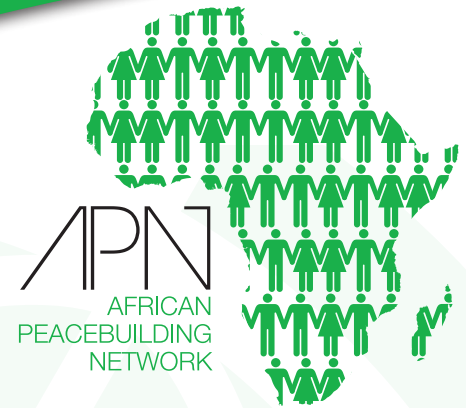




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# Youth Perspectives on Reconciliation: Challenges and opportunities in post-genocide Rwanda

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

### The National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) should:

- Work with the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide to commission a nationwide study on the consequences of the 1994 Genocide for the psychosocial lives of Rwandan youth, and use it to inform policy and practice.
- Collaborate with government programs and CSOs to design programs targeting the older generation to promote intergenerational dialogue, unity, and reconciliation.
- Work with CSOs on placing emphasis on intensive youth group dialogues to strengthen resilience by addressing the consequences of the painful parental memories, and promote learning about reconciliation among the youth.
- Work with Rwanda Education Board and CSOs to provide support, and mentorship to youth initiatives on national reconciliation, unity, and cohesion.
- Work with National Itorero Commission to include all youth in “itorero,” alongside programs targeting pre-university students.

This policy briefing note addresses the challenges and opportunities for engaging youth in post-conflict reconciliation in Rwanda, and makes specific recommendations based on the findings of a research project. Coming to terms with the past after a period of extreme violence during which hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives is a major challenge for any society. One of the mechanisms deployed by the government of Rwanda following the 1994 Genocide was the establishment of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) in 1999 (NURC, 2016). To achieve its objectives, the NURC organized a number of platforms, namely *Ingando*,<sup>1</sup> *Itorero*,<sup>2</sup> seminars,<sup>3</sup> and national summits<sup>4</sup> in which various categories of Rwandans discussed the above-mentioned issues (NURC, 2016). This policy brief draws upon the results of a 2017 qualitative study investigating the extent to which Rwandan youth in the western part of the country between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two years participate in reconciliation processes and what, according to them, are the factors enabling or hindering reconciliation policies and practices.

Respondents of the study included youth identified through their membership of a number of civil society organizations (CSOs) and participation in government initiatives in the field of peacebuilding (mainly at the secondary school level), and those that do not take part in any club or association focusing on peacebuilding. Most of these clubs work towards fighting against genocide ideology and promoting unity and reconciliation through debates, dialogues, peer education on reconciliation as well as organization and participation in outreach activities. Respondents in this study were not yet

<sup>1</sup> A program of peace education since 1999, which aims to clarify Rwandan history and the origins of division amongst the population, promote patriotism and fight genocide ideology.

<sup>2</sup> Established in 2007, the *Itorero* program is a leadership academy to promote Rwandan values and cultivate leaders who strive for the development of the community.

<sup>3</sup> Training of grassroots leaders, political party leaders, youth and women in trauma counseling, conflict mitigation and resolution, and early warning systems.

<sup>4</sup> Since 2000, several national summits have been organized on topics related to justice, good governance, human rights, national security, and national history.

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enrolled in the national *Itorero* program as this program targets pre-university students, among others. The study was implemented in collaboration with Community Based Socioterapy (CBS), a Rwandan non-governmental organization (NGO) that promotes interpersonal healing and grassroots reconciliation processes.

## FAMILY AND PUBLIC NARRATIVES ON RECONCILIATION

Respondents all recognized a number of efforts undertaken by the government of Rwanda following the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi to provide justice to the victims, initiate the process of psychological healing, restore social relationships, and foster unity and reconciliation. Some identified “family” as a key setting for the discussion of reconciliation in a free and open manner. Others, however, found it difficult to engage in such discussions as some parents tend to shy away due to the impact of their past traumatic experiences, in addition to the changing family lifestyles and obligations that limit the time allocated to dialogue.

The most challenging situation reported was the divergence between public and family narratives on reconciliation. It was observed by respondents that some parents tend to be united especially in communal activities and share everything within their neighborhood, but may change narratives when it comes to their feelings about the past and how one should behave accordingly. One example given concerned the issue of “intermarriage.” Getting married to someone from a different background can be a shock to the respective families, which can lead to a lack of family support to the couple, and the disruption of such relationships. This was identified by some respondents as an indicator that reconciliation is not yet fully understood or achieved, especially at the parental level. The contradiction between family narratives and the national discourse on reconciliation was identified by other respondents as one of the factors contributing to the occurrence of genocide ideology (divisionism and denial) observed among some of their peers, even those who were not yet born during genocide.

Responses during fieldwork pointed towards insufficient mentorship by various youth reconciliation initiatives in terms of training opportunities or regular follow-up visits as well as the need for educational materials among others. Furthermore, the clubs were found to be mainly operating at school level with limited grassroots platforms (i.e. cell or village level) in which reconciliation messages can be directed at out-of-school youth.

Findings from the research underscore the importance of the living environment when it comes to reconciliation among youth. This suggests the need for specific interventions that target the micro level (family) to ensure the effectiveness of efforts deployed at the macro level by policy

makers and other practitioners in the area of reconciliation. In addition, the findings underline the importance of mentorship and scaling up of youth reconciliation interventions aimed towards sustainable peacebuilding. True reconciliation is a lengthy and complex process requiring long-term engagement of individuals at all levels of society, including the second generation, if one aims at preventing any future relapse into another cycle of violence.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) should:

- Work with the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide (CNLG) to commission a nationwide study measuring the magnitude of the consequences of the 1994 Genocide and its aftermath on the current psychosocial lives of Rwandan youth. The results of the research should be harnessed to inform policy and practice.
- Collaborate with other government programs (e.g. Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion) and CSOs to design specific programs targeting the older generation (parents) to promote intergenerational dialogue and facilitate processes of unity and reconciliation among the youth. One option is to build on existing programs such as the “parents evening program.”
- Work with CSOs on placing more emphasis on intensive youth group dialogues to strengthen resilience by addressing the consequences of the painful parental memories/trauma, and in collaboration with the Ministry of Local Governance, connect local administrative activities to promote learning about reconciliation among the youth.
- In collaboration with the Rwanda Education Board (REB) and CSOs, provide material and institutional support, and sustained mentorship to various youth initiatives working towards national reconciliation, unity, and cohesion.
- In collaboration with the National Itorero Commission (NIC), include all youth in “*itorero*,” in addition to its current program targeting pre-university students.
- In collaboration with the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB), strengthen the role of Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) in reconciliation processes mainly at the family and community level.

## REFERENCES

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