



## A PROMISING EXPERIENCE: BUILDING PEACE THROUGH COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Mainstream peacebuilding approaches tend to assume that a conflict settlement must be in place before the process of social and economic development can begin. Humanitarian rather than development aid is therefore the norm for countries emerging from conflict, even after the violence has receded.

A few years ago Zombe, a village in Ituri in north-eastern DRC, received an unwelcome visit. Militia members came to ask the chief whether they could recruit a few villagers to their ranks. With a sigh of resignation, the chief said: "Take these men, for I have nothing else to give them." After years of war and devastation, there were not even means to till the soil.

Yet a recent evaluation of a UNDP project in the Democratic Republic of Congo concludes that development can be an effective tool to build peace, even in the midst of violence. In the war-torn district of Ituri, local initiatives for community development effectively enabled a shift from violence to relative peace.

Some time later, militia members returned to Zombe. Again they addressed themselves to the chief, posing the very same question. He said: "Now my people can make a living. We have a health centre; we have started cultivating our land again. No one wants to leave. The answer is no. I will not let you take any of my people." The guerrillas left with their mission unaccomplished.

## AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

Zumbe was one of the sites of the peacebuilding and community development project in Ituri. The project was carried out by the UN Development Programme and Office for Project Services from 2003 onwards. It was co-financed by the Norwegian government/Norad (USD 3.1 million) and UNDP (USD 400.000), and evaluated by a CMI team in 2006.

In Ituri, a war within the larger DRC war had broken out in 1999. Though Congo's larger armed conflict ended with a string of peace agreements in 2002-2003, violence continued to haunt this district. What had started as a conflict between the Hema and Lendu ethnic groups primarily over land, took on larger proportions with the involvement of Ugandan forces and the exploitation of more valuable resources such as timber and gold. Efforts were made to negotiate peace, but even after the official withdrawal of Ugandan forces violence continued.

In the midst of this violence in 2002, UNDP and Mr. Arild Øyen, at the time a consultant for MONUC (the UN peacekeeping force in the DRC) and currently Norway's ambassador to Angola, decided that some bold steps needed to be taken. The experience of peace deals failing to bring peace in Ituri, and of community development initiatives succeeding in halting violence elsewhere in eastern DRC, inspired them to try a new approach. This was a project to be composed of small, simple projects, to be launched by local groups for the reconstruction and development of their own communities. Giving local actors the responsibility would enable them to take the lead in the building of their own peace.

## CONCERNS UNFOUNDED

The idea was as simple as it was original – and risky. It could, for instance, be suspected that the local actors, devastated by war, would not have the capability to run such projects. Yet some 80 different local organisations received on average USD 20.000 each to initiate and run various projects, and the vast majority of them proved to be skilful and committed project managers.

One may also have suspected that due to the dire poverty in the area, recipients would simply put the money in their own pockets. But only in two of the more than 80 small projects embezzlement was reported. In both cases the money was about to be returned.

A third concern was that, given the strong presence of militia groups in the district, recipient NGOs could be used by the armed

groups as front organisations – for financing the very violent activities that the project sought to reduce. Yet the peacebuilding and development project effectively empowered the local communities, and disempowered the militias.

The idea worked. The project, through the variety of small-scale development initiatives it entailed, played an important role in reducing the level of violence. It helped build peace because it provided real opportunities for meaningful work, and enabled people from different sides of the conflict to work together and thereby to learn to respect each other's differences and to reconcile. The project strengthened the incentives for peaceful behaviour.

## THE OCEAN RADIO STATION IN ARU

Aru, one of the sites of the Ituri project, was marked by the burdens of war. Bordering Uganda, the town was a haven for internally displaced Congolese. The community had been deprived of all sources of information except Ugandan media and the MONUC radio. Yet some teenagers were fascinated by the world of radio. They had not been able to complete secondary school, but they had managed to put up an antenna next to a small house that they were allowed to use as a studio. Their vision was to use the radio to spread information about local developments, stimulate debate, and tell their compatriots about the need for resolving their differences peacefully. They started broadcasting small programmes, but their outreach was limited.

The Ocean radio station received UNDP funding for training and technical material. By 2006 the station was broadcasting a number of different programmes every day. All the nine languages spoken in the territory were used, and the geographical outreach had expanded considerably. The radio filled functions of information, communication (through phone-in and in-studio debates), education (through e.g. awareness-raising programmes on HIV/AIDS), and reconciliation (through reconciliation programmes and the use of peace journalism when covering disputes). Locals highly appreciated what their community radio had to offer.

The Aru experience suggests a number of lessons:

- Locally rooted and imaginative initiatives for peace are most likely to succeed.
- Enabling the population to access locally produced information about the situation in their area, is vital for peace to consolidate.



- Training should be followed by paid work, so that the trainees have the financial ability to make use of what they learned for the benefit of the community.
- In transitions from war radio should be favoured to printed media, given the often weak infrastructure for paper distribution, high illiteracy rates and printing costs.

## DRC

- Approx. 60 million inhabitants
- Approx. 2,345,000 square km (more than 4x the size of France)
- Very rich in natural resources
- One-party rule 1965-1997, wars 1996-1997 and 1998-2002
- At least 3 million people died as a result of the wars
- Approx. 1.7 million Congolese are still internally displaced or refugees
- Presidential, parliamentary and provincial elections held in 2006
- Joseph Kabila (35) elected president, Antoine Gizenga (81) prime minister

## Ituri

- District in Orientale Province, bordering Uganda and Sudan
- Between 4.5 and 5 million inhabitants
- Between 40,000 and 50,000 square km (roughly the size of Denmark)
- Occupied by Uganda 1998-2003, local armed conflict from 1999
- At least 50,000 killed and 500,000 displaced as a result of the conflicts
- Under new DRC constitution, Ituri will become a separate province

had been a thorny process in Ituri. One of the former combatants in Mandro said that he understood that it had to be difficult for fellow villagers to have him back, since he had treated them badly in the past. In the Mandro area violence had not only been between communities, but also within the same villages and ethnic groups.

In addition to helping the returned ex-fighters to make a living, a local women's association had organised a reconciliation ceremony in the village. As one of the women said, "It was very difficult. But we managed. Some of the men apologised." After the ceremony she felt that tensions were eased.

The Mandro experience suggests two overall lessons:

- Aid to reintegrate former combatants needs to target not only the combatants, but also the communities into which they are to be reintegrated.
- Reintegration and reconciliation requires reconstruction and development. Reconciliation efforts in Mandro would likely have collapsed without the opportunities the project gave to till the soil, ease the women's workload, and to access healthcare.

projects" all shared one or several of the four overall aims of reconciliation, reconstruction, local capacity building, and awareness raising on the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The project was a success, in large part due to the local factor. The local communities welcomed the opportunity to build peace. People in Ituri were used to "fending for themselves" after the 32 years of Mobutu's rule and the half a decade of war in the Congo. Paradoxically perhaps, their capacity to build their own peace therefore related to the fact that they were not used to receiving development assistance. So when they got this chance in the Ituri project, they made the most of it with much entrepreneurial zeal and enthusiasm. The local actors proved to be key drivers of change, as they were able to achieve what hardly any of the higher-level peacemaking efforts had achieved: a significant reduction of violence at the local level.

Violence reduction also came as an aggregate result of several characteristics of the micro projects, most importantly:

- The inclusion of people from different sides of the conflict in each project;
- The practical orientation of each project, enabling participants both to work together and thereby to reconcile and also to make a living;
- The aid agency's trust in the local actors, which inspired local ownership and boosted the self-confidence of Iturians in their ability to build peace; and
- Tight follow-up and guidance by the aid agency on the ground, and its ready availability in cases of problems and questions.

The project was relatively unique in Ituri at the time, yet had it been scaled up and expanded geographically it would likely have reduced the levels of violence even further.

## REINTEGRATION AND RECONCILIATION IN MANDRO

In Mandro, a village outside of Ituri's main town Bunia and another site of the Ituri project; a health and maternity centre was under construction. A mill had been installed. Ex-combatants had organised themselves in a cooperative so that they could start cultivating the land they had been awarded upon their return. They had also started rearing goats.

Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration

## A PROMISING EXPERIENCE

The Aru and Mandro initiatives were but some of the more than 80 small projects run by almost as many actors, primarily local NGOs, through the Ituri peacebuilding and development project. The evaluation took a closer look at 24 of these initiatives, which included activities such as hairdressing, the production of bricks, eggs, honey, and manioc; a blood bank, micro credit for women, and the building of bridges, water networks, a stadium, courts, and primary schools. These "micro



CMIBRIEF is based on *Evaluation of the UNDP/UNOPS Peacebuilding and Community Development Project in Ituri, the Democratic Republic of Congo* (CMI Report 2006:20). Author of CMIBRIEF: Ingrid Samset. Photos: Ingrid Samset. Editor of CMIBRIEF: Ingvild Hestad. Technical editor: Inger A. Nygaard.

Key to the project's success was also the dedication and hard work of the small UN project team in Ituri. Nonetheless, the project as a whole suffered from inadequate planning, an unsuitable organisational framework, the centralisation of key tasks to the capital Kinshasa, weak strategic management – and continued violence in the Ituri district.

The evaluation therefore concludes that project was a success that came about in spite of a number of deficiencies, or a “success by default”. Deficiencies in large part related to the UNDP and the fact that this is a relatively bureaucratic structure whose management standards are tailored to working with government agencies rather than with small NGOs. The evaluation is also in line with the 2006 high-level panel report on UN reform, which highlights the need for better coordination between UNDP and other UN and non-UN agencies at the country level.

## FUTURE APPLICABILITY

While community development proved to be an effective peacebuilding tool in the case of Ituri, it is not likely to work in all sorts of conflict zones. Only if the conflict is closely related to poverty and marginalisation, as it has been in the DRC and Ituri, community development is likely to make a difference in building peace. A corresponding approach could thus have worked in e.g. northern Uganda and southern Sudan, where poverty and marginalisation are central issues. In cases such as Israel/Palestine, by contrast, where issues such as identity, religion and power politics play a larger role, the approach is probably less applicable. The importance of anchoring the peacebuilding process among local actors and communities is still a lesson from the Ituri project which is likely to be more universally applicable.

And while UNDP took the lead in the difficult environment of Ituri, the problems it faced when running this project suggest that other agencies, for instance organisations that are less bureaucratic, more flexible, and more accustomed to working with local NGOs; may achieve at least as much if adopting the peacebuilding through community development approach.

In sum, using community development to build peace is a promising approach. The Ituri experience suggests that aid agencies that adopt this strategy will stand a fair chance to succeed in significantly reducing poverty-related violence.