

ARENA AFRICANA

On Post Conflict Peace Building in the Mmano River Union Countries.

A Paper Delivered By F.I.Suma at the Ballie, Amsterdam , for the Public Discussion on Peace Building in Africa, Organised by the Africa Studies Centre of The University of Leiden, the Netherlands on 13 October 2005.

1.0. COURTESY

I wish to thank the organisers for inviting me to this very pertinent and timely discussion. For me, coming to Amsterdam generates memories of my youth. It was in this City that I made the transition from teenage life to adulthood.

The memories of the Leidsplein, the Dam, Uilenstede and the Bijlmer aside, those were also the days of lively debates and mass demonstrations in support of the anti-apartheid and liberation movements in Africa.

Yes, those were the 1970s and early 80s when a generous, liberal and tolerant Dutch Community accepted us strangers and refugees in their midst and in their homes. Those are potent factors that create a bond between an individual and a City. Yes, I have that bond with Amsterdam.

It also allows me to test my Dutch, a language I still use with my children when we want to gossip and say ugly things about others. The organisers now know why I did not hesitate a second to accept the invitation.

Thanks a million for this.

1.1. THE REGIONAL CONFLICTS

The organisers of this discussion wanted me to present a case study of ABC-Development, an NGO that is active in social reintegration and reconstruction at community level in the border districts of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia.

Far removed from the cameras and with a shyness for publicity that seems to create the impression that the actors (staff and members of

the communities) were engaged in some mischievous sectarian or anti-state activities.

Far from that it is today one of the largest local NGOs in Sierra Leone with considerable influence in communities in Liberia and Guinea and among sub-regional peace building Networks in the MRU countries.

However, I will not be promoting the cause for peace in my own country and community if I fail to speak as a representative of Civil Society of the Mano River Union Countries of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. This is due to the fact that only purely artificial borders separate these ethnic cousins and that the conflict in these countries are waged by thousands of young fighters without any regard for national frontiers.

These countries have been engulfed in a brutal conflict of a sub-regional dimension and intensity for nearly a decade and a half, of violence directed mainly at the civilian population, creating one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent African history.

These conflicts are rooted in the history of the countries' colonial legacies of dysfunctional states, failed political institutions and high levels of poverty. In general bad governance in terms of political, economic and social injustice, corruption, lack of accountability and transparency and the abuse of political power constitute the proximate causes of these conflicts.

These conflicts are the most horrific wars of economic, political and social dislocation in recent African history.

Women and children in particular have suffered disproportionately throughout the wars. In addition to the violence, thousands of children as young as 6 were easily recruited, trained and forced into combat, after the loss of family members to war brutality, to avenge the violence or as a result of no perceived alternative to survive.

The wars consumed the whole region. It left no family unmaimed, mentally or physically. All these have accelerated the disintegration of

the traditional family and community structures including the village and community-based economic and social “safety-nets”.

The traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution, reconciliation and peace building processes rooted in the cultures of the respective communities which linked up families and other social networks have been severely undermined by the violence. Genuine healing of the deep emotional wounds and trauma is pushed to the background as communities pursue survival needs.

Similarly, civil society organisations were crippled and the requisite capacity to mediate effectively in the ongoing conflict was gravely undermined.

The brain drain has been massive as skilled persons, highly educated civil servants, private entrepreneurs and professionals fled to other countries outside the sub-region.

A crippling effect of the wars is the substantial loss of institutional capacity in terms of human resources and the socio-economic infrastructure needed to support post-conflict reconstruction and nation building. Public and private sector institutions have been crippled and unable to effectively retain and utilise the available human capacity while the systems required for efficiency, effectiveness and transparency are either absent or enormously handicapped.

The conflicts in the MRU countries are largely the result of the endemic and pervasive poverty and failed political institutions.

But on the other hand conflict is a constraint to development and institution building.

It is said that a country once torn apart by war is likely to relapse to war in 5-10 years. The conditions that inform this theory are overwhelmingly present in the Mano River Sub-region. The lack of access to justice in a transparent and affordable manner, economic inequities, extreme poverty and social inequalities constitute flash points for future conflicts.

Moreover, in a sub-region where there are over 80% of unemployed and unemployable youth, mostly illiterate, they are predisposed to recruitment by the state and non-state actors for their war efforts.

Also in a context where poverty and deprivation are commonplace characteristics, being a fighter has become a means of livelihood, creating a class of mercenaries of able bodied youth, men and women willing to sell their services to any bidder across the porous borders of West Africa.

An example which would sound unlikely to this audience, but very true is that Liberian fighters were involved in the Coup D'Etat and the assassination of Mai Nasara, President in Niger some years ago.

2.0. Peace Building.

Although the background, historical and contextual factors informing the MRU conflict remain principally unaltered, there have been some positive strides towards the quest for peace, stability and security at national and regional levels, especially in the last three years.

Addressing the complex issues of peace building, reconciliation and post-conflict reintegration and reconstruction is a daunting task. It is beyond the capacity of any single entity and definitely beyond that of a war weary government. It requires concerted efforts and partnership between state and non-state actors and internal and external actors from the international community of NGOs and Bi-lateral and Multi-lateral agencies. There have been substantial commitments and interventions by actors at all these levels.

The UN's role in the sub-region has generally helped in creating an enabling environment for peace with nearly 30,000 multi-national peace keeping forces and a complex peacekeeping agenda costing millions of dollars a day.

Due to the intervention of the international community, the bitter conflicts in the sub-region are receding.

Sierra Leone is in the third year of stability which has allowed significant progress in reconstruction and reintegration and the establishment of new institutions of governance, crisis prevention and reconciliation initiatives.

The guns are silent in Liberia, a DDRR programme is being implemented and the general elections of two days ago, will hopefully yield the results that will keep the guns forever silent.

Guinea (considered by many as West Africa's next failed state) is slowly moving towards national dialogue as the authority of the ailing president degenerates day by day.

A situation of no-war-no-peace prevails in the Cote d' Ivoire while the international community exerts every pressure to restore peace to that country.

2.1. National Ownership

Like millions of my compatriots, we appreciate efforts by the international community and that of a considerable number of external actors. But people like us who are privileged to communicate with the international community will be doing ourselves a dangerous disservice if we fail to indicate that the International Community cannot promote genuine and sustainable peace if it maintains the Front Seat that it currently occupies in the sub-region.

What is required is a partnership in which the international community promotes national ownership of the peace process and acts as catalyst by recognising, collaborating and engaging in healthy dialogue with local, national and sub-regional capacities, structures and initiatives.

External domination (as it currently prevails in the sub-region) creates local resentment, inertia and resistance. And at any rate, eternally dominated and driven process is not sustainable and could lead to renewed conflicts in community. I can also say with the benefit of years of experience, that internal actors know and understand the

complex nature and needs of their communities far better than outsiders. This makes National ownership of the process of peace building and post-conflict reconciliation and reintegration imperative.

2.2. The emerging National and sub-regional actors

A positive consequence of the war is the emergence of a vibrant Civil Society, Non-Governmental Organisations and a multitude of Community, traditional and faith-based organisations and a thriving private sector. Their presence can no longer be ignored as they are developing strong alliances and networks at local, national and sub-regional levels and with sectors of the international actors, that was hitherto hardly the case.

There have been substantial interventions by civil society organisations in the Mano River Union in resolving the conflicts that often go unreported in the international media. These include the facilitation of contacts between Heads of state and rebel factions in efforts to normalise relations between the three countries and the various factions.

The courageous Demand for Peace Now earlier in Sierra Leone and latter in Liberia through national conferences, sit-ins and street demonstrations (by especially various women organisations) were instrumental to the breakthroughs in resolving the conflicts in these countries.

National actors are promoting national dialogue and constituting themselves into channels to develop and strengthen popular participation in governance, nurturing the development of the fledgling democracy and providing for accountability and efficiency.

Spear headed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the search for solutions to the conflicts and the restoration of stability to the region have been firmly integrated into the Sub-regional and the continent wide agendas Promoted by the African Union for international co-operation and development.

Let me express the hope here that the positively ambitious plans and initiatives of the AU and ECOWAS be translated into more positive actions and made more accessible to actors at community level.

Post-conflict peace building with its daunting task of reconciliation and societal transformation should be rooted in communities in order to be sustainable.

3.0. ABC-Development and Post-Conflict Reintegration

The non-state national actors are assuming greater role in social reintegration of communities torn by war. We refer here to a process of community resettlement that promotes the healing of the deep emotional wounds, reconciliation and prejudice reduction, basic acceptance and the willingness to work together as a community again, the creation in and by communities of ways to prevent future violence and the possibilities for young people and ex-fighters once they have disarmed to reintegrate in the community.

For several years now, I have had the privilege of being a Founder Member of an NGO that is contributing to this process at Community, national and sub-regional levels.

The mission of the Asociaton For the Well Being of Communities and Development (ABC-Development) is **To help create a socio-economic environment conducive to the promotion of peace, the well-being of rural communities and total human development.**

In doing so, we work with appropriate community groups in order to promote institution and capacity building, necessary for peace and reconciliation at community level and the participation of members of the community in the development and political processes of their country.

Starting its work among refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone in the various camps in Guinea, ABC development gave refugees the

opportunity to participate in discussions and activities for solving their own problems of survival, trauma healing and conflict resolution. It also undertook an active approach at creating social and economic relationships between the refugees and the host communities as a solution to the widespread conflict between them, created by the supply of food and non-food items, infrastructures such as water and schools in the refugee camps and at the same time, neglecting the needs of an impoverished host community that has sheltered and shared its meagre resources with the refugees long before the arrival of the International Relief Agencies.

At community level, ABC is engaged in post-conflict reintegration and reconstruction. It does so by working through traditional community structures and by resuscitating the community social and economic “safety-nets”. A process of guidance and counselling that promotes genuine community reconciliation and healing with the participation of victims and perpetrators of the horrific violence accompanies the social and economic activities such as food production, skills development, Sports, Music And Theatre.

Ex-combatants, child soldiers, girl child, victims of physical and emotional violence are all brought together in community reconciliation discussions, healing and cleansing ceremonies.

This process has resulted in the reintegration of thousands of young people, including those victims who would otherwise be stigmatised and lost to shame and self-torture, ex-combatants whose initial reaction was to hide behind massive alcohol and drugs consumption, members of the communities, including vigilante groups preferring vengeance and retaliation, and ordinary men and women.

Nothing is more humbling than to be a catalyst in a process that brings a victim of atrocities in contact with a perpetrator that leads to admission of guilt, forgiveness and reconciliation at community level.

But ABC was founded by a group of citizens of the three Mano River Union Countries as a Sub-regional peace building NGO at

community level. Hence, it was no coincidence that our preferable terrain has been the border districts of these countries.

This is also in recognition of the fact that the geographical and ethnic ties, social fabric, traditional customs and economic structures of these countries were inextricably linked. Over 50% of the populations of these countries are ethnic cousins sharing the same languages and traditional customs on different sides of the artificial borders that cut across ethnic groups and families, traditional water points and grazing and farm lands and forests.

This origin has also resulted in our partnership of various national and sub-regional networks, initiatives and efforts in the MRU countries. Our tasks at those levels is to transmit the messages and pre-occupations of the communities, as a consistent reminder that they are by far the victims and also that, without their participation and genuine contribution, peace will hardly be sustainable.

For the simple reason that they are the parents and the origin of the young, marginalised, impoverished, unemployed and unemployable, illiterates and school drop-outs, who constitute the thousands of young men and women who sell their fighting skills to any bidder across the borders in the West African sub-region.