Grassroots Peacebuilding: lessons learned from Church Action in the North Rift Region of Kenya

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Session: Session: *What approaches are effective to build peace in divided communities? What role can churches play to promote processes that build peace at the local, grassroots level? Based on firsthand experiences of the Catholic Diocese of Eldoret, Kenya that are rooted in creative initiatives to overcome ethnic violence in Kenya's Rift Valley, the session will outlines practical steps used by the Diocese to bring people together to negotiate, discuss root issues, craft local peace agreements or "social contracts," while carrying out joint projects of interest to all parties, such as rebuilding a health center or constructing a rural road.*

What approaches are effective to build peace in divided communities? What role can churches play to promote processes that build peace at the local, grassroots level?

Based on firsthand experiences of the Catholic Diocese of Eldoret, Kenya that are rooted in creative initiatives to overcome ethnic violence in Kenya's Rift Valley, the presentation describes 'connector projects', one aspect among twelve practical steps used by the Catholic Diocese of Eldoret, and featured in a book entitled *Amani Mashinani (Peace at the Grassroots: Experiences of Community Peacebuilding in the North Rift Region of Kenya* by Bishop Cornelius Korir.

Introduction
The nature of internal conflict today necessitates the need for citizen's participation in efforts to build peace. It is clear that traditional bi-lateral negotiations modes alone are insufficient to address systems of violence. In this presentation, I will explore activities of grassroots peace building, defined in the characteristics structures of rural and urban 'communities'. These communities are most recognizable through their organizing reference points: the smallest representative units of state and national institutions, such as local councils, parishes etc. I will base my presentation on my personal experience and the work I journeyed with the Catholic Diocese of Eldoret on a grassroots peacebuilding project that is also documented in the book "*Amani Mashinani: Peace at the grassroots. Experiences of Community Peacebuilding in the North Rift Region of Kenya*" by Bishop Cornelius Korir.

At this point I should point out that I will not discuss the whole book, but I will just pick up on one concept of a "Peace Connector project", which I feel is relevant to this symposium and it also reflects on the kind of work that each one of us is doing out there in the field.

Background

Catholic Diocese of Eldoret began to use of the term peace connector project in 2009 when it implemented the *Rift Valley Amani (Peace) project*which was a response to the post-election violence in Kenya of 2007/2008. In the violence close to 1,300 people were killed and over 6,000people were internally displaced. Most affected areas were in the Rift Valley province.

This massive conflict was primarily political but had ethnic overtones which rapidly grew as politicians used conflict to divide people ethnically who originally were cooperating peacefully; people who were previously working together were now divided. This was characterized by one witness, "I saw Christians killing Christians, so now I want to change my religion." During this period, people made imaginary boundaries, e.g., political, historical injustices, access to resources, and began to communicate among themselves differently. They divided into camps, created stereotypes of opposing communities, began to discriminate and created stories about the other community. Churches were also involved.

Behavior of Communities during the Violence: Lines of Divisions Emerged

Imaginary boundaries in the onset of conflict: During the violence many issues divided the people including politics, historical injustices, language, ethnic group identity, or over resources, cultural differences, names of places as well as impunity. The central problem in Burnt Forest, for example was that "during and immediately after the violence, people created an imaginary boundaries between themselves. People from one community could not go to the other community for fear of attack. Business was impossible and life was very difficult" –AM pg 39.

In working at grassroots, we realized the large communication gap in the community between the local communities from different ethnic communities. There was also quite a large economic gap between them. The chief obstacle is their isolation from each other.

Peace connector projects as a method of grassroots intervention
In designing for interventions for the divided communities in conflict we realized that the main potential for peace comes from the institutions that make people converge on a daily basis such as schools, cattle dips, dispensaries, roads etc. Inspired by Mary Anderson's idea connectors and dividers in her book DO No

Harm, we designed peace connector projects. These were ordinary projects but designed carefully with a "peace lens". They were basicallyprojects that engage people on the different side of a conflict meant to break down their negative stereotypes, so they could begin to depend on each other and start building normal, positive relationships which could later be extended to issues in conflict..

The basic assumptions of these peace connector projects were three-fold: 1) that theycould lead to the construction of specific structures, organizations, relationships, and institutions useful to those on both sides of a conflict. 2) that they could createthe potential to lead to grassroots reconciliation and conflict transformation that could then spread to society as a whole. 3) Once completed, its manifestation could serve as a symbol of peace and cooperation.

In designing the connector project members of conflicting communities cooperated to organize the connector projects. For example, in one of the project site (Yamumbi/Kapteldon) youth who participated in the violence came together to work on a peace road that connected their two villages. For our case, even though the Diocese initiated the idea, theconnector projects were actually begnn by the conflict victim themselves—those individuals who were close to the conflict itself. We found out that these tended to have the most promise of success, due to the sense of project ownership and the direct transformation that tends to occur as the projects are undertaken. However, the Church' role should remain that of a facilitator.

Example from the Field

Peace Connector projects in the Diocese of Eldore

Catholic Diocese of Eldoret implemented several of these connector projects in various sites in the Diocese to rebuild communities devastated by violence: Examples of such projects include the Yamumbi/Kapteldon Peace Road which connected the two villages occupied by Kikuyu and Kalenjin and were separated by the conflict. The project brought together 70 youths (35 youth from each side) of Kikuyu and Kalenjin) and they worked together collaboratively. There was also abridge in Burnt Forest which connected communities living in both sides of the conflict divide. The bridge has since been memorized as a symbol of peace. Others include rebuilding war-damaged houses, anddeveloping joint educational facility destroyed during the violence in Lorian/ Burnt Forest and a cooling plant in Lelan.

The aim of these projects was to establish communication between communities divided by post elections violence. This was done through activities of common interest.The Diocese encouraged communities to take leading roles in project development and being charge of the project.

Through the project people were able to interact without necessarily having to confront the most difficult aspects of their conflict which they still may not feel comfortable confronting. Yet they began the process of building trust and

understanding with people on the other side, while they focus on an external, clearly mutual problem. Once they learned to work together, and learn that they can, indeed solve problems together, they redefined (or reframed) their fundamental differences in terms of common problems and began to work together in a cooperative way to solve those problems too.

By the time People to People Peace Project (3Ps,) the successor project of RVAP, was coming in 2010, connector projects had gained momentum. 6 additional connector projects were implemented in the communities of Burnt Forests through the project in the areas that were potentially referred as "hotspots" because of the likelihood of eruption of conflicts. A milk cooling plant in Lelan where Pokot and Marakwet were at the logger heads over cattle rustling and political rivalry brought these communities together.

Such were positive, local activities performed by members of the local communities that were in different sides of the conflict divide, whose intentions were to bring together former enemies to allow individuals from opposing sides of the conflict to encounter one another in a conflict-free zone of cooperation.

Things to consider when implementing a connector Project

1. There should be a careful and a thorough needs assessment to identify the key problem that would be in the interest of both communities to solve. Failure to do a proper assessment can lead to projects that are unneeded and waste time and money.
2. Projects should be designed carefully, to ensure that they actually address the issues they are intended to solve, plan to possible problems and are technically sound.
3. The local people should feel that they own the project and have full participation in its management.
4. Lines of authority should be clearly defined: who is in charge of what? Who is responsible for financial accounting? Which decisions are made by the entire Committee and which are left to managers? If such questions are not answered, conflict over power and authority can sap energy from a good project.
5. There should be tight accountability mechanisms in place to prevent misuse or resources. Corruption will only intensify the conflict and encourage the belief that one side cannot be trusted in good faith.
6. The project should benefit as many people as possible in the community, to should the benefits of the peace to the entire village, not just a lucky few.
7. The distribution of such benefits should be equitable. The criteria for distribution should be agreed upon in by the Committee, to prevent conflicts over who gets what and how much. The reasoning behind such allocation should be explained clearly and carefully to the villagers concerned so that rumors, misinformation and gossip do not spread.

8. If the project is a building or some kind of structure, it should be located in an area that is considered a "neutral territory", in which all people will feel welcome.
9. The project should encourage and incentivize interaction between the two communities at all points in the project development and management process. Ideally, the end result should also facilitate links between them.
10. The peace Committee should monitor the project's progress carefully, to correct any problems and deal with any conflicts that might arise.

Key Outcomes of the PeaceConnector Projects
- Connector projects were found to have encouraged reconciliation between the Kikuyus and Kalenjins on various levels. For example, the greatest impediments to reconciliation during the conflict were thatsince both communities were separated from one another, inevitably negative stereotypes on both sides existed. Connector projects brought them, leading to the breakdown stereotypes as each side got to know the other better and why they engaged in violence.
- The projects enabled them to share common interests: Because the focus connector projects is building institutions that have positive meaning or use for both sides, such as houses, schools, and hospitals, communities were able to see that they shared common interests. Participants who helped each other in such simple ways as carrying heavy objects were able to develop shared work ethics.
- Through the process participants were able to begin and continued communication as well as created lasting relationships or even friendships.
- Peace Connector projects allowed them to realize some cooperative accomplishment that led to de-escalation and transformationof the conflict.
- The greatest lesson is that that Peace Connector projects is a key ingredient in peacebuilding especially at the grassroots level.

The Potential Negative Side of Joint Projects
Peace Connector projects may seem to be entirely positive; however, there are potential negatives to working closely with one's enemies.
- Verifying Stereotypes: While the separation of opposing communities may lead to negative stereotypes, working in proximity with opposing parties can lead to first-hand verification of such stereotypes.
- Potential to further separate opposing parties if the connector project will benefit the other more: In addition, connector projects can potentially further separate opposing communities if one side feels that the resulting structure or institution will benefit the other group more.
- Lack of ownership because of conception and organized by third parties (NGOs). Oftenconnector projects are conceived, designed and/or organized by third parties, such Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) of churches and sometimes this may lead to a lack of the important feeling of ownership by the communities that a successful connector project must have.
- Funding:Connector projects often need the assistance of outside parties, and the initial unbiased push needed to get people involved. In our case, AuAID

through CRS and Caritas Australia provided the initial funding. Later USAID providedadditional funding for the subsequent projects. Once initiated by outside third parties, ideally such projects should be transferred to the participants themselves, at least to some extent, so they feel as if the project is their own, not something they are doing for someone else. Funding and other constraints, however, often make these projects difficult to do.

Conclusion

Although connector projects are certainly not a panacea for highly escalated, intractable inter-group conflicts, they are one element in a variety of peacebuilding activities that are absolutely essential to bring about eventual conflict transformation and stable peace. But they need to exist within the context of many other peacebuilding, peacemaking, and sometimes peacekeeping activities, which together can bring about constructive change.