

# RECONCILIATION: REBUILDING TRUST AFTER THE TRAGEDY OF VIOLENT CONFLICT

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War is a human tragedy. A large-scale form of violent conflict, it takes an enormous toll on those involved. But the cessation of violence is not the end of the story. What happens in the months, years, and even decades after a conflict ends is what can either unravel the progress or truly lead to an enduring peace.

In last year's theme book, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) challenged students and teachers to rethink common perceptions about conflict as something inherently negative and instead view it as a neutral concept, something we can choose to manage without violence and even to shape in a positive direction. Conflict is an inevitable and essential part of our world. What is important to know, then, is that there are skills and tools that we can learn and use as individuals, communities, and countries to manage conflicts without violence and to transform them into positive outcomes. That is one reason it is such a tragedy when violence erupts from conflict.

When the violence ends, there are opportunities to pursue practical steps toward a peaceful future and to start a new chapter for affected communities and countries. However, this is not automatic. In fact, it can be challenging for peace to triumph over years or decades of actual and perceived injuries. That is why the process of **reconciliation** is an important element of peacebuilding.

## What is reconciliation?

USIP broadly defines reconciliation as “the long-term process by which the parties to a violent dispute build trust, learn to live cooperatively, and create a stable peace.”<sup>1</sup> It is the process through which divisions can be healed, divides bridged, and communities knitted back together to face a brighter future.

But what does it look like? Who are “the parties”? How do you build trust? What is the definition of a



Wall art in Bogota, Colombia, symbolizing hope.  
Courtesy of the United States Institute of Peace.

successful reconciliation? Complicating the attempt at a clearer understanding of the term, experts point out that the term “reconciliation” itself can be off-putting or misunderstood in different cultures. In some places, like Sri Lanka, the term “to reconcile” is seen to represent a distinctly Judeo-Christian value; in some areas of Latin America, reconciliation is synonymous with avoidance of important issues.<sup>2</sup> By studying examples throughout history that employ different approaches to reconciliation, teachers and students can discover how people work to triumph over tragedy and make peace possible in places ravaged by violent conflict.

## Why does reconciliation matter?

This question has two important interpretations: why does it matter as a **process** in post-conflict situations, and why does it matter as a **subject** that we intentionally study reconciliation efforts in history.

Speaking at a public event in Nashville, Tennessee, in October 2017, USIP President Nancy Lindborg commented that “rebuilding social fabric is as important as rebuilding infrastructure after conflict.”<sup>3</sup> Violent

<sup>1</sup> “Reconciliation,” U.S. Institute of Peace, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/glossary/reconciliation>.

<sup>2</sup> Fred Strasser, “Reconciliation as the Road to Durable Peace,” U.S. Institute of Peace, updated September 24, 2015, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/index.php/publications/2015/09/reconciliation-road-durable-peace>.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Lindborg, “Practical Peacebuilding for National Security,” Tennessee World Affairs Council Global Town Hall, October 2, 2017.

conflict destroys buildings, roads, and power grids. It often also fractures the bonds between neighbors, and can damage the relationship between a people and their government. Just as economic development and reconstruction plans are conceived to address physical damage that violent conflict causes in a community or country, well-planned reconciliation efforts are essential to help overcome less visible wounds, which can be just as, if not more, devastating.

National History Day (NHD) is built upon the importance of revisiting our past to help us learn, grow, and evolve. This is particularly true when thinking about the subject of historical efforts to reconcile opposing sides after violent conflict has ended. Whether a reconciliation process effectively addressed underlying tensions or causes of conflict might not be known for years. The Rwandan genocide in 1994 saw an estimated 800,000 people killed.<sup>4</sup> Twenty years later, a Rwandan professor commented that “the Rwandan people still carry the scars of war” and discussions of ethnicity are not common in public fora.<sup>5</sup> History also serves as a guide for modern-day actions. The professor’s comment was made during a USIP program that convened South Sudanese community leaders, whose country was and is still experiencing violent conflict, to learn from the Rwandans about how they have spent decades working to triumph over 100 days of violence.

## Reconciliation in History

There is no set formula for what a reconciliation process looks like—it is appropriately shaped by the dynamics of each conflict. That said, there are general categories into which reconciliation approaches fall. By examining 277 projects from over 40 conflict zones, USIP was able to identify ten different strategies behind the interventions including conflict mediation, trauma healing, exposure to the other, documenting history, and institutional activities.<sup>6</sup> The following examples are snapshots. They are not meant to capture the whole story of the reconciliation process nor do they go in-depth on the “success” of an approach—that is what your NHD project is about! Think about what it would mean to

be triumphant for the individuals, communities, and countries that lived through these tragedies.

## Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

Created, supported, or funded by the government of the country in which the conflict took place, temporary truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) are typically established to provide an official forum for victims and perpetrators alike to share their stories, and to provide recommendations.<sup>7</sup> South Africa established a TRC after a mostly peaceful transition from the Apartheid system, which legally enforced segregation from 1948 to 1990. Present in the minds of leaders of the African National Congress was that they would “continue to share South Africa” with those behind Apartheid.<sup>8</sup> After receiving testimony from approximately 21,000 victims of either state or liberation movement violence, the final recommendations covered a broad range, from reparations to prosecution to political system reforms.<sup>9</sup> Aspects of the South Africa TRC have been replicated in or have influenced processes from Northern Ireland to the Balkans to Sri Lanka.<sup>10</sup>

TRCs give a voice to victims who have suffered as a result of decisions made well beyond their control. It took the Sierra Leone TRC more than 5,000 pages to capture the scope of their findings and recommendations.<sup>11</sup> However, they felt an important part of the narrative warranted special attention: the most powerless victims, the children. The commission produced a special document, a “child-friendly version” of the overall report that provided an insight into what the 7,000 child soldiers and thousands of others targeted for violence went through during the war.<sup>12</sup> This version of the report concluded with action items that children could pursue to make the recommendations of the TRC a reality, saying that when they are “active partners in the process [it] can help break the cycle of violence.”<sup>13</sup>

## Leveraging the Authority of Religious Leaders

Another approach to reconciliation focuses on “leader dialogue,” bringing together influential members of the community from all sides of the conflict. The premise is

<sup>4</sup> “Rwanda: How the genocide happened,” BBC News, updated May 17, 2011, accessed December 14, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13431486>.

<sup>5</sup> Nicoletta Barbera and Danielle Robertson, “South Sudanese, Rwandans Share Stories of Resilience in Search of Hope,” U.S. Institute of Peace, updated June 11, 2014, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2014/06/south-sudanese-rwandans-share-stories-resilience-search-hope>.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly McCone, *Reconciliation in Practice* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2015) 8-30.

<sup>7</sup> “Truth Commission Digital Collection,” U.S. Institute of Peace, updated March 16, 2011, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2011/03/truth-commission-digital-collection>.

<sup>8</sup> USIP Staff, “Considering the Lessons of Mandela’s Legacy and South Africa’s Reconciliation,” U.S. Institute of Peace, updated January 16, 2014, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2014/01/considering-lessons-mandelas-legacy-and-south-africas-reconciliation>.

<sup>9</sup> “Truth Commission: South Africa,” U.S. Institute of Peace, updated December 1, 1995, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/1995/12/truth-commission-south-africa>.

<sup>10</sup> “Considering the Lessons of Mandela’s Legacy and South Africa’s Reconciliation,” U.S. Institute of Peace.

<sup>11</sup> “Truth Commission: Sierra Leone,” U.S. Institute of Peace, updated November 1, 2002, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2002/11/truth-commission-sierra-leone>.

<sup>12</sup> “Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report: For the Children of Sierra Leone,” Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2004, 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, “Methodology.”

that if the leaders can be successful in finding common ground, that will create the space for further dialogue and encourage others to participate,<sup>14</sup> whether in a community-based approach or supporting formal peace talks. Take, for example, the work of Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye from Nigeria, a country that is nearly half Christian and half Muslim.<sup>15</sup> When religious-based violence broke out in 1992, the men fought on opposing sides, but were changed by the experience and grew determined not to let the violence that had killed thousands of Nigerians happen again. Working together, they helped ease tensions between the religious groups and they established the Interfaith Mediation Center. Not only has the center made local peace processes possible in Nigeria, it has also trained people from around the world, including Kenya, Iraq, and Sri Lanka.<sup>16</sup>



Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye at the Interfaith Mediation Center in 2016.

Courtesy of the United States Institute of Peace.

Religious leaders also can bring their influence to formal peace talks. During 1996 talks in Mindanao, in the Philippines, high-ranking religious leaders were brought into the formal discussions between the government and rebels specifically to leverage their authority and push both sides toward an agreement. While the peace agreement was not signed for years, the Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders formed the Bishops-Ulama Conference, which maintained

pressure on political leaders and served as a model for the people on how different religions could work together for peace.<sup>17</sup>

### Incorporating History into Modern Peace Talks

After more than 50 years of violence, 220,000 people killed, and another six million displaced, the reconciliation effort in Colombia is a “massive task.”<sup>18</sup> That process actually started before the peace deal between the government and main rebel group was signed in 2016. Produced by an organization that is now the National Center for Historical Memory, “Basta Ya! Colombia: Memories of War and Dignity” not only captured the stories of victims, but also examined the origins of the conflict and how the groups involved evolved over time. By working to document all of this history even as the conflict was ongoing, the authors were able to bring the reconciliation conversation, especially about the victims, into the discussion around the peace deal itself.<sup>19</sup>

### The U.S. After the Civil War

Just across from the USIP headquarters in Washington, D.C., is a reminder of the important role that reconciliation has played in our own history. The Lincoln Memorial honors this country’s sixteenth president as a unifier who preserved the nation through the Civil War. Inscribed on the north wall of the Lincoln Memorial is President Lincoln’s Second



Abraham Lincoln delivering his second inaugural address as President of the United States, Washington, D.C.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress (LC-USA7-16837).

<sup>14</sup> McKone, *Reconciliation in Practice*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> “Nigeria: Religious Demography: Affiliation,” Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, updated 2016, accessed December 14, 2017, [http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/nigeria/#/?affiliations\\_religion\\_id=0&affiliations\\_year=2010&region\\_name=All%20Countries&restrictions\\_year=2015](http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/nigeria/#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010&region_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2015).

<sup>16</sup> USIP Staff, “Nigeria’s Imam and Pastor: Faith at the Front,” U.S. Institute of Peace, updated September 29, 2017, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/09/nigerias-imam-and-pastor-faith-front>.

<sup>17</sup> McKone, *Reconciliation in Practice*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> “Colombia,” U.S. Institute of Peace, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/regions/americas/colombia>.

<sup>19</sup> Fred Strasser, “Colombia Considers War and Memory,” U.S. Institute of Peace, updated October 14, 2015, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/10/colombia-considers-war-and-memory>.

Inaugural Address, in which he called for reconciliation between the North and the South, saying

“with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”<sup>20</sup>

## Classroom Connections

This article has focused on the theme of reconciliation as part of the process through which it becomes possible to overcome the tragedy of violent conflict. For students, unpacking a concept as broad as reconciliation and then putting it back together into a successful NHD project can be challenging. USIP has resources to help students get started. Everything featured here and additional resources can be accessed at [usip.org/2019NHDThemeBook](https://usip.org/2019NHDThemeBook).

### Berman’s Despair-Empowerment Curve

Bringing conversations about conflict and peace—whether in history or in current events—into the classroom in a manner that is constructive and hopeful can be challenging. It is often easy to focus on the tragedies and not make it to the triumphs. A helpful framework is the Despair-Empowerment Curve by Sheldon Berman.<sup>21</sup>



USIP’s visualization of Sheldon Berman’s Despair-Empowerment Curve.

The basic premise is that because young people sometimes express a sense of powerlessness to effect change, they can end up withdrawing from active participation in our society. Learning about a violent conflict can initially leave students in despair. Educators can assist in moving them into the realm of empowerment by listening to young people’s concerns, helping them identify solutions to the underlying causes of conflict, teaching them conflict resolution strategies, and, most important, creating opportunities for their own involvement and action.

## Perspectives on Peace

Reconciliation processes have an end goal, but the priorities and interests vary from case to case and even between groups involved in the same reconciliation process. To help understand the concept of multiple perspectives, USIP’s *Peacebuilding Toolkit for Educators* features a two-part lesson plan that enables students to explore their varying personal definitions of peace, and the relationship between peace and conflict.

### Understanding Reconciliation: Truth, Justice, Peace, Mercy

In this one-hour exercise, students think about the interconnection between some of the elements that are necessary for reconciliation to occur after a conflict has ended. By creating their own definitions and examining the relationship between the concepts of truth, justice, peace, and mercy, students deepen their understanding of a complex process that has no one right answer.

## Analytical Frameworks

Conflict analysis is an important element of peacebuilding that allows us to separate out the different positions and interests at play and see what the true drivers of conflict are. It could assist students tackling complicated examples of tragedy in history. USIP’s “Elements of Conflict” handout and accompanying worksheet on analyzing a conflict pose six key questions. Another framework, based on the work of John Paul Lederach, is the Peacebuilding Pyramid that breaks down the different actors into three levels, assigning specific actions into each level. Conflict analysis can also help with the process of rebuilding in the aftermath of violent conflict—understanding the parties and the context is essential to being able to address underlying grievances and knit communities back together.

<sup>20</sup> Peace Trail on the National Mall,” U.S. Institute of Peace, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/peace-trail-national-mall>.

<sup>21</sup> Sheldon Berman, “Educating for Social Responsibility,” *Educational Leadership* (November 1990): 79.

## The Takeaway

History can sometimes feel dry, and wars in history can sometimes feel distant—but they are all about people, and they can best be brought to life through stories. Among the most compelling stories in history are those that show people triumphing over tragedy, and finding ways to live together and work together—and that is what reconciliation is all about.

Past efforts at reconciliation enable us to derive best practices that can help manage post-conflict efforts more effectively, and build a more resilient peace. By exploring the process of reconciliation through history, we can also draw out the importance of choices and action, and highlight peacebuilding as an endeavor that requires our best effort. The story of war does not end when the violence does, and it is important that students see that and understand what else can and must be done. Peace is possible through hard work, and we all have an important role to play.

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent national institute, founded by Congress and dedicated to the proposition that a world without violent conflict is possible, practical, and essential for U.S. and global security. USIP pursues this vision on the ground in conflict zones, working with local partners to prevent conflicts from turning to bloodshed and to end it when they do. The institute provides training, analysis, and other resources to people, organizations, and governments working to build peace.



To access more NHD theme resources, go to [nhd.org/themebook](https://nhd.org/themebook).



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