From Conflict to Peace in a Changing World

Social Reconstruction in Times of Transition

Edited by Deborah Eade

An Oxfam Working Paper

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Preface

Deborah Eade

Since its very inception in 1943, Oxfam GB has sought to respond to the impact of war and armed conflict on civilians and on the fabric of their societies. Today, conflict-related work continues to account for some two-thirds of Oxfam's annual grants expenditure, from the large-scale emergency relief programmes associated in recent years with Eastern Europe or the Great Lakes region of Africa, to the low-key work in areas which may at last be emerging from conflict, such as Central America, the Middle East, or Southern Africa.[1]

Not surprisingly, then, armed conflict has been a major and recurrent theme in Oxfam's publishing programme, whether the books and other materials are aimed primarily at international policy-makers, at development and relief practitioners, at the academic community, or at the general public. But, as **Jenny Pearce** points out in her contribution to this Working Paper, the danger today is that as 'the peace industry' gears into action, NGOs are drawn into concentrating on the definition of their own role and the expression of their own opinions, rather than giving voice to those whose lives are more directly affected. She argues that, instead of highlighting how people and societies themselves define and respond to crisis, NGOs and other aid agencies often imply (and sometimes perhaps believe) that these survivor-victims are passively waiting for outsiders to rescue them:

> The external agencies concerned with peace seem increasingly to focus the debate on *their* interventions (for instance, what *they* can do to articulate relief and development, what *they* can do to prevent conflict and build peace), and much less on the dynamic of *local* capacities and how these can shape the future prospects for peace-building.

This Working Paper reproduces articles and essays which first appeared in the quarterly journal, *Development in Practice*. The first part features papers by scholars, agency representatives, practitioners, and policy-makers on the ethical and legal dimensions of humanitarian endeavour. The second part comprises a collection of original essays which were commissioned from some of the highly experienced practitioners in the field of development and conflict who attended the June 1996 Symposium entitled *Building Bridges in Southern Africa: Conflict, Reconstruction and Reconciliation in Times of Change*, which was co-sponsored by the Johannesburg-based Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) and Oxfam's South Africa Office. The two sections are complementary, each addressing conflict-related themes from a range of perspectives, and together painting an informative picture of the moral and practical complexities of crisis and intervention.

Hugo Slim opens the Working Paper by exploring the concepts of neutrality, impartiality, and solidarity; and the necessary links between human rights and international humanitarian law. Similar explorations are made by **David Bryer** and **Edmund Cairns** in their account of how Oxfam perceives these issues and shapes its own interventions in conflict. However, **Andy Storey** shows that much of the international humanitarian response to the 1994 crisis in Rwanda fell dismally short of could possibly be regarded as minimum standards of professionalism. Indeed, the main lesson to emerge from the 1996 evaluation was that humanitarian interventions cannot substitute for political action.[2] Here, **Juan Somavía** — architect of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, and Chile's Permanent Ambassador to the United Nations — considers how today's expanded definitions of peace and security have, along with changes in the dynamics of war and insecurity, outstripped the capacity of

traditional diplomatic methods and international instruments. He reviews the moral, political, and practical options available to the international community, and suggests ways in which the UN Security Council might enhance its ability to stem the abuse of power by governments and other actors. Within Europe, **Michel Chossudovsky** illustrates how IMF-sponsored economic structural adjustment policies served to exacerbate latent social tensions in the Former Yugoslavia — problems which, he argues, have been further intensified through the provisions of the Dayton Peace Accords. There are major lessons here for anyone who is concerned about the relationship between conflict and development. Drawing on the experience of Guatemala, a country with an atrocious history of State-sponsored political violence, **Elizabeth Lira** shows that, for peace to become a reality, the formal processes for recording human-rights violations must also be accompanied by society's willingness to recognise and assimilate its past. For the majority of the victims, such recognition requires material, as well as attitudinal, change. The question of how external agencies and NGOs might best engage in 'mental health' issues is taken up in a debate between **Derek Summerfield,** of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, and **Alastair Ager**, Professor of Applied Psychology at the University of Edinburgh.

The Symposium drew together 30 individuals and organisations working in the areas of violence, conflict, and peace-building from across the Southern African region — the first time that NGOs had collectively addressed what it actually means to rebuild the social fabric. Participants were themselves working at many different levels, and discussions ranged from the very specific experiences of working with communities torn apart by war and violence, to the region-wide problems of weapons proliferation, the spread of HIV/AIDS, the manipulation of ethnic identities, and relations between civil society and the State. Healing strategies were also compared — from work with former child-soldiers in Mozambique to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, and the efforts of NGOs and the Church in Namibia to address internalised oppression, re-integrate exiles, and face the issues raised by survivors of detention camps during the war of liberation.

An invaluable dimension was the participation of speakers from Latin America: these helped to set the parameters for reflection and analysis, and ensured that the importance of changes in the international political and economic sphere was kept in view. Questions arising from the detailed presentation on El Salvador found many echoes in Southern Africa:

- Does reconstruction bring structural change?
- Does peace bring justice, and does justice bring peace?
- What is the role of collective memory in healing and reconciliation?
- How can we recognise and work with the many different levels of transition?
- What is the role of NGOs?
- With rising levels of violent crime in so many 'post-conflict' societies, can we even speak of peace at all?

And what are the gender-related dimensions of war, and of recovery and reconstruction? Negotiated peace settlements have seldom addressed women's specific economic and psychological needs, or built effectively on their social and political capacities. What happens, for example, to the women abducted by militias, and forced into sexual slavery? In Mozambique and Angola, as elsewhere, women's specific needs have been neglected in the demobilisation process. If they leave (or are abandoned by) their abductors, they lack any means of survival. Yet if they stay, they are not recognised as dependants in the demobilisation agreements. Women are in many ways excluded from access to land and training, and from the right (and opportunity) to take a full part alongside men in the process of shaping the political and economic reconstruction of their societies.

The papers arising from the Symposium thus focus on the daily challenges posed by working for a 'culture of peace'. A keynote paper by **Jenny Pearce** compares the 'post-conflict' developments in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Peru. She places the accent on local involvement in shaping society, finding that formal peace processes may exclude rather than foster grassroots and popular participation — an issue developed in greater detail by **Martha Thompson**. A recurrent theme is that, although societies and communities must draw on their own self-healing potential, uninformed or badly timed external assistance can easily thwart these often very fragile and multi-layered processes: something highlighted by both **Anne Mackintosh** and **Graeme Simpson**. This may also affect how societies acknowledge their past: for while

decisions about truth commissions, tribunals, and similar formal processes are taken at the highest political level (often with international support), it is among ordinary people and in mundane events that denial and recrimination must give way to recognition, reconciliation, and forgiveness. **Wiseman Chijere Chirwa** looks at how public symbols can help to establish a collective memory, while **Noel Muchenga Chicuecue**, **Viriato Castelo-Branco**, **Glenda Caine**, and **Francisco Tunga Alberto** focus on ways in which to help people consign *destructive* memories to the past.

The articles and essays collected here help to give concrete expression to the various conditions under which local and international agencies are working, and in which societies and individuals must somehow recover shared meanings and purpose. These contributions can only touch on some of the topics that need to be addressed. They do, nevertheless, give some insight into the ethical and practical issues involved in dealing with conflict and rebuilding societies that have been ravaged by war and violence.[3] Work on mediation and conflict-resolution cannot be approached in a social and economic vacuum. Conflict is a part of and influences to different degrees every sector of human activity: in societies in transition, conflict necessarily affects every kind of development intervention.

Deborah Eade
Editor, *Development in Practice*

Notes

1 See Linda Agerbak (1990): 'Breaking the cycle of violence: doing development in situations of conflict', *Development in Practice*, Vol 1 No 3; reprinted in Deborah Eade (ed) (1996).
2 David Millwood (ed) (1996).
3 For further reading, please see the Annotated Bibliography at the end of this Working Paper.