Conflict, reconstruction, and reconciliation: reciprocal lessons for NGOs in Southern Africa and Central America

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The Johannesburg Symposium illustrated the value of sharing experiences across continental divides on the common thematic and programmatic challenges facing NGOs involved in post-conflict work. This brief reflection identifies some of the areas in which there is potential for NGOs in both regions to learn from each other’s experiences.

As Jenny Pearce has observed, peace is becoming an industry. The multilateral agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are increasingly seen as having a blueprint for reconstruction. Other organisations, particularly USAID and the European Union, can have substantial influence on both the processes and programmes involved in reconstruction. There is a growing body of literature about reconstruction and reconciliation in post-conflict contexts.

In both Central America and Southern Africa, the way in which NGOs and grassroots organisations respond to armed conflict and the post-conflict context differs significantly from that of the response of donors, governments, and UN organisations. This engagement leads to a unique vision and understanding of the situation. It is crucial that NGOs and grassroots organisations should have a voice in the post-conflict stages of reconstruction and reconciliation. It is vital that the whole range of NGOs which worked with civilian structures in situations of armed conflict, as well as the popular and community organisations themselves, begin to create a space within which to exchange experiences and learn from one another about how to deal with the different international actors who appear on the stage once the formal hostilities are over. Only then can NGOs be equipped to apply much-needed critical thinking to reconstruction and reconciliation work.

This reflection aims to stimulate discussion on possible exchanges between NGOs and others in Southern Africa and Central America who are currently working in post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. There are several areas in which there is considerable overlap of interest, concern, and experience.

Reconstruction plans

While each armed conflict is quite distinct from all the others, certain packages for reconstruction and reconciliation, particularly those designed by the multilateral agencies such as UNDP, tend to be applied irrespective of the context. For example, a reconstruction package similar to the one that UNDP and USAID promoted in El Salvador in 1992 is now being proposed for Angola (despite the fact that it was heavily criticised for the problems which arose in the implementation phase).

In both El Salvador and Nicaragua, there is already a wealth of experience of such funding programmes for reconstruction. For instance, in El Salvador donors promised US$800,000 for a reconstruction plan which was designed to...
promote integrated development in areas affected by the war; meet the immediate needs of civilians and ex-combatants, both FMLN and government forces; and repair damaged infrastructure. Although they had prepared an alternative plan, the FMLN agreed not to present it and to let the government put forward its reconstruction plan as the concerted plan. This plan did not, however, reflect the needs or experience of the people living in the conflict zones, nor of the NGOs that had worked with them. Further, to the post of Director of the National Secretariat for Reconstruction the government appointed a person who had previously headed a government agency that was deeply involved in the counter-insurgency effort in the mid-1980s.

The aid was supposed to be administered through the municipalities. The mayors were to hold open meetings to gather opinions on how the reconstruction funds were to be used, although they had the power to make the final decision. This was particularly problematic in the former conflict zones where the people's own self-governing structures were not recognised by the government. Mayors who had been elected by displaced populations while they were living outside the war zones then moved back to the towns whence they had fled, and in their capacity as local government authorities began to disburse reconstruction funds. Municipal structures had become weak and polarised as a result of the long civil war. In the few areas where local mayors agreed to invite NGOs and others to discuss projects and coordinate work, the mayors were reprimanded by their parties and denied access to funds. Most importantly, there were no accountability mechanisms. The mayors were not accountable to the populations, and the National Secretariat was not accountable to the donors for the use to which the reconstruction funds were put.

Now UNDP wants to implement a similar structure in Angola, with a national reconstruction body and implementation through the municipalities. Exchange between NGOs in El Salvador and Angola could be particularly useful, and could draw on published critiques of peace and reconstruction in El Salvador. In particular, some of the people who played leading roles in the Salvadoran NGO movement during the war and the transition period were deeply involved in the discussions concerning an alternative reconstruction plan, and have also experienced the difficulty of getting access to reconstruction funds through the national plan. Some Salvadoran NGOs have also analysed the problems posed when an economic structural adjustment programme is implemented at the same time as a national reconstruction programme. In effect, in El Salvador (and perhaps in Guatemala) the government intends to use the reconstruction funds to soften the impact of structural adjustment.

Access to — and redistribution of — land has also proved a thorny aspect of reconstruction and reconciliation in Central America, as it is likely to be in southern Africa. In El Salvador, access to fairly apportioned plots of land was crucial to the chances of a sustained peace; and, despite enormous difficulty, four years after the war ended, all ex-combatants had received some land. For many, however, this is just the beginning of the problem, and land disputes continue. There are many lessons to be learned from the experience, including the huge financial support needed by the FMLN in order to develop their technical and operational capacity to carry out their part of the land agreement.

Post-conflict tensions for NGOs

After a time of armed conflict, NGOs often have a harder time responding to needs, articulating new ways of working, and coping with the peace than they had when working together in adversity. Divisions and differences tend to increase — which is upsetting to the NGOs themselves, and also weakens their ability to respond quickly to transition. It may be useful to compare experiences in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala with those of the post-conflict NGO world in Southern Africa.

Reconciliation

In Southern Africa, a considerable amount of work has been done to promote community-
level reconciliation and recovery from violence. Neither response has been comprehensively developed in Central America, apart from Nicaragua, where the focus has been on the ex-combatants. In El Salvador, little has yet been done. Four Christian Base Communities around the capital city have just published their own history of the deaths and violence they suffered during the war. A Committee to Find the Children has formed, to seek children who were kidnapped by the armed forces during military raids in the rural areas. The FMLN formed its own NGO to work with its own ex-combatants, and this did have a mental-health programme. However, it remained largely unused, because the former fighters did not want to be tainted with the tag of ‘mental illness’. In Guatemala, there is a great need for local-level reconciliation, especially given the violence carried out by the civil patrols on their own communities.

What is clear from Central America is that the Peace Accords do not offer solutions to the deeply rooted societal conflict which was the cause of the wars. People have returned to their communities after the armed conflict only to find that many aspects of the reconstruction plan have intensified existing tensions. For instance, structural adjustment policies in El Salvador have worsened the economic situation of the rural poor and further deprived them of scarce government-funded services. Since neither the Peace Accords nor the reconstruction plan really promoted any kind of local reconciliation, NGOs need to address it. However, in Central America, there has been far more emphasis on reconstruction than on reconciliation.

The other important work that is going on in Southern Africa at the grassroots level is addressing the trauma experienced by those who lived through the years of violence and repression. The need to address this is hard to articulate in many rural communities; either it is ignored in favour of economic programmes, or it is assumed that the time for it has passed. Unfortunately, the fact that these problems have not been addressed does not mean they disappear with time. Rather, they persist, as people end up expressing their feelings through other kinds of negative behaviour.

Demobilisation and re-integration of ex-combatants

Demobilisation is proving problematic in the cases of Mozambique, Angola, and Namibia, and has also been difficult in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Again, the type of ‘re-integration’ package that is being offered to the African countries — involving training for ex-combatants in micro-enterprise management — has already proved unsuccessful in El Salvador and Nicaragua in terms of providing any real economic security. This is a critical area for exchange and mutual learning, particularly since — if re-integration programmes fail — the potential for social conflict is so enormous. In Nicaragua, for example, where the Peace Accords are several years old, ex-combatants from both sides have frequently taken up arms, sometimes together, sometimes in separate bands, in order to make the point that they are not happy with the results of the Accords, the re-integration package, or the way in which the political process is being managed. In El Salvador, the ex-combatants received help in a land-distribution programme that was far more successful than that of Nicaragua, but combatants on both sides complain that the economic re-integration package has not helped them significantly. The increase in armed...
crime in both El Salvador and Nicaragua after the end of the wars suggests that ex-combatants are still armed and by no means re-integrated into society. In Guatemala, the issue of demobilisation remains to be defined.

NGOs in Southern Africa and Central America would have a great deal to contribute to discussion on these matters. Two major issues are the failure of the economic reintegration programmes which depend on turning ex-combatants into small entrepreneurs, and the problems encountered in the course of implementing the expensive training programmes funded in the Salvadoran re-integration programme. The Salvadorans now realise the importance of asking questions, such as who should do the training, who selects the trainers, who defines the content, and what is the methodology? What happened in practice was that USAID and other donors would approve or even hire NGOs to do the training, although none of them had any prior experience of working in the conflict zones, or even much understanding of the issues over which the war was fought.

Other aspects of demobilisation which require careful consideration are the particular problems confronting women, the fate of child-soldiers, and support for psychological recovery. In El Salvador, the high proportion of women combatants within the FMLN, especially among the mid-level commanders, would provide useful leads on gender-specific issues to be addressed in economic re-integration processes. The work in Mozambique with former boy-soldiers appears to be unique, and could yield useful lessons for El Salvador, where the issue of child-soldiers was simply never addressed. Valuable experience has also been developed in Mozambique in the psychological aspects of re-integrating ex-combatants into their rural communities — work that might be useful in both El Salvador and Nicaragua.

The participation of civil society in the Peace Accords and beyond

In both Southern Africa and Central America, NGOs are directly affected by many aspects of the peace negotiations, especially questions of human rights and economic, social, and institutional reform — particularly reform of the judiciary and the security forces. Experience in Central America continues to show the importance of involving civil society in the peace negotiations, although this has never been given formal recognition. The National Debate in El Salvador and the Assembly of Civil Sectors in Guatemala are both examples of civil society’s attempts to participate in negotiations. Both provide insights into NGOs’ attempts to contribute to national debate about reconciliation. In each case, the sectors and institutions which were represented developed their own proposals for many of the problems that had been identified in the peace negotiations, and would be a rich source of information and inspiration. A further example is the attempt in El Salvador to create a civilian police force from ex-combatants from both sides, a process being supported by UNDP.

On the basis of my own experience in Central America, and what I observed and heard in South Africa, I have tried here to identify the themes and issues where contact would be most useful. If I were to select priority areas within which to foster exchange, they would be:

- Exchanges between NGO workers with experience of the Salvadoran reconstruction plan and Angolan NGOs who are concerned about the reconstruction plan proposed for Angola.
- Systematisation and exchange of experience on demobilisation, economic and social re-integration, and work with ex-combatants among groups in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Angola, and Mozambique.
- Local-level reconciliation and work on post-violence trauma.
- Contact between NGOs in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador and the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.
Notes