UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE
INSIGHTS

STATE OF THE ART

Reconciliation as a Peacebuilding Practice: New Questions, New Ideas

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In its simplest definition, reconciliation aims at "learning to live together in the post-conflict environment."[1] Reconciliation within and between societies in the aftermath of violence is not new and has been a familiar peacebuilding practice. Beyond the frequent use of this word, there is remarkably little agreement about the concept of reconciliation. Even the proposal that it refers to a recognizable phase and set of problems in late-stage peacebuilding remains contested. Until recently, it seemed that the concept, with its aspirational, slightly mystical, and theological overtones, might be slipping out of fashion, or at least that enough had been said and written about it with no new insights being produced.

Lately, however, reconciliation is going through a renaissance. Maybe its importance was never lost on the peacebuilding field or on those who survived conflict and were left to rebuild their societies in very difficult circumstances. It seems likely that new interest in better understanding reconciliation, how it takes place, what its limits are, and how it can be supported may stem from two factors. The first is the costly failure of reconciliation in many contexts to include environments where peace agreements have failed, where agreements were never reached despite much effort to foster reconciliation, as with Israel-Palestine, and where conflicts are "frozen" and deeper, more sustainable peace failed to develop. The second is new research on conflict resolution methods that evaluate impacts of practices and new usages of established social science methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, to reach more precise understandings of hitherto vague concepts, such as reconciliation. While the challenges in using the term have become clearer, so has the importance of identifying concrete interventions that can be described, categorized, analyzed, evaluated, and eventually transformed to fit different conflict environments and cultural contexts.

Those working in the peacebuilding field, researchers and practitioners, are making progress in identifying the main challenges in understanding reconciliation, including new and

emerging ones. What follows is a presentation of three core challenges or questions about reconciliation theory and practice.

Peacebuilding By Another Name?

For some in the field of peace and conflict studies, reconciliation is synonymous with peacebuilding. Its methodologies, particularly those described as dialogue and collaborative trust-building projects, can seem nearly identical to standard conflict resolution or even prevention practices. But many working in postconflict contexts experience distinct problems with their own timeline and challenges. In order to analyze reconciliation practices, the peacebuilding field would benefit from a clearer framework and definitions. It is useful to separate the pragmatic phases of negotiation, reaching and implementing peace agreements, as well as early postconflict collaboration, from reconciliation. Herbert Kelman observes that "the settlement process is not especially designed to change the quality of relationships between the societies."[2] New identities and relationships must emerge in which conflict identities are transformed. Otherwise, conflict-divided societies will fundamentally not remain as they are, and peace will not be sustainable.

Given the focus on relationships and identities within reconciliation, it appears that history, responsibility, and accountability have traditionally been covered in this phase of peacebuilding. Indeed, issues of the past are generally not addressed in earlier phases. Since changes in identities and relationships are very much shaped by past experiences, this phase is a long-term one, requiring generations to take hold. Intergenerational transmission of memory and trauma are at play while, at the same time, different generations relate to the violent events differently. Direct memories become those of family members and even ancestors. As generations pass, new spaces for reconciliation open up. This is not assured, however, as sometimes new

political and social realities intersect with legacies of conflict in ways that restrict possibilities for new relations. In such cases, it seems, reconciliation can become even more difficult to advance than at the conflict's end. These essential understandings

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of reconciliation, linked to relationships, identities, and an expanded time frame, would seem to offer clarity on reconciliation as a distinct phase of peacebuilding, with a need for distinct practice.

However, peacebuilders who concentrate on reconciliation too often see reconciliation as the last phase in a linear vision of peacebuilding. Overlaps with other phases have not been engaged enough in the field; peace negotiations aim to stop armed conflict but are not crafted to anticipate reconciliation. The relationship between reconciliation and other phases needs to be rethought. Recent research by Valerie Rosoux and Mark Anstey looks at the relationship between negotiation and reconciliation, including how peace processes and agreements create discourses, identities, institutions, and visions that facilitate reconciliation—or not. Peace agreements too often replicate the old lines of hostilities while wringing agreements from combatants to lay down their weapons in return for admission to positions of power. Agreements may continue to conceptualize groups involved by their original identities, and so at best conflicts

are frozen, as in Cyprus or Bosnia. In these scenarios, even coexistence, the thinnest version of reconciliation, may be fragile and difficult to sustain without the threat of outside coercion. The links between negotiations and peace processes and the long-term transformation of conflict identities need to be better understood. Given the many conflict contexts that remain "frozen," it is also critical to understand whether reconciliation is truly blocked in the wake of all-too-common scenarios of elite agreements that leave conflicts essentially unresolved, and whether and how it can be unblocked.

Colombia's recent experience raises the question of whether activities specifically associated in most conflicts with the post-peace-agreement phase can be tried before the armed conflict has entered a peace negotiation phase, in a context of low security and no formal agreement about how to end the fighting. Over the last decade, in the midst of ongoing violence, Colombia chose to address the issue of history by collecting and publicizing historical memories of victims and thus integrating their voices and experiences into the national consciousness. These are activities usually found in postconflict historical or truth and reconciliation commissions. This work, seemingly premature in traditional understandings of reconciliation, is currently reflected in the peace negotiations as one of five critical strands of negotiation, i.e., Victims of the Conflict. Colombia's is the first peace process to give a formal voice to victims, to hear about what they suffered, what their needs are, what peace would mean to them. Other reconciliation attempts, including efforts to negotiate history and create common historical textbooks, have failed when they were attempted without peace agreement or in the midst of continuing violence, as we saw in Israel-Palestine, where many brave and creative joint projects have been developed since the late 1990s. Reconciliation is complex in Colombia, where many groups are involved, including the state. The legacy,

however, of the "early" programs in the post-peace-accord phase—assuming the negotiations succeed—will offer critical lessons about how and why they bore fruit. In what we hope will be Colombia's postconflict period, there will also be much to learn about how and what the earlier efforts contribute to future, new reconciliation practices.

Expectations and Limits: The Logic of Reconciliation and Victims

A recent critique of reconciliation, made by Thomas Brudholm, Rosoux, and others, is that the most common conception demands too much of victims. That conception focuses on forgiveness (often even more than apology) and on the creation of friendship and understanding between former enemies. This attractive and charismatic conception of reconciliation has been strongly influenced by certain scenes from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the rhetoric of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. We need to ask whether it meets society's obligations towards those who have suffered the most—and whether it meets the needs of sustainable peace. As Rosoux asks, is one conception of reconciliation creating categories of "good," "forgiving," victims and "bad" ones, who demand justice, are angry, and unable to abandon a sense of obligation to dead family members no longer able to speak in their own names? After all, there are harms that cannot be redressed: That which is smashed cannot always be made whole.[3]

With this concern in mind, reconciliation in its most common conception must be rethought to be much more flexible and responsive to different contexts and cultures and with far fewer preconceptions and expectations attached to it. At its heart, reconciliation is about trying to address historical grievances, even if incompletely, and not about forcing normative models onto uncooperative realities.

One common definition of reconciliation is "resigning oneself to something." If one group, especially one which has suffered significantly more from violence, must do more of the resigning, does it serve to hide and maintain unaddressed grievances? Is reconciliation too often just "the strong do what they will, the weak do what they must" dressed in shining robes? The alternative approach to reconciliation would include processes that are truly a force for change, not just those that mirror the original conflict. This raises the challenge of reconciliation in asymmetrical conflicts, after which there is too often asymmetrical peace. If one interlocutor essentially holds most of the cards, reconciliation, particularly if construed as a kind of harmony,

Is reconciliation too often just "the strong do what they will, the weak do what they must"?

must require greater compromise from one side. The challenges in this context are enormous if many on the weaker side participate in reconciliation, practicing coexistence while "biding their time" until a future opportunity to address the balance presents itself.

Reconciliation Practices: How Do We Know They Work?

Case studies of reconciliation have been limited to a small but intensely scrutinized group: World War II Germany with its neighbors and Israel, China-Japan-South Korea, South Africa, Northern Ireland, Turkey-Armenia, Palestine-Israel (note that some of these cases are considered failures). Evidence is surprisingly thin about the many practices and interventions that are tried in the belief that they further reconciliation. While the case studies on Germany and its neighbors have tracked and analyzed postwar activities at all levels, from Track 1 dialogue to grassroots, from political gestures to the arts, this interstate case tells us very little about the more common intra-state conflicts since World War II. What models inform interventions by outsiders, who can sometimes be state officials or elites? What has inspired those who lived through violent conflicts to pursue reconciliation across former enemy lines, and how did they do it? Do the practices fall into recognizable categories, and which theories of change do these categories reflect? How do we evaluate the impact of these practices, and can we establish causation?

It has long been observed that it is hard to separate a certain level of reconciliation from activities meant to further it. For example, does an effort to create and introduce a new history textbook on the recent conflict further reconciliation—or does the effort itself, not to mention a successful project, indicate that a certain level of reconciliation has been reached?

Reconciliation is an ongoing mutual process based on common consent. It cannot be compelled, and it is not an arrival point or end of history. We can never claim that two groups whose relationships were shaped by mass violence are "reconciled"; these legacies are so powerful that they do not simply vanish with time. In the words of Lily Gardner Feldman, "Reconciliation, and by implication peace itself, is the management and 'integration' of differences," not harmony.[4] This makes reconciliation very hard to measure—and therefore the impact of practice difficult to evaluate. Management of continued deep disagreements may prove to be easier to track and evaluate than "harmony." A mapping project in process at USIP demonstrated that whatever the challenges in evaluating the state of the field, there is no lack of projects to study. Reconciliation practice is not limited to official truth commissions or other institutional gestures at the state level (reparations, apologies). Reconciliation is a vibrant area of activity, with both nationally led projects supported by donors in the Global North and also many small and local projects that reveal both courage and creativity.

Reconciliation is risky; crossing lines forged by violence and opening discussions on loathsome acts committed in the past can be dangerous and appear to be failing at first. But in the course of their work, at least some of the actors involved have seen social and political space open for contact, rehumanization, and shared conceptions of common futures. It is in mapping, collecting, and analyzing these practices to better understand when and how they are effective that the most exciting part of this field lies. ∎

NOTES

1. Herbert C. Kelman, "Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation: A Social-Psychological Perspective on Ending Violent Conflict Between Identity Groups," *Landscapes of Violence*, 1, no 1, Article 5, (2010): 1-9, 3.

2. Kelman, 1-2.

3. The term is used by John Torpey to discuss the difficulty of meaningful reparations for extreme violence, in which many victims did not even survive. See *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: On Reparations Politics* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2006), 11; the title itself is a reference to Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, edited with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 257-58.

4. Lily Gardner Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 17.

STATE OF THE ART
Reconciliation Beyond Conceptual Debates
GRAEME SIMPSON, DIRECTOR, INTERPEACE USA

Although widely recognized as an important dimension of societal and political reconstruction in fragile and conflict-affected societies, reconciliation remains one of the most frequently abused and contested terms in the peacebuilding lexicon. The word itself produces much controversy as it is often seen as too narrowly associated with notions of confession and forgiveness, and trapped in a Christian theological bias. Others claim that the concept lacks universal relevance and remains foreign to many political cultures, languages, and parts of the world, particularly outside of Africa. Alternatively, the notion of reconciliation is criticized when narrowly viewed as an imagined outcome of the accountability-driven legal template of postconflict or transitional justice aimed at "dealing with the past." By the same token, in the psycho-social arena, the concept is contested because of its frequently debated assumptions and claims about individual, communal, and societal "healing" or catharsis. Reconciliation is also viewed through the controversial lens of "nation-building" and criticized for potentially re-energizing forms of exclusionary identity, including nationalism.

Controversy around the concept of reconciliation is unsurprising, as it neither presents some utopian state, nor is it based on consensus in practice. Its programmatic content, priorities, and orientation are the subject of dialogue in any given society and eternally incomplete. A pragmatic approach to peacebuilding requires not that we ignore the above-mentioned claims or criticisms—as they may all have a relevance and a value in particular societal contexts at particular moments in time—but that we move beyond them and indeed, if need be, beyond the lightening rod of the word reconciliation itself.

A Pragmatic Approach to Reconciliation
A pragmatic interpretation of reconciliation refers to the building or rebuilding of relationships damaged by violent conflict, not only between people and groups in society but also between the people and their societal institutions, particularly, but not exclusively, institutions of state.

This view of reconciliation speaks not only to the importance of horizontal social cohesion between individuals and groups in society but also to the need to build civic trust as part of the transformation of state-society relations in the wake of conflict. Based on the perceptions and agency of citizens themselves, this approach to reconciliation offers peacebuilding practitioners a platform for engaging state-building policy and practice in a manner that prioritizes the need to transform state-society relations rather than merely building the capacity of fragile state institutions. Reconciliation recognizes the important mediating potential of the state and other societal institutions in shaping, protecting, guaranteeing, and, where necessary, constraining the relationships between individuals, groups, and communities in society.

Whether reconciliation is understood as an ongoing process, a targeted outcome, or merely as an aspirational goal, these attempts to transform relationships can neither be detached from, nor taken for granted as an implicit outcome of, formal processes of political settlement, democratization, justice, or economic development and reconstruction. They demand concerted and deliberate programmatic attention in their own right. Formal processes of political transition—constitutionalizing and democratization—have limited potential to facilitate transformed relationships, shared political identities, or newly found intergroup trust. This may also indicate the potential limitations of a normative human rights discourse too often narrowly framed in terms of state obligations and individual rights at the expense of group rights that need to be respected and secured horizontally, i.e., across groups, within society. Re-emerging conflicts in places such as the Central African Republic or recently independent South Sudan present powerful illustrations of the neglect of engagement in horizontal relationship building in favor of state capacity-

building, formal political processes, or elite political settlements.

If reconciliation is about building or rebuilding relationships that have been damaged by conflict and violence, then it is essential for peacebuilders to fully understand the precise content and nature of the harm done. The damage wrought by violent conflict strikes at the heart of the social fabric of communities. It damages or destroys inclusive social, civic, and political institutions and the places of belonging and social cohesion they offer while decimating trust. Beyond just the lives lost and the crimes perpetrated, all these manifestations are highly specific to particular country and community contexts and to the nature of particular conflicts and are also impacted by the character and process of the specific transitions that ensue. This places an emphasis on conflict analysis as a prerequisite for reconciliation programming. Accessing the inclusive voice and facilitating the participation of affected societies and communities themselves are indispensable, both to the legitimacy of the endeavor and to avoid the risk of transposing generic causes and consequences onto highly conflict-specific country contexts.

Understanding the relational "harm done" as a result of violent conflict also demands recognition that conflict and peacebuilding are anything but linear or mono-directional processes. A conflict transformation lens acknowledges that within complex adaptive social systems, patterns of conflict and violence transmute and evolve over time. This presents important challenges for a reconciliation when we do not acknowledge that the threat of re-emerging conflict and potential violence does not necessarily manifest along the same lines of social and political fissure as preexisting conflicts. For example, several countries illustrate how the complex relationship between the criminalization of politics and the politicization of crime produces blurred dividing lines between

political and criminal violence over time. This offers a fundamental challenge to notions of reconciliation that are narrowly concerned with a formulaic notion of "dealing with the past." This is not because this is not itself important, but because it understates how restitching the social fabric of damaged relationships must take place in a forward-looking and preventive way. This perspective places the reconciliation approach at the heart of building peace. Reconciliation must address, through a relational lens, the continuities and changes in patterns of violence, morphing sources of fragility, and underlying drivers of con-

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flict, whether these are based on patterns of political marginalization, economic exclusion, or the independent momentum of identity-based conflicts.

In this context of continuously evolving forms of conflict, it is imperative to acknowledge that social cohesion is not an inherent good. This awareness presents additional challenges for how peacebuilders relate to reconciliation as a relationship-building endeavor. Patterns of marginalization and exclusion often produce socially cohesive and resilient responses that may be sinister rather than socially benevolent. Youth and criminal gangs are one powerful illustration of the alternative places of belonging in response to marginalization and exclusion. Negatively resilient systems of patronage and corruption may easily become entrenched in new state structures and embedded in relationships to the state. Powerful and cohesive conflict-based or illicit subeconomies, or

defensively organized ethnic or religious groups, may all present the challenge to positive relationship building and may reorganize around violence. All these examples illustrate the importance and challenges for peacebuilding practitioners in forging creative and practical alternatives.

Debates that have framed justice and reconciliation in the wake of conflict as if they are inherently in tension with each other present an additional complication. These views are often premised on narrow interpretations of justice as equated with criminal accountability or equally restrictive representations of peacebuilding as synonymous with negotiated peace processes. This is not to suggest that manipulative political actors, eager to preserve their own impunity for crimes committed, will not often seek to abuse the reconciliation discourse as a convenient alternative to accountability. However, wider notions of addressing experienced injustice, including historical patterns of marginalization, ought not to be equated with normative obligations to prosecute violators. By the same token, broader processes of peacebuilding and reconciliation should not be reduced to the horse-trading that often characterizes elite-level political negotiations. Instead, a more elaborate perspective of a peacebuilding and justice continuum offers the creative space and temporal flexibility for integrating the goal of addressing lived experiences of injustice—not just "delivering justice"—as central to the objective of sustainable and transformed relationships, both within society and between society and the state. Not only does this promise a range of creative and different entry points outside of the criminal justice system, but it also proffers real potential to bridge the divide between various dimensions of justice, restorative, distributive, and retributive, through wider notions of societal accountability. This approach also offers a potentially creative basis for expanding the contribution of justice and human rights to the durability of peacebuilding through the shift from a predominantly normative approach to rule

of law to a potentially transformative contribution of justice to prevention.

The Architecture of Reconciliation Programming: Engaging at Different Levels

The opportunities for reconciliation programming present themselves at different levels and through various kinds of engagements in fragile and conflict-affected societies:

- National processes
- Localized processes
- Institution-building and reform
- Individually-based or people-to-people initiatives

Reconciliation processes are often viewed as taking place through national processes and meta-narratives. This might include Track 1 political processes of negotiated settlement, the foundational processes of inclusive constitution-making or reform, national-level elections, or truth seeking or truth commissions. However, there are dangers in assuming that these national-level processes inherently address the relational dimensions of societal reconstruction after conflict or that they adequately anticipate new patterns of exclusion or evolving forms of conflict. In particular, assumptions that national-level processes automatically trickle down to the local level or percolate the experiences of the "rank and file" upwards can be very problematic, not least because these very national level processes can be severely tested by the (re)emergence of violent conflict at the local level.

On the other hand, highly localized processes offer unique opportunities for rebuilding or building relationships damaged by violent conflict. Examples abound of local-level truth telling processes in highly diverse communities from Bosnia to Greensboro, North Carolina, in the United States. Community-level reintegration processes vary from cleansing ceremonies in local communities in Mozambique to the reintegration of violent perpetrators through the "Fambul Tok"

processes in Sierra Leone or the Nahe Biti Bot gatherings in Timor-Leste. Many of these programs are disconnected from, or undermined by, the wider national political processes, with local processes suffering from the difficulties of development to scale or the reciprocal danger that local-level engagements might in fact be undermined by national processes from which they are disconnected. Even more striking is the danger that highly culturally-specific processes might either be romanticized or mythologized as having some inherent reconciliation value without being assessed for their efficacy, inclusivity, or durability. By the same token, these processes are potentially undermined by the alternative tendency to

> Patterns of marginalization and exclusion often produce socially cohesive and resilient responses that may be sinister rather than socially benevolent.

unhelpfully "demonize" them as incapable of complying with prevailing norms, such as in gender or human rights terms, without acknowledging the extent to which they have traction in local culture.

A frequently underestimated arena for reconciliation processes is in the realm of institution-building and reform. Security sector reform, demobilization, demilitarization, and reintegration or judicial reform are often viewed through the lens of ensuring accountability and building new functional state institutions. However, the dynamic contribution to reconciliation resides in the opportunity offered by institutional reform as a platform for recrafting damaged relationships. Whether through the endeavor to transform the Royal Ulster Constabulary into an institutional "home" for both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, or grap-

pling with race relations in the integration of the former South African National Defense Force and the liberation armies into one army in post-Apartheid South Africa, even limited and partially flawed processes have massive potential as reconciliation interventions that ought to reach well beyond the technical or normative processes of vetting or screening of public officials. Furthermore, the creative opportunity for such "relational reconstruction" presents itself in a much wider range of institutions than just those associated with justice and security. The enormous potential for institutional reform in the media or education sectors offer rich platforms for transforming relationships and building civic trust, both in relation to past conflicts, as well as in the creation of voice, visibility, and inclusion in societies moving forward. This perspective also enriches the relationship between reconciliation and statebuilding endeavors.

Finally, it is important to neither overstate nor underestimate the value of individually-based or people-to-people reconciliation initiatives. Bridge-building through these endeavors may be deep and meaningful in dealing with the damage done to particular relationships, but they might also serve to mask the deeper underlying causes of past violent conflict or the fault lines of new emerging conflict. The value of people-to-people "contact" is highly contingent on the context and nature of the conflict. For example, its value in the context of a long-standing "frozen" conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots might be very different from Tutsis and Hutus living side-by-side in postgenocide Rwanda. Similarly, victim-perpetrator interactions might in some instances offer symbolic hope for a different future, but they might equally mystify notions of catharsis or substitute thin concepts of healing for the societal struggles to deal with residual or unresolved trauma, especially if they are not voluntary processes. In the arena of individual contributions to societal reconciliation, insufficient attention has been given to the invaluable role of "leadership" not just at the

formal or national political level but in the role of consensus figures who emerge from within various communities and constituencies to help bridge divisions.

This short treatment cannot do justice to the full spectrum of potential entry points in reconciliation programming. However, in the critical relationship between individual, local, institutional, and national processes, it is vital to appreciate this as more than just about "the geography" of reconciliation initiatives. Particular social groups and constituencies bring unique challenges and perspectives to the endeavor of building reconciliation in conflict-affected societies. Women, youth, victims, indigenous groups, displaced persons, diasporas, and veterans all demand particular attention and have a particular stake, despite often being politically inarticulate, vulnerable, or marginalized, when contemplating the architecture of relationship-based reconciliation programming. More important still is the need and potential for reconciliation programming to proactively connect these levels—individual, communal, institutional, and national—and seek out the intermediary processes, civil society organizations, social capital, and leadership that offer better "multi-track" coherence and scalability between national and local experiences.

Youth Art Camp in Bosnia.
Photo courtesy of Kemal Pervanic

Conclusion

The proposed pragmatic approach to reconciliation offers creative space for multilevel engagements, diverse points of entry in programming, and a sensitivity to the changing and evolving temporal frame in the wake of different conflicts. It is an approach which acknowledges and is enriched by the fact that these opportunities change over time, depending on a range of factors, including the proximity to the conflict, the nature of the transition, the character and changing meanings of violence, and the mutating challenges of conflict and fragility. However, this approach to diversified engagements does not simply mirror the tradition of "multiple-track" peacebuilding, each with its own parallel targets, constituencies, and differentially measured outcomes. Instead, it offers an analytical lens and a programmatic framework through the aspiration to build trust in historically damaged relationships, both horizontally and vertically, which offers creative opportunities and coherence rather than mere coordination.

An approach that places the transformation of relationships at its heart is especially dependent on the perceptions of integrity and legitimacy of the processes involved. These processes must go beyond mere rhetoric of ownership and agency of local actors, while simultaneously avoiding the substitution of a thin discourse based on accountability, dialogue, and inclusive narratives of the past.

Reconciliation must carefully navigate the realistic limits of what can change and how quickly it can do so, as well as the dangers of unmet expectations. Yet notwithstanding these real and tactical limitations, reconciliation, thus defined, lies at the heart of peacebuilding in its reach beyond elite processes and pacts as the means to end violence. It endeavors to address, via political, economic, social, and cultural approaches, the seismic patterns of dispossession and exclusion that underlie violent conflict, without adopting either a reductionist or mutually exclusive approach. ∎

PEACE ARENA
Theory vs. Practice

In each Newsletter, the Peace Arena offers a space for discussion between scholars and practitioners as they comment on a selected quote. This issue we feature: Valerie Rosoux, Université Catholique de Louvain and Brandon Hamber, University of Ulster and Director of INCORE. The selected quote comes from Duncan Morrow's article "Seeking Peace amid the Memories of War: Learning from the Peace Process in Northern Ireland," from Robert Rothstein's edited volume After the Piece: Resistance and Reconciliation:

"Reconciliation," according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, means "to make friendly again after an estrangement" and "to make acquiescent or contentedly submissive to something previously disagreeable"….. Classical peacemaking focuses on the first definition, with its emphasis on mutual friendship and the making of new relationships on all sides. Politics … has often seen reconciliation in the second sense, as something the loser in a conflict must do to come to terms with reality.

BY VALERIE ROSOUX

Duncan Morrow's quotation shows how ambivalent the notion of reconciliation is. On the one hand, most official representatives, scholars, and NGO workers consider reconciliation as the ultimate achievement in societies previously marred by violence. On the other hand, victims or their relatives largely distrust this notion. Many of them feel bitterness towards what they perceive as an "indecent" injunction to reconcile with their enemies. Rather than a strategy to move forward, reconciliation is perceived as mere rhetoric that does not do proper justice to their sufferings.

The gap between these attitudes underlines a tension that cannot be avoided when speaking about reconciliation: The legitimate need to look forward at a collective level risks ostracising people who are permanently traumatized by the conflict. This tension does not detract from the significance of efforts made to bring about a rapprochement between former adversaries. Nevertheless, it means that the irreversible character of certain trauma cannot be underestimated. These festering wounds—physical as well as mental—are at the origin of an intense hatred that must be taken seriously. I will always remember the eyes of a Colombian woman who tragically told me, "Don't touch my hatred. That is the only thing that's left. They took all I had—except for my hatred."

Is reconciliation always possible, or even necessary, in every instance? It is futile and counterproductive to call for reconciliation regardless of the circumstances. I would personally call for a less ambitious view. Rather than expecting a process that entails forgiveness and harmony, I would insist on the importance of setting achievable aims (coexistence is already a remarkable goal after mass atrocities) and being realistic in terms of timing (changes in this area do not take years but generations). A maximalist conception of reconciliation addresses our need for hope and closure. But does it help them?

BY BRANDON HAMBER
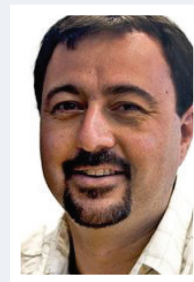
There is a view, as outlined by Morrow, that reconciliation aims at rebuilding fractured relationships after a conflict. This objective is pursued through dialogue, sharing stories, mediation, or other peacebuilding activities that convene individuals, groups, or communities. The purpose of such activity is to foster those deep and lasting connections across the society considered essential to sustainable peace.

It is challenging to think of political entities engaging in such work, as the Morrow quotation indirectly implies. In politics, claims Morrow, reconciliation has a harder edge and reconciliation is more about the loser becoming "contentedly submissive" with the victor after a conflict ends.

Relationships at all levels matter following political conflict, as they determine whether and how the progress to peace and stability will be made. In a divided society, building a new road is never simply a technical task—it invariably requires negotiation and discussion about the benefits for each actor. Inevitably, harms due to past violence, even in the most mundane of policy decisions, will surface during that process.

Reconciliation is not about a simple decision to cooperate, or designing processes so former adversaries can work together with the long-term aspiration that deeper connections will follow. This could result in a forgive-and-forget mentality or, if Morrow is right, an approach akin to getting on with "negative peace" in a resigned manner. This approach is not conducive to long-term stability or what I understand reconciliation to be.

In the short-term, coexistence and cooperation might be all that is possible. However, if lasting peace is to be guaranteed, we cannot avoid addressing relationships in a deliberate and strategic way. Justice, apology, reparations, acknowledgement, and healing are part of this process—issues that are not separate from reconciliation but central to it.

Brandon Hamber's Response to Valerie Rosoux

It is, of course, as Valerie Rosoux asserts, counterproductive to call for reconciliation regardless of circumstances. No one approach should be imposed without consideration of the local context. I have routinely warned of "false reconciliation" whereby the word is used expediently by politicians to whitewash the past or to belittle victims' pain or calls for justice in the name of peace. As a concept, "closure" is unhelpful as we can never close off memories of mass violations. We have to learn to live with them both as societies and individuals. Unfortunately, to do this, especially in contexts of civil war and internal strife, interaction with the other is often inevitable. Dealing with relationships is part of the painful and challenging process of coming to terms with the past; to say otherwise reduces issues such as healing and justice to the intrapsychic or interpersonal. This is an acontextual way of understanding harm and restoration. ◾

Valerie Rosoux's Response to Brandon Hamber

Brandon Hamber is right to emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships. For even if a rapprochement seems necessary to the representatives of each party, it cannot be imposed by decree. Violent conflicts provoke an infinite series of individual fires that need to be extinguished one by one. The response to past atrocities is ultimately an individual one. Far from being reduced to a Manichean tension between hatred and forgiveness, this individual response brings to the surface deep sadness, fear, loss of trust and hope, and other emotions, which may result in calls for justice and accountability.

Therefore it might be useful to question our own assumptions. Is the aim to distinguish between "good" (resilient) victims and "bad" (resentful) victims or to define a new social contract? It is if—and only if—the diversity of reactions is taken seriously that one can finally see an end and a beginning. ◾

IN PRACTICE

The In Practice section presents the scope of peacebuilding activity in a specific country in the form of a short "case study" or through personal accounts.

Bosnia: Building a Shared Future, Facing the Past

KEMAL PERVANIC, FILM PRODUCER AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Before the decadelong war that led to the breakup of former Yugoslavia, Bosniaks and Serbs regarded each other as neighbors, teachers, or even friends. The camps where countless victims perished in unimaginable violence during my early twenties were guarded by the same people I had grown up with. Survivors were forced into exile. It seemed easier to pull the trigger in 1992 than to face each other and acknowledge the past, eight years later, when it became possible to return.

Official truth-telling efforts in the region, supported by organizations such as UNDP, USIP, and the International Federation of Human Rights, among others, rarely demonstrated a tangible impact. Two local attempts, the Sarajevo Truth Commission and the Bijeljina Truth Commission, failed to deliver as they were highly politicized and forced upon the victims without consultation. Various NGOs, such as the Center for Non-Violent Action (CVA) and Documenta, did successfully work on reconciliation with individuals and groups across the Western Balkans. The work of CVA, which brings together war veterans from both sides, demonstrates that it is possible to bridge communities that suffered from successive wars.

To aid local reconciliation, the Most Mira (Bridge of Peace) initiative brings former enemies together in the hope they will one day rehumanize each other. Initially, Most Mira pursued this challenging task by encouraging the sharing of war stories, an approach that bore little fruit. The next attempted step was to use arts to convene children, the future constituency of peacebuilders, from former enemy communities. The level of resistance, both within the Bosniak and Serb communities, was significant. The involvement of my former Serb teacher, who also ended up being my guard in the Omarska camp during the war, and a Muslim writer who survived two camps, proved crucial in overcoming the hesitancy within communities.

Over the years the initiative convened more than a thousand children, hundreds of com-

Manjača Camp, 1992
Photograph provided courtesy of the ICTY

munity members, and many teachers. The painstaking work has slowly eroded mistrust. Over the last eight years the process of reconciliation had to be built up from the bottom, in the absence of national political support for a truth and reconciliation commission or other institutional vehicles for reconciliation. The reconciliation model advanced by Most Mira does not undermine the general process of peacebuilding. This bottom-up model of reconciliation may transform some of our young beneficiaries into the peacebuilders of the future. ∎

Obstacles to Rwanda's State-Led Reconciliation Process

BY SUSAN THOMSON, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES, COLGATE UNIVERSITY

Reconciliation is a messy and frequently politicized process that seeks to publicly restore social ties and economic livelihoods, with the ultimate goal of striking a balance between justice and healing, vengeance and forgiveness. Twenty-first century Rwanda provides insight into this aspirational goal of reconciliation in postconflict societies, through a top-down approach. While Rwanda's international donors have helped fund its postgenocide reconciliation practice, the country has pursued a homegrown approach in modernizing traditional justice and reconciliation mechanisms. External actors, including multilateral partners such as the African Union and the United Nations, and bi-lateral ones, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, have provided a mixture of financing, moral, and logistical support.

Gates locked at Kibuye Memorial
Photo Courtesy of Susan Thomson

Following the 1994 genocide, in which some 800,000 Rwandans lost their lives, the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) instituted a broad social engineering project designed to "never again" allow the scourge of genocide to "take root in the hearts and minds" of Rwandans. Unfortunately, in postgenocide Rwanda, reconciliation is primarily a top-down administrative matter instead of an affair of the heart. Rwanda's self-stated success in reconciling Hutus and Tutsis results from a centralized approach. Victims reconcile within the confines of acceptable action shaped by an official narrative of history. The reconciliation rhetoric provides little recognition of the diverse experiences of the 1994 genocide, beyond the official assertion that the genocide presented a mass slaughter of the Tutsi population by a Hutu-led government. The programs permit little public discussion of violence carried out by RPF soldiers, creating a "victor's truth" that does not mirror the experience of the entire Rwandan population. Rwandans are encouraged to reconcile in state-sanctioned settings, such as the ingando citizenship re-education camps, the neotraditional gacaca local courts, or during genocide mourning week (every April 7–14). In the process of controlling the spaces where reconciliation can officially occur, the RPF has neutralized or eliminated alternative spaces, rendering them suspect. This practice constrains the ability of many ordinary Rwandans to reconcile in personally meaningful ways as they struggle to rebuild their lives.

In the face of this strong state presence, some people try to engage in practices of individual reconciliation that operate outside of the official sphere of state-led practices. To do so is risky, as government officials work to ensure that Rwandans reconcile in officials ways. Informal (nongovernmental) settings, are hard to come by. This means that for many Rwandans, individual or community-based reconciliation activities are difficult to attempt, for the government punishes non-official reconciliation practices with a variety of sanctions, from losing access to social benefits to social shunning and outcasting to arbitrary detention and, in extreme cases, disappearance or death. Some Rwandans I consulted in the course of my research did find subtle and creative ways to subvert official reconciliation practices through minute individual actions, such as finding ways to avoid participating in state-led reconciliation practices or refusing to speak about what they witnessed during the genocide when government officials ask them to do so. Such individual tactics allow Rwandans to strategically resist reconciliation as a way to avoid reconciling in ways that do not account for emotional and physical hardships since the 1994 genocide.

Vianney, a young Tutsi survivor, offers insight into the burden of being forced to reconcile: "Because of the genocide, I lost my whole family. What is the point of forgiveness anyway? The Hutu who killed, they know who they are, but are they able to tell their truth? No, and I understand why not. If they say anything, they go straight to prison. I understand their problems; I blame this government for its lack of fairness. If we could all just get along, I know we could find some way to coexist. Reconciliation is never going to happen. At least not for me. I am alone because of genocide. It is better to remain distant than to get mixed up with the ideas and plans of this [postgenocide] government." ■