in general and on the African continent in particular; setting the framework –? What experiences are there?

On day 2, we will look concretely at South Sudan as an example, and will discuss various approaches and issues, looking at a wide range of actors as well: civil society groups working at changing the attitudes of people, the role (or non-role) of civil society in peace negotiations, discussing approaches preferred by the international community like security-sector reform and state-building, looking at the problem of security for civilians including the role of UNMISS and unarmed civilian peacekeeping provided by the INGO Nonviolent Peaceforce, questions of economics, gender, etc.

Day 3, we will look with the help of resource persons from other countries at challenges and issues of peacebuilding in other countries in Africa and beyond.

On the concluding day, 4, we will seek to draw lessons from the case studies, and discuss the issue of peacebuilding, nonviolence and the contributions of international solidarity and support . The key question will be how can we better work together?

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