MICHIGAN STATE
U N I V E R S I T Y

The Positive Management of Conflicts in West Africa

ENDA GRAF SAHEL & RENAPOP *

Introduction – Context

In 1994 and 1995, two workshops were held in Dakar and N'djamena, with representatives from different organisations from several West African countries. It was here that the first steps were taken in an initiative to help those involved in conflicts to turn situations of tensions into educational, empowering situations, for themselves and others. The result of this workshop was a programme for positive conflict management.

This programme is now underway in various French-speaking African countries: Guinea, Senegal, Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Chad. The programme structure is based on two phases: first, the formulation of an action-research phase within the framework of workshops (1996-97); second, the development of action-research in the process of change (1997-99). This paper outlines what has happened since the first phase workshop in Senegal in October 1996.

Presentation

Conflict is as much a key component of change in rural and urban societies as it is at the heart of large organisations. Conflicts are like cross-roads where the contradictions which divide social groups meet. Village associations and local committees from all over Senegal met at Thies to discuss the possibility of utilising conflicts as a means of promoting change. From now on we will call these organisations "Popular Organisations" (PO), without specifying whether we are referring to urban or rural organisations. Around 20 men and women representing these organisations attended the workshop. Four members of *Enda Graf Sahel* took part under the same umbrella title as the other groups.

The Senegal workshop was largely organised and led by RENAPOP (The National Network for the Progress of Popular Organisations). For both practical (infrastructure) and symbolic reasons, the workshop took place between the 30th September and the 4th October in the National Institute for Rural Development (which some years before became the Ecole National Superieure d'Agriculture - a prestigious centre of higher learning in agricultural studies) in Thies.

The workshop was preceded by several preparatory meetings. Some were purely technical or logistic (choosing location, division of labour, research materials, establishing budgets), whilst others were more philosophical in their outlook. After these meetings, the organisers identified several objectives, some of which were of a more general character (medium- to long-term) and others which were more specific to the workshop (short-term). The key objectives were:

- Discovering ways of dealing with conflict within popular organisations:
  - how to raise the issue and discuss it?
  - how to analyse it constructively?
  - how to use the conflict as a path towards creative change?

- Reinforcement of the possibility of directing conflicts towards innovation and change.

- Identifying ways in which conflicts could be used to reinforce RENAPOP through:
  - consolidation of member organisations
  - consolidation of links between organisations
  - consolidation of network dynamics.

- Overcoming the rifts which are currently dividing urban and rural POs.

- Creating a programme and launch a research process in RENAPOP.

- Fostering a collective research drive.

Methods and Basic Principles

Each participant talked about the conflicts in which he or she had been involved. Participants refrained from discussing general conflicts such as disputes over land ownership or inter-ethnic conflict and it was also stipulated that participants should not talk about 'other people's' conflicts or about situations in which they had no direct involvement. The tone of the discussion was, *"I will tell you about my conflict so that you can help me to understand it better and to progress. Then, tell me about your conflict."* Thus, the participants were sources of information for one another *("Others help me to see and to see myself in a new way")*. Going around the table one by one gave everyone the chance to explain their situation in 20-30 minutes. The plenary group then split into two groups of 10-12 people to discuss two cases of conflict in depth. In this way, the participants sought to formulate an approach to dealing with conflicts. Those who did not have an opportunity to

submit their case to group examination will have acquired the skills to tackle the problem when they return home.

The number of participants was voluntarily limited and we also expected a tailing off or reduction of numbers. A greater number of participants would have made the expression and examination of personal situations more difficult. Participants voted in favour of choosing a few cases on which the groups could concentrate. In the end three situations were decided on:

- conflicts linked to health insurance in Fandene;
- conflicts which cause rifts in RENAPOP;
- conflicts between Enda Graf Sahel and Popular Organisations and between other organisations.

The work groups had two objectives; on the one hand, to help those involved in conflicts to turn a situation of tension into a situation of growth and education, and on the other hand, to explore the 'ins and outs' of such a process so as to achieve a similarly positive result. Two groups formed automatically, one to work for 24 hours on issues facing RENAPOP, and other to work on the insurance question. Later in the workshop, both groups looked at conflicts between Enda Graf Sahel and the POs and conflicts amongst POs.

Conceptualising Work on Conflict

We can now see three fundamental axes for an alternative approach to social and political thinking. (see Table 1 over). These three axes also constitute valid fields of research. In the box below we have transcribed the Ouolof version *(1)*.

The negative phrasing of the objectives (dismantle, strip away, etc) was chosen because we don't want our research to be rigid and restricted. We want to smash the mechanisms which instrumentalise our domination, but we do not want to suggest in a dogmatic manner with what they should be replaced. RENAPOP should develop and mobilise itself around this field of research. Once one has eliminated the mechanisms of domination, with what does one replace them? How can these innovations be made into a reality? That is where individual responsibility comes into the picture. This research may well promote the autonomy of individual organisations, but having no precedent with which to compare our situation, we fear that by replacing one mechanism with another we will, in effect, slip from one 'political religion' to another.

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(1) The Ouolof text in the box was debated at length by the participants. It is important to us that the concepts are reproduced just as they were expressed by the participants. The participants' translation [into French], attempts to convey their ideas as faithfully as possibly, although not word for word. The Ouolof script is incorrect, mainly because we cannot type many of the characters. Instead we made do with this phonetic translation. Please excuse us for any inaccuracy in the translation.

Table 1:
THREE ROUTES TOWARDS A SOCIO-POLITICAL ALTERNATIVE

1. (i) Dismantle all mechanisms which turn differences into inequalities;
   (ii) Dismantle all mechanisms which legitimise inequalities or present them as "natural";
   (iii)Dismantle all mechanisms which produce privileges on the basis of these inequalities.
   Toj bepp doxaliin buy tax wute yiy gu te lewwol xeebeel aki mberma

2. (i) Strip away all mechanisms which produce exclusion;
   (ii)Develop mechanisms which promote integration.
   Toj bepp doxaliin buy indi beddi

3. (i) Change the structure of decision-making; which implies taking control of the places where decisions are made about our resources and about all our lives.
   Am baat ci bepp berep bi nuy dogale sunuy mbir

If these three research axes lead to significant innovations, many conflicts could take on a constructive perspective.

This task of dismantling mechanisms should extend to all areas of life: from the couple to the family, from spirituality to the church or the mosque, from the workshop or the field to the marketplace, to the school or to the public or private institutions and, of course, within our popular organisations. All of our workplaces and living spaces play host to the production of inequality, exclusion and poverty. It is in these places that research into alternatives should be carried out. Some of the goals for action are discussed below:

Breaking the mechanisms which turn difference into inequality

We are all competent but not in the same ways and not at the same things. Each of us has knowledge and know-how which is of use to the rest of society. We must not accept mechanisms which recognise certain people as superior to others and which allow these people privileges as a reward. Being competent in a particular field does not make one 'better' than others. An elephant may have an advantage over a bird, in toppling a tree, but it would be a great disadvantage when reaching the summit of a mountain. Natural abilities only have a social value when put into a social context. We must remove these mechanisms which emphasis the "inferiority/superiority" of individuals, and replace them with a value system which

recognises the importance and usefulness of all members of society. We are all equal but different.

Destroy the mechanisms which lead to exclusion

No one is born poor, it is the environment into which one is born which makes one poor. Poverty is primarily born of the way others perceive one and the way one perceives oneself, and consequently, in various situations which cross one's path. It take many forms – material or economic poverty, cultural poverty, emotional poverty, symbolic poverty, spiritual poverty. What are the mechanisms which create our poverty and the poverty of those around us? Which mechanisms exclude some people to the benefit of others? How can we beat these mechanisms? How can we dismantle them, starting right here in our own organisations?

A question of particular importance in the discussion of poverty is, *"how to give meaning to people's lives and help them to make sense of the world around them?"* So, existential poverty is at the heart of the problem at hand. What are the mechanisms which empty our lives of meaning and force us to respect and live by values which are alien to us, not just in our organisations, but also in other areas of our lives? In the course of the workshop discussion, we identified mechanisms for the *redistribution of wealth*, away from some privileged groups, which is one of the potentially most active and pernicious factors in the creation of inequality and marginalisation.

Reinventing the role of leader, and changing the 'how' and the 'where' of decision-making

The function of leadership is indispensable: leaders are necessary to implement decisions. Not everyone is capable of performing leadership duties – who leads depends on the situation, the stakes, the context, the person, the circumstances. We are not against leaders in all their guises, nor are we against the very concept of leadership. For us, leadership is a social function, which should be carried out communally. However, we do not accept that leaders should be allowed certain privileges simply due to the fact that they are leaders. We do not see the role of leader as different to any other social function. We do not accept leaders who use their leadership as a shield, who monopolise decision-making, who marginalise the groups which they are meant to serve, or who sabotage those who may inspire popular creativity. We will not accept a cult of leadership.

Our evaluation of the practices of our leaders and those in power in our organisations, should be seen as the first step in a global investigation into this field, with the aim of promoting radical change. Leaders should no longer be seen as 'bosses,' but rather as people who carry out tasks and responsibilities and who execute the decisions of the group.

The wind of democracy is currently sweeping the African continent. Senegal is no exception. Unfortunately, it generally takes the form of a parody of an alien system which was developed elsewhere, in another era, which brought glory to other people but which is completely foreign to us. We do not reject the idea of democracy itself, but we do question models which have been imported from abroad. Democracy has no foundation or legitimacy unless it is the brain-child of those who practice it. Otherwise, we believe it to be a dangerous form of domination. Our investigation into leadership has led us to denounce pyramid models and the mechanisms of delegation which allow it. Leaders are not chosen to tell others what do do, they are chosen to execute decisions taken by others. We prefer horizontal models. which emphasise equality, freedom and individual responsibility.

In the provinces, the dismantling of political processes was identified as an important step forward. In general, these processes consist of manoeuvring oneself into positions of power by displacing others. These days, such activities are characteristic of political parties whose actions end up depoliticising society. In reality, when everything is geared to taking over positions of power, there remains little in the way of time and resources for examining questions of real importance. As the proverb says, *"The route to the throne rouses the fist, but deadens the heart."* Political processes should question these mechanisms and they should develop an alternative vision of peaceful and harmonious community life.

Enda Graf Sahel as a vehicle for socio-political alternatives.

Aid, as a concept, embraces several contradictions and ambiguities. What gives some people the right to decide it necessary to intervene and offer their aid to others? The question underlies any criticism of aid. What motive is there to help others? What is the unequal basis of any aid relationship? How can this be avoided?

In order to bypass these difficult questions Enda Graf Sahel chose to adopt a different position. Those involved in the organisation now see themselves more as part of a process of research and experimentation with an aim radically to change our society, in the manner outlined above. The relationships and programmes, developed by Enda Graf Sahel with other organisations, are no longer relationships based on aid or support, but rather alliances with a view of creating change together. By distancing itself form the role of an 'aid organisation,' Enda Graf Sahel believes that many dead-end conflicts can be avoided.

The conference in Thies is just one point on a continuing journey. Below is a list of the steps to be taken by each participant, in the months following the workshop:

- Return home and settle back into work.
- The identification, within the organisation, with the help of the participant, of a research programme based on the axes of research outline above.
- The development of a programme of experimentation.
- Each organisation will produce an activity report and a research report.

Another conference date was set for later in 1997. The objectives of the workshop were: evaluation of each organisation's research programme; and finalisation of programmes and checks to ensure that they are in accordance with the 3 axes of research (noted in Table 1). A few thoughts to conclude are noted in Table 2:

Table 2: A few thoughts to conclude

Here are a few important ideas which emerged from the workshops:

"It's not the house which is too small, it's the occupant who has a small heart."

"If there is no conflict, you do not know who you are or where you're going. Conflict is the gateway to true communication."

"I'm looking for aid or education, but not for money. Money helps but intelligence is a real investment."

"At present, we have an idea of what we want but we still don't know how to put our body and soul into the movement."

"Our spirits recognise the novelty of what we have learnt together, but our hearts and bodies are lagging behind. So, the first thing we must do is adapt our bodies and hearts."

"All this research into conflicts boils down to an investigation into our ways of life and our practices, for it is these which cause conflicts."

"What unites us is research aimed at change (gestu ngir sop i). *The only thing which can bring about that change is logic* (sop i doxalin)."

"We have been to school and some of us have even been to college, but our heads were filled with rubbish. Because of this rubbish we are now unable to think or reason freely. Our problem is removing all of this rubbish from our brains, which is one of the results of this research with which we have become involved."

"Change does not come about by itself, it is often born out of pain. This research should help us to find ways of changing without leaving ourselves hungry."