



Healing and Reconciliation Experiences of Community Facilitators Gasabo, Bugesera and Kicukiro Districts

Introduction

Since 2016, GER in partnership with CFOR has been running a unique program to support the process of reconciliation and healing community wounds from the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

Program activities include facilitating large group community forum interactions, and building community capacity to respond to existing challenges towards a sustainable reconciliation. Over 500 people have participated in program forums and out of these participants 60 people were trained as facilitators and continue to organize grass root community reconciliation interactions.

The program supports and deepens the reconciliation process in Rwanda. The participants include survivors and perpetrators of the Genocide, elders and youth, including children of survivors, children of perpetrators, and those born from rape. The forum interactions have received very strong feedback from community members and local leaders. Many forum participants say that they are deeply surprised and relieved by the depth of dialogue between those who are survivors and those who were perpetrators, and that they didn't know this was possible. Older participants, including community leaders, speak about their shock at hearing the depth of pain among the youth, as well as the youth's compassion and desire to facilitate a deeper dialogue in their families, and to contribute to the reconciliation process.

Because of the country's commitment to reconciliation and the special nature of our programme, we might also be able to contribute a model for what could happen in other countries dealing with the aftermath of violence and violence prevention.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, I reached out to small groups of community members who have been involved in the initiatives and asked them to share their experiences. They spoke about what they had lived through during the genocide as well as their experiences of our work together in the forum and training activities. Some preferred to write their experiences; then read them. They felt this helped them to express themselves:

"I could not stand in front of people and give my testimony, but this works very well." A Genocide survivor.



“I wrote my story and read it quietly in my room. I felt like I was telling myself my own story. This opened me up. In 26 years I have never been able to give testimonies or tell anyone what happened to me. But now I feel free to share my experiences and encourage others to do so because it helps to heal.” A Genocide survivor from Bugesera

Our Program participants expressed how the interactions contributed to their process of healing to the extent that they are now able to support their families and their neighbors in their own healing processes. Community members told me that “healing, reconciliation and rebuilding became possible” by building on existing opportunities, and receiving support from the government of Rwanda and partners of peace and reconciliation like GER.

Rwanda has endured a painful history, which some Rwandans participated in, others survived from; some were raped and all of us left with both physical and psychological wounds. Young people carry their history. They say that there is painful tension between those who are children of survivors and children of perpetrators. Others are young people who say “society rejected us, we belong to neither side” because they were born from mothers who were raped during the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi. Some of these people experienced a profound transformation and healing through taking part in the forum interactions and they now feel free to share their testimonies about their journeys.

Survivors’ Experiences

After the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, the situation in Rwanda was devastating for all humanity. The loss of nearly one million lives in just three months left the country in a state of collapse and left a weighty toll on the survivors and on society as a whole.

“My family was killed in front of my eyes. I was raped by killers...those moments are hard to talk about” A survivor from Gasabo district

Survivors of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi say that they did not believe they were alive, even after RPF stopped the genocide. They say that they had no hope at all. They were left with a lot of wounds.

“Despite finding out that my mom was still alive, I felt my life was useless...” A Genocide survivor

To survivors, healing seemed impossible, but their first glimmer of hope for a new life was the arrival of RPF Inkotanyi.



“RPF Inkotanyi, led by President Kagame, stopped the genocide and gave us life. They restored our hope to live again and have given us a reason not to get stuck in the tragic history we have gone through. We are also contributing to building the country we want, free of discrimination, hatred and conflict” A Genocide survivor.

Even though survivors try to be strong and participate in rebuilding the country, they say that their hearts are still full of pain and sorrow, as well as trauma which remains unhealed. One of the survivors involved in the forum interactions said the following:

“Only through speaking about what happened to us can we start feeling free and relieved. I attended the forums organized and facilitated by GER and CFOR. It is there that I understood that I wasn’t alone, and that there were people ready to understand me and others who needed my help. I opened up and recounted all that was burdening my heart.”

These dialogues and mediated interactions brought survivors together with genocide perpetrators who killed their families, making it possible to reconcile and to work together for their communities. One elder survivor said the following about harvest time in their agriculture cooperative:

“It is when a real reconciliation among Rwandans can be witnessed. We share our harvest regardless of what might have been separating us. It removed the suspicion we had towards them [genocide perpetrators].”

Perpetrators’ Experiences

Some participants in our program who were perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi and who were convicted and finished their jail term have shared stories of how they were groomed to participate in the genocide. They testified about their role during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. Some of them confessed, taking accountability, and asking for forgiveness for their role in mass killings, rape and numerous other horrific acts that were committed during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

“I was 14 years old during the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi, and I took part in it. After the Genocide against the Tutsi I always felt guilty and felt a big emptiness and pain in my heart for what I did. When the Gacaca courts came, I decided to confess my crimes and surrender myself to justice.”

Despite having admitted their crimes and having finished their jail terms, it was not easy for them to rejoin the society in which they committed their crimes. They had issues with their children, who



carried shame as long as they were addressed as children of killers. They wondered how they could live with genocide survivors after all they did to them.

“I was very ashamed; I used to stay indoors without attending Umuganda (community work) and other community activities.”

Perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi also hold trauma and wounds from which they must first heal before proceeding with the process of reconciliation. Through community dialogues on Ndi Umunyarwanda and the forums of GER and CFOR, they opened up and spoke the truth about history. In our GER-CFOR forums, survivors frequently asked perpetrators to tell the truth about what they felt, what they did, and for information about what happened to their loved ones who disappeared. They have a profound need for this information so that they can give their family members a dignified burial and so that they can come to some closure.

“I remember when I shared information about where to find unburied bodies of the genocide victims. This is when I started feeling relieved.”

They say that their children played a big role in helping them to ask for forgiveness.

“They asked me why I was in prison. I told them that I killed innocent people. When they asked me why I killed them, I explained to them well about bad leadership, which planned, organized and executed the Genocide against the Tutsi. My youngest child said something powerful to me. He said ‘we forgive you, but do not ever kill people again.’ My reconciliation with my family helped me to approach those people I offended, and I was forgiven. I am also encouraging others who committed genocide crimes, but are still hiding themselves and do not want to tell the truth.”

Perpetrators also say that working together with genocide survivors has facilitated their reconciliation:

“When we share the harvest, we celebrate our achievement together. It has removed suspicion and mistrust among us and our relations have vastly improved.”

Stories of children born from rape

Children who were born as a result of their mothers' rape during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi are another category of people who suffered from the tragic history of Rwanda and are still facing problems related to the existing effects of the genocide. They say that being raised with a traumatized mother is the worst experience one could face. One young person said *“My mother could not tell me where my father was; the question shocked her instead. It was very tragic for her as she was also rejected by her surviving family because of me, (carrying a baby of killers).”*

GER

CFOR



Despite these children always wanting to know their origin and understand why they are sometimes mistreated by their family, having the truth revealed to them was the biggest shock of their lives. One of them said that she had a lasting trauma since she knew how she was conceived. *“When my mother finally told me the truth, it really hurt me. I was crying day and night. I felt like I didn't have an identity; I was always wondering where I belong. I was always alone feeling rejected.”*

The process of healing for these young people started when they met with other people having similar problems. They shared what they went through.

“When I attended the forum it was the first place where I felt open to talk. I felt like I discharged the entire burden that I was carrying in my heart. I met with other youth who have the same problems. Some even have stronger stories than mine, and we supported each other.”

These young people say that they used to spend their whole time wondering which side they belonged to. During the forums they felt their identity as Rwandan.

“We learnt that we are Rwandans. We are no longer trying to find our identity wondering if we are either Hutu or Tutsi. We are Rwandans and our country gives us equal opportunities like other Rwandans.”

These people also say that they have a duty to help those who have experienced similar problems but are still hidden and crushed by the pressure of history.

Existing challenges

Despite the appreciating progress of the reconciliation process in Rwanda, communities agree that there are still many challenges hindering the process of community healing.

It has been more than 26 years since the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi and its effects are still visible. Trauma among Rwandans has changed shape. The trauma among those who survived the genocide is not the same as the trauma they experienced directly after the genocide when the wounds were still fresh. Some people may think that trauma is passed, but this is not true. It has changed in appearance. These are challenges to the reconciliation process.

Children who were born from rape say that they still face the challenge of having traumatized parents who need to heal, and they lack access to education due to the poverty of their families.

“Our mothers need to attend the forums we attended. They need to heal from their wounds of genocide. We also have difficulties with pursuing our studies. Personally, I thank GER for the



advocacy raised. Now I am supported and I am doing my University, but other children having the same problems are struggling with continuing their university studies.”

Unpaid property damaged during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi is also a challenging issue that needs facilitation in communities. This is of great importance to the process of reconciliation and several of the participants are beginning to facilitate these issues in their communities.

Another extremely important issue for the reconciliation process is the large number of genocide convicts (perpetrators) who are not yet open to speaking the truth about where the bodies of victims were left.

“Some bodies of our people who were killed have not yet been identified in order to be buried with the dignity and respect they deserve. This is a big challenge for us in the process of reconciliation” A Genocide Survivor

A large number of genocide convicts are finishing their jail term and rejoining society. This creates numerous challenges for them and for their communities. We should consider measures to support reintegration. Some of the perpetrators have spent 26 years in prison or in exile or hiding in the forest. They have a different mindset. They are not aware of the progress that has been made in reconciliation. If nothing is done, these people could cause problems in their families and communities. Steps should be taken to involve them in the reconciliation process already underway.

Methods of facilitation

The forums, and the space this gave for people to speak about their painful experiences from the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, and to engage with one another, were underpinned by the method used by Arlene and Jean Claude Audergon of CFOR to facilitate the interactions. Participants were invited to determine the themes that they wanted to talk about and then to stay carefully with the difficult and emotional topics that arise, and include their feelings. Forum participants were grateful for the method because it gave them enough space to speak out. The participants appreciated how the facilitators (Arlene and Jean Claude) listened and shared the feelings of what happened to Rwandans. They appreciated how they tried to be in people’s shoes, as well as the way they value the importance of the community listening and witnessing testimony as a process of healing.

The small group discussions during the large Forum gatherings helped participants interact in such a way that everyone had enough space to express their feelings and played a role in improving personal relationships and trust between genocide perpetrators and survivors. Some perpetrators and survivors met each other in the Forum for the first time in 25 years, since the 1994 genocide against Tutsi.

GER

CFOR



Because of their transformative interactions during the forum, they exchanged contacts and are now working together in community initiatives. Furthermore, the NURC is drawing on the skills of these people in different activities of unity and reconciliation as well as experience sharing. Community facilitators have also facilitated local authorities to distribute food support and disseminate solidarity messages during the Covid19 crisis.

The forums and training have directly involved more than 600 people in 5 years, including 60 people trained as community reconciliation facilitators. However, the number is still small compared to the number of people who need these interventions. We need to keep mentoring community facilitators and to train more facilitators in different communities so that our interventions can benefit as many people as possible. Our goal for the upcoming five years (2021-2025) is to train an additional 500 community reconciliation facilitators in other areas of Rwanda. Our target groups are youth, religious leaders, local authorities (women and men) and marginalized groups who will drive changes in community trauma healing, improving people's relations and contributing to holistic activities solving people's basic needs.

Acknowledgements

The success of GER and CFOR's activities was made possible by working alongside the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC). We (GER) appreciate our partnership with Arlene and Jean-Claude Audergon of CFOR. GER will keep working with local authorities and partners in this process to scale up its interventions in Rwanda, and to document and disseminate information about such community interactions and reconciliation stories, for the future generation to learn from these experiences and to contribute as a model for other regions.

Innocent Musore

Executive Director of GER

+25783570305

GER

Global Initiative for the Environment and Reconciliation
Remera Road KG av17, PO 2117
Kigali, Rwanda
+250783570305 | musorebita@gmail.com

CFOR

|Hampstead Town Hall Centre | 213 Haverstock Hill |
London | NW3 4QP
+ 44 (0) 207 435 0756
| admin@cfor.info | www.cfor.info
Registered Charity 1148661