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The role of NGOs in Democratisation and Education in Peace-time (Rwanda)

C NUNGWA KUZWE *

Rwanda is passing through one of the darkest periods in its history and probably one of the greatest tragedies in the history of humankind. Since the beginning of the century, we have only witnessed four real genocides: those of the Armenians, the Jews, the Tziganes (Hungarian gypsies), and the Tutsis in Rwanda. The fact that in Rwanda, one sector of the population massacred more than a million people of another sector, often in atrocious ways, is beyond comprehension or imagination. What makes it even harder to understand is that the different socio-ethnic groups had been living in harmony and symbiosis for decades.

The fact is that the split did occur and that millions of people lost their families, leaving widows, orphans, and cripples. Rwanda has produced the greatest number of refugees in the world, most of whom can be found in neighbouring countries. Many have already been forced to return due to the situation in Zaire.

Several attempts at reconstruction, both of the country and of morale, are underway, most notably the national reconciliation programmes, victim support programmes, and the resettlement and the socioeconomic rehabilitation of refugees. What happened in April-July 1994 in Rwanda cannot and should not be forgotten. We now have to rebuild a nation.

The Role of NGOs

Essentially, the NGO movement is a product of the community and it should plant the seeds of endogenous and durable development in the basic communities. It is imperative that NGOs participate in the prevention of conflicts and the creation of a culture of peace. NGO members must understand and must make the community understand the true causes of conflicts. They should take part in the eradication of the underlying and indirect causes of these conflicts.

In ‘developing’ countries, especially in Africa, it has become apparent that the principal cause of conflict is the refusal to share power. In our opinion, if developed countries fail to recognise the tragedies which are the daily lot of many Africans, it is because they have managed to install political systems which favour frequent changeovers of governmental power. Such systems do not exist in African countries. Our NGOs should therefore be actively involved in popular education programmes which promote political and governmental change.

* Dr Kuzwe is President of the Forum of Rwandan NGOs
In order to remain in power for as long a time as possible, preferably without sharing it, political leaders invent a whole series of strategies. The recent experience of Rwanda, provides us with examples of a few of these strategies.

It is hardly surprising that in countries divided by chronic conflicts, there is a minute portion of people who are incredibly rich, while the vast majority remain in a state of squalid poverty. This situation is often considered desirable, because a poor and starving person does not think, thus he or she can be manipulated by promises of a crust of bread. In Rwanda people participated in genocide because they were promised the property of their neighbours. However, sooner or later, people revolt. If we truly want to prevent conflicts and create a culture of peace, our community organisations will have to become involved in local programmes which promote the alleviation of poverty and, more specifically, nutritional safety.

The Importance of Education and the Law

There is not a shadow of doubt that illiteracy and lack of education provide the ideal cultural environment for the propagation of conflict. A population which knows neither how to read nor how to write, will accept whatever they are told. So there is a good reason why African leaders put obstacles in the way of national schooling programmes, which could be seen as a source of knowledge and therefore a source of anti-establishment protest. In Rwanda, children begin their primary education at 8 years old and finish at 16. The only language taught in schools is the local language, Kinyarwanda.

Since its creation in 1994, the National University has only been able to take in 3,000 students. We believe that these measures have kept the population under the blanket of ignorance, rendering it incapable of critical analysis and thus susceptible to manipulation. NGOs should thus become more involved in formal and informal education programmes. This would promote a critical spirit which would prevent blind participation in conflicts.

People are often subject to great injustices in poor countries. Injustices which are maintained over a long period of time constitute a potential source of conflict, for sooner or later the injured party will seek justice for itself. It is interesting to note that the judicial system has long been the poor relation of political decision-makers: characterised by the lack of law schools, the shortages of materials and equipment in courts of law, and the blatant mismanagement of legal proceedings. We cannot possibly prevent conflicts without a decent, independent legal system. NGOs should promote training programmes for magistrates, aim to make legal texts available to all, and provide legal representation for those who are unable to arrange it for themselves. Before the modern judiciary system can be fully
functional, we therefore have to develop and energise the traditional system of community justice.

Conflicts are born when one is forbidden to think freely or to read and write what one thinks, freely. Dictators have tried to silence their people but sooner or later the latter always rebel. Given the importance of freedom of speech and education in the process of democratisation, it is imperative that our organisations should invest time and money into the creation and maintenance of autonomous and independent newspapers. Audio-visual means of communication, especially radio, should be given priority due to the fact that a large proportion of the population is illiterate.

Many of us would like to know what our NGOs have done to prevent or to halt the genocide and massacres which have cast a tragic shadow over Rwanda. Certainly we should have done everything in our power to prevent it but could we have achieved that? And once it was underway, what could have done to stop it, when faced with machine guns and machetes and hysterical people? Did not the UN and the West clear out while they could? However, we must recognise the mistakes we made in the past in order to build a better future.

Providing democratic models

First, we must acknowledge the weakness of our organisations with regard to organisation and planning. The relationship between our organisations and the populations which we are supposed to serve is not as close as it should be. Projects are planned in our offices without any consultation with or participation by those they affect most: the beneficiaries. So, we should review our approach and, moreover, encourage communities to resolve their problems themselves.

The management of our NGOs is far from democratic, so how can we continue to criticise our political leaders for being anti-democratic when at the heart of our organisations we don’t practice democracy either? Very few decisions are made in meetings and those which are, are rarely enforced. Credibility is an indispensable prerequisite for our organisations if we are to play a determining role in the mobilisation of people and in the creation of a lawful state and a culture of peace. This credibility is threatened by the management of our organisations and by the leaders who abuse their positions so as to make themselves wealthier.

NGOs can only play an active role in the prevention and management of conflicts if they maintain a politically neutral stance. Overt or covert involvement of a community organisation leader in a conflict, can have negative repercussions for his/her organisation. In Rwanda we have seen cases of NGO leaders being won over by politicians. We must establish a code of honour for our leaders so that our credibility and the apolitical stance of our organisations can be safeguarded.
It is also important that we cultivate a culture of peace at the heart of organisations. We can never be considered to be the ‘salt of the earth’ if we practise exclusion amongst ourselves. If we believe in peace we ought to begin by practising it at home. I personally believe that if all community organisations and their members were to have an absolute faith in the case of peace, they would find that their goals would be within each reach. Think of the numerous religious groups, of the youth and women’s associations, of the workers’ co-operatives and the consumer co-operatives.

My country has suffered greatly as a consequence of the events of April 1994: peace is still elusive in the Great Lakes region. It is with great difficulty that we forgive the international community for remaining silent and turning a blind eye to the genocide which threw Rwanda into mourning. But we blame it more for not having helped us to reconstruct our country. Our NGOs, for example, have been crippled by a lack of personnel and equipment. Trust between different socio-ethnic groups has been shattered. We need help to re-establish that trust through constructive dialogue. Thousands of widows and orphans lack food and shelter. You cannot aim for peace without first taking care of these women and children. Thousands of refugees have returned to their motherland. They continue to sleep under the stars. Women and children are left uncared for and without schooling. As we have already seen, the absence of peace in Rwanda has been echoed in Burundi, Zaire and other neighbouring countries. Why should our community organisations continue to close their eyes to the foolishness of certain leaders. It is time to wake up! We believe in peace...so let’s defend it! The faith and conviction of Nelson Mandela transformed South Africa; others’ faith and conviction in peace will transform Africa and the World.