

RECONCILIATION: HEALING THE PAST, FACILITATING OUR FUTURE

GER & CFOR, RWANDA REPORT 2016-2025



In 2015, Innocent Musore made contact with CFOR's Directors, Arlene and Jean-Claude Audergon, which led to an invitation to the UK to attend their training. During his time in the UK, he learned a lot and invited them to Rwanda, seeking ways to collaborate and bring their activities to the country.

We aimed to support the existing process of reconciliation, healing the past and facilitating the future. We gathered Genocide survivors, perpetrators, youth born from rape, women, religious leaders and local leaders to talk about their history, to heal, reconcile and build a shared future through transformative facilitated dialogue. We have implemented 4 projects named: Beyond Conflict: Rwanda; Healing the Past and Facilitating the Future; Youth-Reconciliation and the Future; and Gender and Reconciliation.

Since 2016, about 1600 have participated in reconciliation training and interactions. Our interventions have focused on diverse groups in Rwanda, with particular emphasis on youth and women because they were the most affected by the Genocide against the Tutsi and related violence. The project was implemented in 6 districts of Rwanda, Bugesera, Gasabo, Rwamagana, Kicukiro, Ruhango, and Musanze in collaboration with the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission.

1. Beyond Conflicts-Rwanda Project 2016

In June 2016, we organized the first forum attended by 35 participants, both survivors of Genocide against the Tutsi and perpetrators. It took place at the Foyer de Charité, Kicukiro. CFOR directors, Arlene and Jean-Claude Audergon attended and facilitated this meeting. By November 2016, another forum took place, attended by about 50 participants, which also consisted of Genocide survivors and perpetrators, religious leaders, local authorities, and representatives from the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission. Arlene and Jean Claude (CFOR directors), facilitated, while Innocent actively coordinated the Forum. As it was uncommon for Genocide survivors and perpetrators to come together for conversations 22 years after the Genocide, achieving this was significant. It remains challenging to this day, especially when discussing the Genocide, as some participants share their experiences while others confess their roles in the atrocities. The forum addressed various topics, including the country's history and the events of 1994. These were difficult discussions, but thanks to the facilitators' experience and expertise, and careful coordination by GER, participants were able to open up and share their painful experiences.

“I remember that in this event, one perpetrator who took part in the Genocide killings at Gahanga, where more than 5,000 people were murdered, shared his testimony. He was unaware that a survivor of his ruthless acts was among the participants. At the forum, the two met, got to know each other, and had a conversation. This resulted in the perpetrator publicly asking for forgiveness, which the survivor granted. Together, they began the journey of unity and helped others in their communities take similar steps. Due to the rarity of such acts of unity and reconciliation, their story was deeply touching and inspiring. I remember that they were later invited to share their testimony at Parliament during National Peace Day in 2019,” Innocent recounted.

In June 2017, a three-day forum was held at Bon Espérance, Kicukiro, attended by 76 participants, consisting of Genocide perpetrators, survivors, youths, religious leaders, and local authorities. Following the forum, we conducted a two-day training for community facilitators. Among the participants were also refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi, whom we had invited to attend alongside our already existing participants. We had expanded our activities beyond Kicukiro District, and soon, we had participants from Gasabo and Bugesera as well.

During this time, some participants also requested that discussions be held in their communities and invited GER and CFOR directors, Arlene and Jean Claude, to visit. They went to the rural area of Rutunga Sector, Gasabo District, where they observed various community activities.

In November 2017, another forum and training was held at Bon Espérance. Over seven days, we organized a three-day general forum attended by 50 participants, a one-day forum specifically for women with 40 participants, another one-day forum for religious leaders, and a two-day training for community facilitators tasked with helping others in their communities. This training became part of a modular training programme for community facilitators.



In November 2018, we held an event in the Bugesera District at Savannah, a three-day forum that brought together 186 participants, consisting of Genocide survivors and perpetrators, and those from historically marginalized communities. There were elders, and also youth, (those from survivors' and perpetrators' families, those born as a result of rape), local leaders, community facilitators, and religious leaders. The forum facilitators were Arlene and Jean-Claude. Following this, we conducted a two-day training at Bon Espérance, Kicukiro, attended by 50 participants from the previous year's forum, completing their designated six-day training program. During this meeting, we also distributed the Training handbook for community facilitators to help them conduct reconciliation activities in their respective communities.

Additionally, in the same month, refugee participants from the 2017 forum invited us to visit their community. We went to Nyabiheke Refugee Camp, where we held a one-day interaction with refugees. They shared their testimonies and painful experiences of war in Congo and Burundi, expressing the need for a specific program designed to address trauma in refugee camps. They highlighted challenges beyond war experiences, including conflicts within the community, domestic abuse, and unsustainable living conditions.



2. Youth-Reconciliation and Future project:

From the forum interactions we had experienced, we were moved by the strong desire expressed by youth to better understand what had happened during the Genocide, and to understand their current tensions with one another, and how they could engage in processes of reconciliation. We determined to focus the next phase of our programme on youth in the country to increase their knowledge about the country's past and how they can navigate the trauma and be able to build a sustainable future not only for themselves but also for the country as a whole. One of the reasons to focus on youth is that youth compose the majority of the population of Rwanda, making up 75% of the population below 35 years of age.

Youth face intergenerational trauma stemming from the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi with some coming from survivor's families, others from the perpetrators side, while others are results from rapes that occurred during the Genocide. The trauma from their parents gets transferred to their children and can damage their lives if they are not taken care of or shown ways to heal from it, and to find pathways to reconcile among their own generation, and support their families in the reconciliation process as well.

During some interactions with the youth, one youth gave his testimony about being impacted by the trauma of his parents. He said “My mom is a Genocide survivor who has trauma as a result of it. Whenever it’s during the commemoration period or she goes through something that triggers her, life kind of stops at home because she is not able to do anything like she usually does, and instead I have to step up and be the one to take care of her and make sure she is okay. Whenever she is like that, I can’t even go to school or go anywhere else, and I feel like the situation she goes through affects my daily life a lot”. Youth are potential future leaders. We must support them, build their capacity, build their resilience, and make sure that we give them a voice and the resources needed to develop and hopefully contribute to the development of the country.

The youth are highly active in their training. Reconciliation, youth leadership, resilience, gender and prevention of domestic and gender-based violence, trauma healing and facilitating reparations in respect to damaged and destroyed property were the main focus of the discussions during this period. There were additional activities including a visit to a memorial site with 60 youth team leaders brought together from all the 6 districts represented.

The youth were very happy about this trip and gave feedback that it was a highly impactful learning experience. They said that they would not have been able to reach this level of fully understanding what happened during the Genocide if not for that trip (how the Genocide against Tutsi was prepared, how it was executed, how it was stopped, and the political will of the nation to reconcile it’s citizens after such a horrible period). Others who were unable to attend have been requesting to be given the opportunity as well.

Between these activities led by Innocent Musore and Gimu Shyikiro, Arlene Audergon and Anup Karia of CFOR provided mentoring sessions to support their development as facilitators. The purpose of the mentorship was to have a chance to discuss complex facilitation issues, and to grow personally and professionally as facilitators who can execute the trainings and facilitate interactions well. The sessions involved discussing about the difficult topics they were meeting, and the challenges they were facing, how to facilitate the interactions and discussions during group work, managing and addressing hotspots, learning about how to support and manage their own emotions during sensitive discussions, and how to take care of themselves and grow individually as facilitators.

3. Healing the past and Facilitating the Future project

In July 2024, GER held a 2-day meeting with women leaders at Centre Christus, Remera. It was attended by 45 women and we had an opportunity to discuss with them a range of issues that women said they are usually afraid to talk about such as domestic and gender-based violence, rape, family conflicts etc., which burdens them and leads to them developing trauma. It was a very impactful learning experience for everyone who was involved in the event. It was meaningful to be able to provide for women a safe environment to voice their concerns and their daily challenges,

and to build their capacity to empower themselves and their fellow women in their respective communities was a great achievement. During this period, most of our activities were centered around working with leaders (local authority, women, and youth leaders).

The district of Bugesera invited us to work with leaders in the district and in early November, we trained up to 60 leaders in the Bugesera district at Sunrise hotel on the topics of reconciliation, conflict resolution, peace building and how they can better support the community members in healing from the trauma from the past and building a sustainable future not only for themselves but for the whole country. In this meeting, the participants also raised concerns regarding the prisoners being released from prison after being convicted for their roles in the killings during the 1994 Genocide, and how there are no designated programs for reintegrating them back into the society, requesting that this was needed.

Most of the time, these people are released without knowing how to navigate life after prison, and the community members are not prepared to receive them. It is especially hard for survivors of the 1994 Genocide. There needs to be programs in place not only to prepare the prisoners to live in normal society, but also prepare and train them to live well with their survivors, and for the community members to get trained on how to incorporate them in their daily lives and facilitate their new life in the society.



Additionally, late last year, in early December, we participated in a workshop that was conducted by Berghof Foundation where they brought women from Somalia to come learn from Rwanda about its journey of resilience and how it managed to rebuild itself after going through such a horrible period during the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi. In this workshop, we gave presentations about the history of Rwanda from pre-colonialism to now, an overview of what GER has been doing together with CFOR, its mission, and role in facilitating the peace-building and reconciliation activities in Rwanda. The women from Somalia deeply resonated with the presentations' content because they said that what happened to Rwanda is somehow similar to what is currently happening in Somalia, where the atrocities affect the whole country, and affect women in particular, as they are most vulnerable and don't have the means to defend themselves.

They thanked GER so much for the activities it has been doing in Rwanda and for instilling hope in them and showing them the Somalians can achieve peace and uplift women in the country.

Over the last few years, GER has also taken an active part in CFOR's Symposia, and classes to share our work with other facilitators working with issues of polarization, divisiveness, reconciliation and transitional justice. In 2024, GER also had an opportunity to present GER and CFOR's activities to facilitators in Japan, as well as in Australia, in online meetings, a great way to spread awareness about what we do to other countries as well and make sure that our impact can reach further beyond the Rwandan borders.

At a personal Level, it has been deeply meaningful bringing together more than 500 Genocide survivors and perpetrators to talk together about the history and painful experiences of what happened during the Genocide, and to witness the transformation that has taken place. Our work has given people a safe environment in which to open up, often for the first time, to share their painful experiences, and to witness others. Individuals were able to reconcile with one another, with some responding to the survivors' call for them to come forward and speak about what happened, owning up to their roles in the killings, showing remorse, and asking for forgiveness while the survivors granted the forgiveness. The transformational interactions and experiences of reconciliation that we have experienced and witnessed bring a profound sense of hope, for building community and preventing future violence. It has also been wonderful to see the interest of local community facilitators in learning and taking this work forward throughout the country and beyond.



Attending the forums and interactions helped the participants heal from the trauma of what they went through. For the perpetrators, these interactions allowed them to cast aside the fear, shame, and embarrassment for their role in the Genocide and were able to share with their families and others what they did. These activities proved that post-Genocide reconciliation is possible, which was made possible due to the country's visionary leadership and political will to reconcile the citizens. The perpetrators were able to open up and name the different places where some of their Genocide victims are buried, allowing the bodies to be found and held a respectful burial and give their families closure. Gasabo district went on ahead to be the national memorial site for the whole country.

At the Community Level

The community facilitators took part in making reparations in regards to the properties that were destroyed during the Genocide. They also helped in improving relations and community building among community members. We connected the community facilitators with the government authorities so that they work together as resourceful individuals to create big impact with their activities and help out during commemoration periods. The training increased the skills, and knowledge of the community facilitators in terms of holding discussions and interactions, skills to be able to be empathetic, and address difficult social issues appropriately. People in their respective communities formed groups where they would support one another to carry out different projects, which would in the end improve their living standards.

These groups also helped in resolving conflicts and other challenges that the members are going through. As mentioned, our activities have served as inspiration for different people all over the world and not just in Rwanda. We've had different women and youth groups from other countries come to visit and learn from our beneficiaries and the projects we've been involved in. The interactions and discussions have helped people get beyond their fears. For example, one participant among the youth told others that before attending the forums, he used to be so scared of going into areas where there are lots of people, because of his grandfather's role in the killings during the Genocide. He felt ashamed and responsible for what his grandfather did. After attending, and being witnessed in his feelings about his grandfather, he was more able to differentiate his own life from his grandfather's going forward.

A youth from the survivors' side, said that she never knew that the children from the perpetrator's side have any challenges that they go through. She thought they had it better, but felt moved when hearing their testimonies of the various challenges they go through. We discussed the topics of collective trauma, talking about healing trauma, fighting Genocide ideologies, asking for forgiveness and granting it, stopping inter-generational trauma, resolving community conflicts that stem as a result of Genocide consequences, and supporting leadership among youth.

From 2023 till now, the impact of the project has expanded to other districts (Gasabo, Ruhango, Bugesera, Rwamagana, and Musanze) where we've worked with over 500 individuals consisting of youths, women, religious leaders who were trained and are now supporting the reconciliation process in Rwanda as a whole and in their respective communities. There have been community initiatives established in each district that we operate in, which have helped in addressing social challenges and improving the community livelihoods.

Testimonies of participants:

The youth were able to understand what it means to work together towards a shared common goal and address the challenges that they were going through, as it was a shared challenge. For example, in Rwamagana district, there is a remarkable story of one of the participants who shared that after the Genocide, he was afraid and scared of going back to his hometown after the horrors of what he saw happening there. However, when he started attending trainings and was able to open up and share his fears with the other participants, he was amazed at how supportive and comforting they were. They helped him work through his fears and right now he is proud to announce that he has finally gone back to his roots, has reconnected with old friends over there, and no longer dreads going there, as he feels like he is at a place where he has come to terms with what happened, navigated the grief and trauma from his lost loved ones, has healed, and is now able to move forward and build his future all thanks to the other youths he engaged with during the discussions and interactions facilitated by GER. The participants shared that they are now able to discuss Genocide-related matters freely without feeling shame or fear of how they will be perceived by society.

One participant, a school teacher from a perpetrator's family, recounted how before attending the training, he used to be very ashamed and didn't want to discuss any Genocide related topic with his students and would instead brush it off, because he was ashamed for the role that his family had in the Genocide and thought that his students would judge him if he was to talk about it even a tiny bit. However, after attending the training, he quickly realised that with a great support system, he can work through his problems and had been instead depriving his students of the knowledge that would have helped them learn more about the past and how to make sure that the same thing never happens again in the future.

He was stunned at how, when he went back to school and started discussing the Genocide, his students were very interested to learn more. It is easy to heal from your trauma when you have people supporting you, and are in an environment where you can open up and share about your burdens, judgement free. This is what happened to most participants, as most said that it was the first time that they have ever been able to fully talk about what they have been going through.

Most youth were able to learn a lot from the training. They have gone back to their families and have been helping their families to heal from their trauma and have facilitated several reconciliation acts between survivors and the perpetrators. The youth were trained to help integrate the ex-Genocide convicts who are being released from prisons back into the society. They have been playing a huge role in helping them navigate their new life in freedom, and what is involved in taking accountability, and asking for forgiveness from the Genocide survivors that they wronged, and what is needed to live with them in harmony in their respective communities.

Esperance, who has been a part of the Forums since GER and CFOR began our work together, spoke about her experience:

"I was fortunate to be part of the forum and trainings that were being conducted by GER and CFOR on the themes of reconciliation, unity and resilience. The main purpose was to learn how to facilitate discussions and interactions, to help the participants heal from the wounds of the past. What I learnt: Knowing how to be humble when interacting with the participants as a facilitator to create a safe space for everyone to open up. Being a good listener as it helps the person I'm communicating with to feel heard and know that whatever they are telling is being valued. Being empathetic and knowing how to put myself in somebody else's shoes, which I think has helped me look into someone's problem through a new lens, to put myself in their perspective, as if it was me. Arlene of CFOR said that the history of the 1994 Genocide is not just things of the past, we are still going through and experiencing their consequences, which if not addressed, could continue to be passed down from generation to generation. Innocent of GER, said that being a leader is not just a title, it's knowing deep down that you are capable and that the others are also able to work together on things that can benefit all. The training helped us believe that there is something we can do for society, especially helping the women who were widowed as a result of the Genocide against Tutsi and those who lost their children as well.

So far, I've visited 60 families of such women and have listened to their very inspiring and heart-

touching testimonies, and I believe that it has helped me learn how to be empathetic and sympathetic. So many of them need and desire to be shown love and to have somebody around caring for them and I'm very grateful to be one that they can depend on and have a shoulder to cry on. I'm very thankful for GER and CFOR for their training because they have helped me gain my sense of humanity and know how to use it properly towards those in need and make everyone feel valued

In 2017, during discussions on unity and reconciliation, various testimonies were shared. In an extraordinary situation, someone who had participated in the genocide committed in Gahanga gave testimony about their role in the genocide against the Tutsis who had sought refuge in Gahanga, where 5,000 Tutsis were killed. While giving testimony, among the attendees was a survivor of the Gahanga massacre. The person giving the testimony did not know that there was a survivor in the audience, and the survivor did not know they would encounter someone who had participated in the killings. This deeply moved those attending the discussions. However, afterward, the perpetrator asked for forgiveness, and the process of unity and reconciliation continued. The NURC invited the GER Rwanda organization to share this testimony on unity and reconciliation with others.



In Bugesera in 2024, when the Bugesera District requested Innocent of GER Rwanda, to share insights with leaders responsible for unity, reconciliation, and healing historical wounds, as well as those leading unity and resilience groups, including genocide survivors and perpetrators, he

shared his expertise in facilitating unity and reconciliation discussions. Among the group leaders, one genocide survivor shared testimony about the importance of attending the training and discussions organized by GER and CFOR. The survivor recounted an incident where they were washing clothes by the river when an elderly woman approached, asking for directions. They were surprised that she did not know the way. She explained that she had been imprisoned for genocide-related crimes and had just been released.

Due to the country's development, including new buildings and roads, she could not recognize her surroundings. During their conversation, Claudette realized who the woman was and asked if her name was BAZIZANE, to which she confirmed. BAZIZANE was one of those who participated in the genocide against Claudette's family. Claudette suddenly remembered the atrocities BAZIZANE had committed against her family and her during the genocide. She struggled with emotions, debating how to react. However, recalling the discussions she had attended with GER Rwanda and the guidance on unity and reconciliation, she gathered strength and helped the woman find her way. Claudette emphasized that since many perpetrators are now finishing their sentences, it is crucial to organize training for them to help them reintegrate peacefully into society. She noted that many things have changed—some returning prisoners find that the wives they left behind have had children with other partners, and other societal shifts have occurred, which, if not managed well, could lead to conflicts, including violence.

During a unity and reconciliation discussion in Ruhango, a female leader representing genocide survivors requested that special discussions be organized for widows who lost their husbands in the genocide against the Tutsis. She mentioned that many still suffer from trauma and isolation due to what they experienced and need support through discussions that help them overcome loneliness and despair.



In Musanze District, youth from different backgrounds were trained, including those from families of genocide survivors and those from families of genocide perpetrators. They came together to support each other in overcoming the consequences of the genocide against the Tutsis and to contribute to building a better future. They helped families dealing with property disputes by facilitating dialogue and conflict resolution. Due to their contributions, the youth requested that more young people receive training so that they can collectively contribute to the country's rebuilding efforts, as only a few have received training so far. They appreciated the opportunity to interact with government officials, who assisted them in addressing the challenges they face.

They also highlighted trauma as a major issue among the youth due to the genocide against the Tutsis. They emphasized that the discussions they attended helped them heal emotional wounds, learn the truth, understand history, visit memorial sites, and engage in development activities aimed at improving well-being. Participants expressed their worries about intergenerational trauma among youth from survivors, perpetrators, and those born as a result of rape. They also discussed their concerns and the challenge of persisting Genocide ideologies in some areas of the country where Genocide survivors are still targeted, and where integration of prisoners being released from prison back into the society has not been easy. There are still a very limited number of skilled people to facilitate reconciliation dialogue at community level. In addition to continuing the work of training facilitators in Rwanda, we are intending to extend our work in Eastern DRC to communities affected by the conflicts and violence, facilitate the potential for deep reconciliation and healing.

GER-RWANDA

