Learning about War and Peace in the Great Lakes Region of Africa

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ABSTRACT Two-thirds of the world’s conflicts are in Africa. In particular, the Great Lakes region (Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Tanzania) continues to see conflicts that are complex, extreme and seemingly intractable. By exploring the narrative experiences of those most affected by the conflicts in the region – specifically refugees from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda living in camps in north-western Tanzania – this article examines to what extent educative processes (holistic formal and informal learning processes) affect people’s experience and engagement in violent conflict. The article draws on the author’s research that identified different information circuits by which people learned about conflict. In opposition to the common perception that formal schooling effects change, the findings indicated that the primary mechanisms were oral/aural, such as gossip, traditional storytelling and radio. Individual and collective identities were constructed through this process and the research identified how identities could be shifted through different formal and informal educative processes – often through indoctrination or coercion. This article concludes with an indication of alternative strategies for conflict prevention and peacebuilding (particularly within a refugee or similar context). Efforts at peacebuilding continue to falter in the region and this illustrates the need to construct a more inclusive peacemaking process, taking into account the insights and values of those most affected.

Introduction

Two-thirds of all global conflicts have occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, yet there is little international recognition of the nature of the conflicts in Africa (Global Issues, 2002). They are regarded primarily as ‘ethnic’ or ‘tribal’ by many Western nations, implying that states should be left alone to deal with their internal crises. The North has largely ignored the conflicts between and within African states, and has also failed to address the mechanisms by which conflicts can be mitigated or resolved at grass-roots level.

This article draws upon the author’s doctoral research which attempted to outline the conduits by which people learn about conflict, both through formal and informal educative processes (education in its broadest sense), in order to identify alternative mechanisms for conflict mitigation. The findings contradicted common perceptions that formal schooling effects behavioural change and could therefore act as the main mechanism for peacebuilding. They indicated that the primary educative processes by which people learned about conflict were oral/aural, such as gossip, traditional storytelling and radio. Individual and collective identities were constructed through these processes and the research identified how identities could be shifted through different formal and informal educative processes, sometimes through indoctrination or coercion.

One of the key factors motivating the research (conducted between 2002 and 2006) arose out of the author’s role as an education officer working with refugees from Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in the Great Lakes region in Africa. The complex
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The interrelationship of the conflicts in these countries was of particular concern and was compounded by the low level of international interest in a situation where over four million people had already died in the DRC alone. The research drew on interviews and focus group discussions with a number of community groups (mainly Burundian and Congolese refugees with a very small number of Rwandan asylum seekers) living in four refugee camps in north-western Tanzania.

This article concludes with an indication of alternative strategies for conflict prevention and peacebuilding (particularly within a refugee or similar context). Efforts at peacebuilding continue to falter in the region and this illustrates the need to construct a more inclusive peacemaking process, taking into account the insights and values of those most affected.

The Formal Education Dialectic: a right of protection or preparation for war?

Much of the development literature states that the right to basic education is a prima facie principle for most agencies engaged in assistance to Southern countries, particularly those ridden by conflict (Pigozzi, 1999; Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Sinclair, 2002; Bird, 2003a; Nicolai, 2003; Smith & Vaux, 2003). However, this is more difficult to sustain in acute emergencies, despite the number of international conventions and human rights acts aimed at ensuring education for all children regardless of context. Literature concerning education in Southern countries confirms that education is regarded as 'a rightful safe haven for children' (Boyden, 1996; Machel, 1996; Roger, 2002; Smith & Vaux, 2003). Roger (2002) adds that through the provision of 'quality' education, children and families can be protected from some of the worst excesses of conflict. Schools or their equivalent can also be a place for psychosocial healing and reconciliation, and can act as the community's 'barometer' of hope for the future.

Several authors (see, for example, Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Nelles, 2003; Tawil & Harley, 2004) reiterate this paradox of formal education and its potential for breeding violence or for promoting social and civic reconstruction. This contradiction was also a significant factor in the research findings, which presented 'educated people' as possessing paradoxical roles in relation to conflict. The potential for negative manipulation embedded in some education systems is perceived in the literature as being a significant factor in influencing conflict. The legitimisation of prejudice – the licit demonisation of the 'other' – through the formal education system is something that is common in the conflicts dealt with in this article.

The political and social manipulation of history education has been well documented elsewhere and a number of authors provide examples of negative elements that they believe have exacerbated recent conflicts in Africa (Slater, 1995; Arthur & Phillips, 2000; Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Baranovic, 2001; Bird, 2003a; Obura, 2003; Smith & Vaux, 2003; Davies, 2004). However, Obura’s illumination of history teaching in Rwanda is of particular interest, given the context of this article’s research findings.

The teaching of history and the manipulation of historical facts were key factors in the genocide in Rwanda, according to Obura. She states: ‘Rwandan nationals are pointing also to how the education system was used over several decades as an instrument for fomenting exclusion and hate’ (Obura, 2003, p. 98). In her examination of the reconstruction of the Rwandan education system after the genocide, Obura indicates that dealing with the sensitivity of teaching history in an objective but meaningful way is proving to be a very difficult task as ‘there have been no history textbooks written or published since 1994’ (p. 99). She suggests that the historical myths that were perpetuated before, during and after the genocide have constructed an erroneous world view of the dynamics of Rwandan society. These ‘myths’, as she explains them, suggest that the three ‘tribes’ of Rwanda, i.e. the Bahutu, Batutsi and Batwa, were from different origins. The supposed ‘indigenous’ Batwa were dominated by the later arrivals in the mid to latter part of the last millennium of the Bahutu and then of the Batutsi, who were regarded as coming from a more sophisticated and educated culture. Colonialists perpetuated these myths as part of their justification for placing Tutsis in positions of administrative power. Obura argues that this view of how the different tribes arrived in Rwanda is ‘untenable’ given recent Rwandan historical evidence, which suggests that the ‘ancestors’ of the three groups had lived in Rwandan territory and the Great Lakes region for over 2000 years.
Obura (2003) suggests that the view that created the Banyarwanda as separate ethnic groups is based on the misperceptions and misunderstandings of European explorers, missionaries and colonizers, which they created for themselves in an attempt to explain African cultural phenomena through their own world view’ (p. 101). Rwandans were then, in effect, forced to take on the European perceptions of Rwandan society and to learn the European view of their own history in the classroom.

In the refugee camps, formal educative processes had significance chiefly in terms of producing ‘educated people’ (those with a university education). These were identified by some as not only having culpability in the conflict but, paradoxically, as also having the potential to promote peace, as explored in more depth below.

**The Role of ‘Educated People’**

There was an important distinction made between ‘education institutions’ and ‘educated people’. The role of education institutions was less important for most respondents than that of ‘educated people’ or ‘intellectuals’, who were perceived as ‘part of the problem’. It was suggested that they possessed a degree of responsibility for influencing and even contributing to the conflict. Schools, along with other ‘arenas of learning’, were identified as places where students would gather to discuss their engagement in the conflict – or to train for it. However, teachers were not identified as teaching hate messages or teaching directly about the conflict. This does not mean to say that this did not exist, but rather that respondents did not identify it as forming a significant part of their experience.

One of the Congolese youth interviewed summarised some of the sentiments about intellectuals that were voiced by several of the respondents: ‘The educated people can be easily corrupted and hence sell us ... They cannot be trusted “kabisa” [completely]’. He suggested that educated people were ‘closer’ to ‘Whites’, who were seen by the majority of Congolese as being at the heart of the conflict. Many Congolese respondents perceived Whites in this way because of the funding given to Uganda and Rwanda. They suggested the money was used to support Rwandan rebels and disrupt the DRC. There was a belief that the increased interactions between Whites and educated people resulted in the corruption and ultimate deception of the intellectuals. As one Congolese youth said: ‘The Whites interact with the learned people and deceive them.’

Intellectuals therefore were seen as powerful people who could influence the outcome of conflict. Educated people were seen as powerful in two ways: firstly, because they were ‘closer to the Whites’ and therefore close to the perceived seat of power and, secondly, because they had a greater ability to gain access to and interpret the information they received regarding the conflict. This power, however, made them less trusted than those with little or no education, who were perceived as more likely to tell the truth. The educated people were therefore distrusted not only because of their education but also because of the power it invested in them.

Teachers and university students, as educated people, perceived themselves in this context as victims. It is well documented that educated people were not only the perpetrators of mass killings during the genocide in Rwanda, but had also been victims during earlier pogroms (Mamdani, 2002). Burundian respondents in Malkki’s (1995) research in the Mishamo refugee camp in Tanzania similarly identified how educated people had been targets during the 1972 massacres: ‘They wanted to kill my clan because my clan was educated. The clans which were educated, cultivated, they were killed. In my clan, there were school-teachers, medical assistants, agronomists ... All have been exterminated’ (p. 98). What is evident from these responses (as well as the research findings from this article) is that there was a contradictory perception of educated people – they were not only ‘part of the problem’ but also had the potential to bring about social improvement by providing the ‘light’ for others to follow.

Conversely, as outlined in the following section, informal educative processes were considered to be more significant in terms of passing on information, whether through family, friends or radio as part of the oral/aural tradition in these societies.
Informal Educative Processes: the power of gossip, rumour and the oral tradition

The types of informal educative processes identified for the purposes of this study draw upon Livingstone’s assertion that informal learning is ‘any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria ... in any context outside the pre-established curricula of educative institutions’ (Livingstone, 2001, p. 4). They encompass Billett’s argument that all actions imply some form of learning, and that most learning takes place outside educational institutions (Billett, 2001, in Colley et al, 2002). In the Southern context, this assertion is particularly valid, as in most traditional societies knowledge and experience have been handed down through the generations. As Obanya suggests:

in traditional African societies, the venue for learning was the entire society ... Generally speaking, general education was given by parents, elders, and within age groups and castes. The ‘teacher’ in this case would be anyone who was older than the ‘pupil’ and so knew more about the world. (Obanya, 1995, p. 4)

Informal educative processes are part of life experiences and, as a result, face similar accusations to those laid at the door of formal education, namely that they have the potential to breed violence. As Nelles (2003) argues, informal educative processes can equally be ‘complicit in, or directly responsible, for the reproduction or mitigation of violence, including specific formats or responses such as terrorism and war’ (p. 239). He also points to educative mechanisms which, although within a formal learning environment, are informal in nature. He highlights the role of the ‘hidden curriculum’ – informal values that are part of educational institutions, and are often stronger in terms of inculcating attitudes and beliefs than the formal structures. He suggests that ‘the hidden curriculum concerns itself with school values, rituals, group loyalties, peer influences and friendship patterns’ (p. 131). He also argues that these patterns form the basis ‘on which society later builds a superstructure of political, demographic, recreational and social segregation’ (p. 131).

The findings of the research presented here reflected Nelles’s arguments regarding the strength of the hidden curriculum, where informal peer networks and organisational structures formed within the school grounds were identified as significant learning conduits (in relation to conflict). The most powerful of all of the informal educative processes was the role of family and peers in passing on collective histories as part of an oral tradition.

The following sections present research findings about the ways that refugee and conflict-affected populations in the Great Lakes region used informal educative processes (oral tradition, gossip, rumour, radio) to learn about conflict and to inform coping strategies.

The Oral Tradition

Pottier (2002) highlights the importance of the oral tradition in developing and maintaining dominant narratives. The remembrance of things past and passed down is also critical in the accepted narratives of international aid organisations and journalists. Learning in a traditional African culture is part of everyday life in an informal sense. Many authors writing on the oral tradition focus on its positive elements as a provider of entertainment through stories, myths and legends, and as a strong educative process that imparts moral, societal or tribal skills and values. This is often through the ‘apprenticeship’ of the younger generation to older members of the tribe or group (Mafu, 2004). The learning of skills through clan associations is another significant mechanism for young people to learn skills from their elders.

These skills are invariably taught orally and bind members of the same clan together in strong kinship networks (Mafu, 2004). The traditions of clan culture are rarely written down. Mafu (2004) describes certain clans who, he says, were ‘held to be endowed with supernatural powers and here too the transmission of the knowledge needed to exercise these powers was always by face-to-face communication. The secrets were not written down’ (p. 54). The clan networks that Mafu describes were also found in Burundi, and were mentioned by respondents as possible entries for peace. Some respondents argued that as clans spanned ethnic divides, thereby mixing ethnic groups, there was a possibility of utilising clan culture for peacebuilding. One Burundian educator,
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for example, in an individual interview, discussed the relationship of clans in Burundi, many of which still exist and some of which cross the ethnic boundaries:

These are more clans than tribes and are not based on family or other lines, but more through common interest. For example, there might be a clan of potters or a clan of basket makers. These might not be from the same region, although there are some clans which do reside together. A lot of times the members of the clan don’t know each other, but if they find out that they are from the same clan, then there is an automatic bond/friendship.

In situations of conflict where there is little opportunity to engage in or develop a literate society – as access to printed texts is limited – orality and the oral tradition are particularly significant. They not only provide a strong social function in cementing community networks, but also are sometimes the only mechanisms by which some marginalised groups receive their information about the conflict. Local knowledge and traditions are similarly highly valued. Elders have a particular status and role to play in traditional societies. Although in the refugee camps they saw their status eroded because of the changes in administrative structures of the camps, there was still recognition that ‘wise men’ had the moral authority to judge others.

An oral tradition was identified by both Burundian and Congolese respondents, who recounted traditional stories concerning the history of the conflict which had been passed down through the generations. These included the historical basis for divisions in both countries as well as the foundations for the current conflicts. For example, one Burundian respondent explained his perception of how the ‘injustice’ between Hutu and Tutsi first arose, and then suggested that these accounts were not written down but were passed down from father to son:

Respondent: So, if you consider the problem of injustice between Tutsi and Hutu, it is a long story. So, someone would say that this began in Micombero’s regime [a former ruler in the twentieth century], he would be mistaken. This began a long time ago.
Interviewer: You say that these things began a long time ago. How did you know them? Who told you?
Respondent: You know that here in Africa the writing is recent. We received information by oral transmission. You were told information by one who has witnessed it. My father has a father. My father’s father told my father the story. My father told the story to me and when I get my child I shall tell him the story.

Such an oral tradition is a powerful educative process that carries credibility with the recipient because of the close relationship with the transmitter. Perhaps also because of the belief that parents are always right, there was little questioning of stories from parents. There was limited critical awareness of alternative viewpoints to history. When some respondents were asked if they thought that ‘their own side’ was also culpable, the answer was often ‘yes’, but no details or stories were provided. Although culpability was not directly admitted, the Burundian respondents identified one of the most critical issues in the conflict as ‘lies’. One of the ‘influential’ people in the camp stated:

All that makes Burundi to be in such a mess is ‘lies and fear’. In order for those things to end, the people must be given a say again. When the community will get back the word that has been taken from them, the fear will also end.

The implication is that the lies, and therefore fear, are passed down from the top – that ‘the people’ have no voice in their own destiny. As a result, there was still an abnegation of their own role in the conflict – the fault always lies with others, whether this refers to their own political leaders or to the ‘enemy’.

The oral transmission of stories was considered by all groups to be one of the most significant educative processes for passing on information. Information was passed on through family and friends, who were trusted sources of information. Children, for example, automatically trusted their parents: ‘My father cannot cheat me,’ said one Congolese child. This child believed all that her father told her in the same way as the adult quoted earlier believed the stories that had been passed down from generation to generation. One child learned about the war entirely through stories that her parents told her. She stated very clearly that the Banyamulenge wanted to ‘take over our country’ and to ‘exploit our wealth’ and, when asked where she learned this, she said: ‘My parents
The Power of Gossip and Rumour

In all societies, gossip and rumour are part of everyday existence which define our reality and the constructs of the world around us. We extract meaning and learn through the practice of believing or disbelieving, trusting or not trusting information given to us, whether written or through gossip and rumour. The power of the oral tradition is significant in African societies, and gossip and rumour – as with any other society – also have a powerful role to play, both psychologically, socially and culturally. Despite this role, there is limited literature focusing on the discourse of gossip, particularly in African cultures.

Gossip is typically imbued with certain malign influences which ignore its potential for social bonding that results from gossiping within and between social networks. It is seen as undermining, as going behind one’s back, as creating tensions, accusations and a culture of fear. However, a small body of literature counteracts this popular perception of gossip by emphasising the positive aspects of gossip – for instance, that it helps to establish working and social relationships and cement social ties (Rosnow & Fine, 1976; Levin & Arluke, 1987; Wickham, 1998). This cementing of social ties is particularly important in African cultures where there is a long tradition of gossip as part of the fabric of daily life, whether through families gathering at the water points, elders sitting under the mango trees or women chatting after church. All are places where gossip is a natural and important function for finding out new information or confirming existing anecdotes. It is not considered as idle or malign, just normal.

The definition of identity through social interaction, a large part of which centres on gossip (see, for example, Field, 1996; Wickham, 1998), was reflected clearly in the research findings. Many of the respondents said that they had discovered their ethnic identity not only from their parents – as one might have expected – but also from neighbours ‘gossiping’ about them, or people talking about them or to them in the street. In this way, gossip acts as either social cement within an ethnic group or as a mechanism by the opposing group to warn others to steer clear of the ‘enemy’.

Rosnow & Fine (1976) also indicate the importance of talk, of gossip, as a mechanism for social inclusion, for forming and maintaining social networks. They suggest that there is something ‘wrong’ in life if people are not talking about other people. It is a sign of social alienation. Similarly, Wickham argues that:

What people gossip about, what stories they tell, will also tell you how their group socially constructs the world outside as meaningful, and about how it understands the processes of practical behaviour, ‘habitus’, as Pierre Bourdieu calls them, which structure the way everyone deals strategically with that world. (Wickham, 1998, p. 3)

The daily process of gossip is becoming increasingly supported by technology where in most modern cultures (and also now in the refugee camps) technological advances have moved the culture of gossip away from the street corner to the mobile phone and Internet chat room. Similarly, rumours are spread equally as rapidly through the new technologies.

Rumour is sometimes perceived as different from gossip, as rumour is believed to have an underlying motive attached, which is not typically benign. Rumours tend to deal with people’s anxieties and are frequently a reflection of societal hopes and fears. Rosnow & Fine (1976) separate these kinds of rumours into two distinct categories: those that we wish were true and others that we dread and ‘pray are false’.

The fact that rumour plays so successfully on people’s fears and anxieties is the reason why rumour is often treated with suspicion, and its success is particularly dependent on who is spreading it. Consequently, those rumours that come from within one’s own trusted network are more likely to be believed and more likely to be transmitted to others. The findings in the research confirmed that rumours from trustworthy sources – typically from ‘own group networks’ – were believed more readily than ‘fact’ from sources considered doubtful. Trust plays an important role in the successful spreading of rumour. In this way, rumour shares similarities with gossip in terms of its tendency to spread information within rather than across social groups (Colletta & Cullen, 2000).
Most critically for this research, the elements of truth and trust were the essential ingredients for a rumour to be taken seriously (Allport & Postman, 1947). The respondents in the research consistently stated the desire and need for truth. For rumour – as well as other information – to be believed, truth was a necessary element, from trusted sources. The importance of trust is a significant element in the ‘life’ of a rumour.

Rumour, which was often passed on through gossip, was considered a different mechanism from the oral tradition, or ‘mouth to mouth’, even though it was another form of oral transmission. Rumour ‘was rife’ before, during and after conflict. Before the conflict started in the DRC, many rumours were not ‘taken seriously’, which is why they were treated as different from information passed between trusted friends and family members. There were many Congolese, for example, who believed strongly that their army would defeat the ‘invaders’, so the rumours concerning the possible takeover of their region were ignored until the evidence was overwhelming that the national army had been defeated. Many respondents were shocked that their national army could just ‘run away’ in the face of the ‘enemy’. As this Congolese leader stated:

When the war begun we started wondering how the Rwandese could dare attack us and let alone beat us on a battleground. It was unthinkable and unacceptable in the mind of the Congolese people. The fact is that the enemy was not stronger than us but the enemy bought influential people in the government and in the national army. In reality, our army didn’t fight.

Rumours such as ‘the Banyamulenge have killed a pastor at Tulambo and given his meat to dogs’ were commonly cited as scaring people but were still not sufficient for them to flee the country. It was not until they started witnessing events, seeing ‘troops of Banyarwanda growing in numbers’, hearing gunfire and seeing the wounded, that people started to believe that their army had ‘run away’ and was leaving them to their fate. A traditional king from the DRC said:

A lot of rumours were circulating. We got them [the rumours] from themselves [the Banyamulenge] and especially from the queer behaviour all during those years of their preparations [for war]. I think it was one of their tactics to scare people by telling them their plan.

The build-up to the conflict was noted in the supposed changing behaviour of the Banyamulenge, accounts of which were then noted and passed on through rumour and gossip. In this way, rumour was used as a mechanism to incite fear of the enemy.

For Burundians, rumour was equally important and was often passed on through gossip at, for example, the marketplace, water collection points or food distribution sites. However, as mentioned earlier, much of the information was not taken at face value, especially if it was known to be rumour. As one of the Burundian youth interviewed said: ‘When we hear rumours, we wait for some time to see if they have some truth and we listen to radios to verify them. No one can give me information that I will accept on the spot.’ Although rumour was accepted as part of normal life and as the way information was transmitted, few Burundian respondents admitted to acting on rumours because they felt that people would tell lies. A young woman, when asked who spread information, said: ‘Ordinary people. The ordinary people walk around. When I hear information I tell a person, that person tells another one … and the news spreads. However, most of the time individuals lie.’ This was a common theme amongst Burundians, who frequently said that the Burundian population told lies – particularly those at the top. They suggested that one of the causes of the conflict was that people were not willing to admit the truth. This statement from a commercial worker was representative of many similar statements made by the Burundian respondents: ‘I find that the war comes from the fact that they lie to one other on everything they do. Since they have begun talks, they have never told the truth to one another.’

Rumour more than the ‘street talk’ of gossip was associated with the circulation of lies. The importance of the trustworthiness of information was a consistent factor throughout the data collection process, and it was important for the respondents that the information they received, from whichever educative process, was from a trusted source.
Propaganda, Media and the Role of the Radio

Propaganda works – as rumour does – by using people’s existing beliefs and fears to build a form of consensual legality that legitimises what the propagandists want to promote. The fear factor was used to such effect by the propagandists in Rwanda through the notorious Radio Milles Collines. As Mamdani highlights:

> For Hutu Power propagandists, the Tutsi question was not one of rights, but of power ... that the real aim of the RPF [Rwandan Patriotic Front] was not rights for all Rwandans, but power for the Tutsi. This is why one needs to recognize that it was not greed – not even hatred – but fear which was the reason why the multitude responded to the call of Hutu Power the closer the war came to home. (Mamdani, 2002, p. 191)

Propagandists therefore, in this instance, were manipulating the existing Hutu psyche and working upon it to build up the fear of Tutsi repression as palpable, closer and more dangerous. As Ellul (1966) asserts, propaganda does not come out of nothing, it has to ‘attach itself to a feeling, an idea; it must build on a foundation already present in the individual’ (p. 36). Thus, for propaganda to be successful it must touch the individual’s sense of self-affirmation and identification with the propagandist. Typically, nowadays this is through means of mass communication such as radio, television and the Internet. Ellul (1966) suggests propaganda rarely succeeds with organised groups because the values of the group override those of the individual. For mass propaganda to work it needs to appeal to the individual sentiment or need. While propaganda within a group can be highly successful, Ellul identifies this as a different issue, which is more akin to political or religious indoctrination.

The role of the media for propaganda purposes, as weapons of war and as sources of information, has long been recognised in conflict situations. Radio has been used for decades as a mechanism for learning, for transmitting knowledge in many forms for both good and ill. In the research, radio was significant not only in the genocide in Rwanda, but also in terms of Burundian and Congolese refugees learning about the current conflicts and the status of peace negotiations in their countries.

As a force for ‘good’, education, radio, television and, more recently, the Internet have been used as part of the expansion in distance learning. These media offer opportunities for learners to engage in a style of flexible learning that is more reflective of their needs and conditions than traditional formal education. Increasingly, development organisations are recognising the potential of this form of learning and are investing funds in Southern countries to establish distance education and online networks. The research findings also highlighted radio as being at the forefront of information acquisition. Refugee respondents almost universally cited radio (certain trusted stations) as one of the most important mechanisms for finding out trustworthy information.

Mobile phones have also dramatically changed the nature of communication and the ability of families to be connected. This has affected the role and use of mobile phones in relation to gossip and rumour. In a study commissioned by British Telecom’s Cellnet on the role of mobile phones and gossip, the researcher for the Social Issues Research Centre, Kate Fox, investigated some of the ways in which mobile phones have replaced traditional mechanisms of gossiping. Fox (2003) suggests that: ‘Mobile gossip restores our sense of connection and community, and provides an antidote to the pressures and alienation of modern life. Mobiles are a “social lifeline” in a fragmented and isolating world.’

For refugees, mobile phones are less a means to gossip than literally a ‘lifeline’ to determine the safety of a possible return home. However, despite the rapid explosion in technology and the desire of the populations of the South to access and be part of the technological revolution, many development agencies are still reluctant to invest in the expansion of technology in Southern countries.

Radio featured strongly for both Congolese and Burundian respondents as one of the most important educative processes for obtaining trusted information. The majority of Congolese and Burundian respondents from both focus groups and in-depth interviews cited radio as being one of the most significant sources of information.
Radio, more so than any other form of media such as newspapers or television, was important for the Burundian and Congolese refugees chiefly because of the availability of radio in remote rural areas. Very few people, except the urban rich, have access to television. In the DRC, Burundi and in the camps in Tanzania, radio was a lifeline for information. This is not to say that all radio stations were trusted. Typically, ‘national’, i.e. government-led radio stations, were not trusted, so any information from these stations had to be verified by using other sources. Trusted radio stations were cited by respondents from both countries and these were typically international stations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Voice of America and Radio France International. As one Congolese family man indicated: ‘The first source of information is radio, especially foreign stations. To us this is the trustworthy source, especially when many stations broadcast the same news items stemming from different reporters.’

The Burundian respondents also mentioned a radio station called Radio Isanganiro, which was trusted because it presents balanced reports and is managed by both Hutu and Tutsi correspondents. As one of the Burundian elders said: ‘There is information in French, Swahili, Kirundi from different radios. If you follow them, all that is said on FM is said on Isanganiro. The first radio to tell information as it has received it is Isanganiro.’

Respondents also stated that they compared stories between radio stations and other sources to determine the most truthful information. Information was rarely taken at face value and was verified by a number of different mechanisms. Radio announcements before the conflicts arose were also recognised as being an important factor in encouraging people to flee. Most respondents placed journalists close to the information even if they were not regarded as powerful. One elder from Burundi stated: ‘The information given by the journalist is the grass-roots information.’ Radio, therefore, was important for respondents before, during and after the conflicts.

As an educative process, radio made a significant contribution to how respondents reacted before the war started, during the conflict – sometimes determining the decision when to flee – and after the conflict, in finding out information on the possibilities for peace and for repatriation. If the source of information on the radio was trusted, then it acted as a very powerful mechanism for change. It also had a social and psychological function in linking people in exile with those at home, and had the potential to influence the perpetuation or cessation of the conflicts.

In relation to the success of an educative process, this element of trust was important in determining whether information could make a difference to perceptions or to actions. The findings indicate that the most successful information conduits need to come from trusted sources, often through informal educative processes, such as oral tradition, radio and internet. These trusted conduits such as reliable radio networks, family and community groups, and sometimes religious leaders, might be useful to promote peacebuilding activities. These ‘entries for peace’ might promote the transcendence of group prejudices, fear and hatred of the ‘other’, and are explored in more depth in the section below.

Reclaiming Positive Identities: a ‘pick-and-mix’ approach to peacebuilding

Transcending Identity and a Positive Identity Shift

In order to identify how to break the potential for violence associated with exclusive and authoritarian control of identity groups, it is necessary to consider the options available to individuals to transcend their identity group and/or their ethnicity. Is the only possibility for transcending this group identity through individual friendship? Is transcendence of group identity the route to a positive identity shift? ‘Positive identity shift’ here refers to the adoption or shift towards an identity that transcends a vengeful mentality, i.e. an identity that encourages negative and stereotypical presentations of ‘the other’. The most important question here is who decides what is promoted as positive or negative within any particular culture/group. Al Qaeda is a clear example of a group who decide and promote an ideology where murder and terrorism are considered as justified attacks. They suggest that:
God has sanctioned such punishment, that they have the ‘right’ to attack and destroy not just villages and cities, but ‘the economy of those who have robbed our wealth and to kill civilians of the country which has killed ours’ ... a convenient justification for revenge. (Davies, 2004, p. 81)

The potential for transcendence of a negative identity adoption, particularly at an individual level, is provided by Mamdani when he talks of a ‘retired soldier-turned-policeman’ embroiled in the genocide in Rwanda. This man hid eleven people in different locations: from ceilings up above to pits down below. When I asked him whether he knew of anyone else who had helped people by hiding them, he said ‘no’. When I asked why he thought there had not been others like him in the area, he simply said: ‘People don’t have the same mind.’ (Mamdani, 2002, p. 220)

The transcendence of identity and the ability to empathise with the ‘other’ to increase the potential for individuals such as the ‘soldier-turned-policeman’ leads one to examine the potential of different mechanisms by which this can be achieved.

The findings from this research suggested that informal educative processes appeared to be significant in effecting identity shifts and transmitting important information relating to conflict and/or peace. Therefore, peacebuilding strategies need to be located also within the informal parameters of educative processes. It is here that identity construction is deeply rooted, through family and community interaction, and that the potential for identity shifts towards the positive might be achieved.

There is a danger of adopting any single approach to peacebuilding as a panacea. There should be a multiplicity of approaches to promote a positive identity shift towards peace rather than conflict. In their summary of peace education approaches, for example, Smith & Vaux (2003) rightly argue that ‘none of them offers a “magic solution” for the prevention of conflict. Rather they represent a complex matrix of education initiatives that address key themes and values that could have a preventative effect in the long term’ (p. 35). Other authors have written eruditely on the potential of positive change through the formal education system. Therefore, this article suggests that a ‘pick-and-mix’ approach to peacebuilding should consist primarily of informal educative processes and interact with the formal system in a holistic way through what Miller & Affolter (2002) term the ‘slow shift from ideologies of antagonism and the glorification of violence to constructive ideologies that offer an inclusive, peace-oriented vision of the future’ (p. 34).

The aim is not to provide a training programme, or set of guidelines, but suggestions for approaches and techniques that might be useful as ‘entries for peace’, i.e. starting points that may assist communities and practitioners to review peacebuilding strategies from a holistic perspective and according to context. They are not suggestions for specific conflict resolution, conflict management or peacekeeping practices, which are all related stages towards a process that ‘encompasses the full array of stages and approaches needed to transform conflict towards sustainable, peaceful relations and outcome’ (Lederach, 1995, p. 14). Interventions should be built on existing community structures and complement, not replace, existing peacebuilding strategies.

Through a Formal Educational Approach

Formal education has had a powerful role to play in the development of conflict in many countries throughout history. Therefore, formal education institutions need to play a role on the flip side to conflict and take part in peacebuilding as part of an ongoing process utilising formal educational institutions but employing informal educative processes as part of a community partnership. In this way,

[p]eace building cannot be seen in a vacuum, as a single educational input, but as a ‘process rather than a product’, relying on local rather than external inputs which seek to create opportunities rather than impose solutions. (Bush & Saltarelli) suggest that peace building education has to go further than ‘add good education and stir’ and offer more systematic community-based mechanisms which encourage peace building as a process rather than a product of education. (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000, in Bird, 2003b, p. 22)
The educational approach is one that aims to provide a coordinated mechanism for the creation of positive histories and peacebuilding efforts by linking what is taught at school with the teachings of parents or guardians at home. These dialogues can be strengthened further by also using radio and the Internet. Radio is already a feature for many learners in Africa and eventually the Internet will become a similar feature.

Through the Oral Tradition

There was clear evidence from the research that the stories passed on by parents and grandparents had a profound affect on children’s self-perception, perception of others and their involvement in conflict. While the whole-family approach mentioned below might be one way of addressing this, there may be additional mechanisms to encourage storytelling in schools and other institutions (which is becoming a dying art in African culture). Mafu highlights the role of entertainment in traditional oral societies:

Entertainment, education, initiation, government, welfare and religion were thus carried out through personal contact and in the language of the group. As in all face-to-face communication, the language of the exchanges was always parole, the dialect particular to the small group. (Mafu, 2004, p. 54)

In recapturing this tradition of ‘parole’, it is necessary to encourage new storytellers who are willing to tell positive stories of the ‘other’ and also persuade the traditional elder storytellers to recite stories that might contribute to positive identity construction. Meaning and moral values are attached to stories which can impart strong social and psychological messages as well as open up opportunities for different groups to share aspects of their ‘joint history and the suffering of the other’ (Chaitin, 2003).

The use of storytelling therefore, in the context of this research, could also be a powerful medium for change, to build up processes and action from within and through the conflicting groups’ own cultures. At different arenas of learning and gathering places, storytelling, theatre, radio shows and other events could be held on an ongoing, interactive basis by community members rather than outsiders.

Through a Whole-Family Approach

The family unit – whatever its composition – is one of the most fundamental learning environments and the interaction within that unit has profound and life-lasting consequences. Therefore, in recognition of the critical importance of the family environment, it is suggested that the use of a whole-family approach, if combined with other key arenas of learning such as school and work, has potential as a transformational mechanism for promoting positive identity shifts.

This approach focuses on the family unit as the essential element in developing a peacebuilding strategy and, like Smith & Vaux (2003), questions the traditional ‘rationale as to why peace education programmes are directed towards certain groups (children, adolescents, adults, politicians, combatants, bereaved)’ (p. 35). Many existing approaches to peacebuilding focus on certain groups or subsections of society. There is no particular rationale for this, except that some groups (for example, children in the company of elders) are perceived as being restricted in the company of a different group. This article suggests that work with all family members is essential when defining the learning needs of children. For example, elders could be encouraged to take an active role in peacebuilding through positive storytelling. The stories that many of the elders recounted during the process of data collection were negative and stereotypical. These harmful narratives of history are passed on through the generations and such narratives need to be counteracted by positive stories that ‘engage the self and other, and provide a narrative that is both cognitively and emotionally compelling’ (Chaitin, 2003).

It is not an easy process to encourage this positive outlook in elders who have traditionally failed to consider the perspective of the ‘other’. Perhaps through engagement in positive narrative and contribution to radio drama it may be possible to bring about constructive transformation of the dominant narrative against the ‘other’. Radio or interactive drama can include aspects of
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traditional peacebuilding programming, such as life skills or human rights education. The difference is that family units are the focus of attention rather than the typically defined groups of, for example, women, youth or elders.

Through the family approach, units of different generations can be engaged in community theatre, radio, family dialogues, family workshops, etc. While this approach may be more intensive and time-consuming than traditional mechanisms for peacebuilding, when combined with the other methods mentioned below, it could provide a strategy which has not previously been utilised in development circles.

**Through a Leadership Approach**

This approach is designed merely to highlight why leaders should be included at all levels, in order to lessen the perceived gap between leaders and communities. Leaders at all levels, from family level to community and national level, are perceived as critical in the decision making that leads to conflict or promotes peace. The approach outlined here is not based on traditional leadership training, but recognises the role of leaders at different levels and how it might be utilised to positive effect.

The emphasis on grass-roots 'local actors' is the critical element in the approach recommended in this article. Many leadership programmes have focused on leaders at the top levels of society. However, fewer national or international interventions have included leaders at grass-roots level to accept and assume responsibility for peacebuilding. As was seen in the genocide in Rwanda, it was the leaders at this level who implemented the orders of their national leaders.

It is therefore essential to bring leaders of different levels together. It is not sufficient for interventions at different levels to be conducted in tandem but it is necessary to have a holistic approach which (a) brings leaders of different levels together in one forum and (b) brings these different leaders together with members of their community – to be accountable and to negotiate peacebuilding strategies that are realistic and achievable for all. As religious leaders are particularly trusted conduits for information transmission, their inclusion and role in peacebuilding needs to be reviewed and developed further. Similarly, positive ‘role models’ as leaders could also be included amongst these groups, i.e. individuals who have transcended the boundaries of identity prejudice.

**Through Media: the role of radio**

Distance learning is not a new phenomenon in formal education circles and many projects have encouraged access to basic education through radio in many countries, including those in Africa. In Tanzania, for example, Mambo Elimu (which means ‘education is everything’ in Kiswahili) operates a distance learning programme on behalf of the US-based Educational Development Centre and provides basic education services for children from grades one to four using the national Tanzanian radio network.

However, radio is not only a mechanism for providing formal educational services to children and adults, it is also an important feature of everyday life in Africa. Few communities do not have access to radio. Despite the fact that many policy makers remain unconvinced about the strength of popular culture and the potential for its success, the successful use of radio soap operas has been recognised, particularly in the field of HIV/AIDS communication strategies (Rogers et al, 1999; Vaughn et al, 2000; Myers, 2002; Singhal & Rogers, 2003). Radio programmes such as the long-running Twende Na Wakati ('Let’s Go with the Times') in Tanzania or Rwanda’s drama serial Urunana ('Hand in Hand') are designed to focus on urban and rural populations by using entertainment as a means of raising awareness of HIV/AIDS and other health-related issues (Myers, 2002). These types of approaches have been used less frequently in the field of peacebuilding, although an initiative by Search for Common Ground has brought together radio stations from sub-Saharan Africa, including Radio Kwizera in Tanzania with Radio Ijambo in Burundi, to launch Radio for Peacebuilding Africa.[1] This broadcasts programmes jointly in Burundi and Tanzania which are designed to reduce tensions and facilitate reconciliation amongst Burundians (and other Africans), whether at home or in exile.

Drama, in particular, is a powerful medium, which Myers suggests
can portray the psychological and social blocks that stand in the way of behavioural change. It can also explore emotions and motivations which conventional communication methods (such as public service announcements) cannot reach. Through realistic characters, drama can portray the different options and solutions that people can use to overcome the social, emotional, spiritual and societal barriers associated with HIV/AIDS. The best dramas are written on the basis of ongoing participatory audience research which is a continuous process of listening, recording and feeding back the reactions of ordinary listeners through focus groups. (Myers, 2002, p. 4)

The use of interactive drama through radio and television as well as through community street theatre, and perhaps at a later stage through the Internet, when combined with the other approaches mentioned in this article, could provide a potential entry point for peace that has previously been overlooked.

Conclusion

The lasting impression gained from the research outlined in this article was the intensity of the respondents’ desire to be heard, to have their stories told and gain access to some kind of audience. This reflects their feelings of being reduced to ‘objects’ in the conflict scenario: forced to flee, forced into refugee camps and forced to obey restrictions imposed by the host country. These people have decisions taken from them. The research provided one small, but critical, opportunity for the respondents to assert their dignity, to define themselves through their abilities to overcome adversity. For a short time they became ‘subjects’, asserting their own importance.

The research underscored the need for refugees to be given the opportunity to assert their humanity through the provision of social and cultural services. These people are expected to rebuild their societies when peace returns. Their commitment to do this is either enhanced or damaged by the extent to which they are the subjects of their own destiny, not the apathetic objects of aid.

It is hoped that soon the refugees may be able to return to a future that provides them with dignity and a sense of self-worth in themselves, in their communities and in their own countries. Perhaps, by reclaiming positive identities through approaches similar to those mentioned in this article, they might be able to rebuild their sense as individuals and as communities in ways that assert their common desire for peace, but also recognise and accept diversity.

Note


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