

## **Peace and Conflict in Africa: Reflections from an African Peacebuilder**

### **II Patterns of Peace and Peace Building: Lessons and Reflections.**

Dr. Assefa: Today I will talk about emerging patterns in conflict and peace in current-day Africa, and illustrate what I mean by telling you a story about a process of peace-building that I have been engaged in for the past six years. And then we can see what kinds of generalizations might be drawn from that experience. When we talk about conflict and peace in Africa, we can see about four patterns emerge. There are a group of countries, like Somalia and Sudan, which have been in crisis for decades and where there still seems to be no discernable signs for peace. Then, there are others like Mozambique and South Africa that have overcome conflicts and are now trying to build sustainable peace. In these countries, it might be a bit too early to talk about reconciliation, but they are working on it. Then there is a third category of countries that have begun building stable peace, but are recidivists. They are addicted to conflict and are slipping back into it. These are countries like Angola, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Uganda. A fourth pattern that is that of international wars. After the fall of the Soviet Union, we thought that there were primarily going to be internal wars. But in Africa, we have seen the resurgence of international wars. For example in the Congo, many countries, including non-African countries, are drawn into a conflict that revolves around the exploitation of resources in the Congo area. On one side you have Rwanda and Uganda fighting against the government of the Congo. Some people say the United States government is assisting

them against the Congo. And on the other side are Zimbabwe, Namibia, Chad and Sudan that have come to the aid of the Congo.

And what are the responses for resolving conflict? We can identify a number of categories. One is direct negotiation between conflicting parties, such as what happened in South Africa between the white minority regime and the African National Congress. But the difficulty with direct negotiations is trying to get the parties to the table. The moment one side signifies that they want to talk, the other side takes this as a signal of weakness and tries to intensify its offenses. And neither side is willing to be the first to ask for negotiation. Therefore, an unmediated negotiation has been quite difficult in the African context.

There have also been a number of different kinds of mediation efforts made both by African states and outside states. Examples are the British mediation in Zimbabwe, the United States' attempt in the Ethiopian conflict, and the Tanzanian mediation in Burundi and Rwanda. And then there are regional responses to conflict in Africa such as the Organization of East African States that is trying to intervene in Liberia and Sierra Leone by employing negotiation and military means to bring peace.

When we look at all these responses there is a certain pattern about them -- they are undertaken by state actors: single states, international bodies or a group of states. Secondly, they are done at the top political level. They are what we call 'top-down' or 'trickle-down' approaches. The assumption is that if there is an agreement made at the political level, it will somehow percolate down to the rest of the society. But this assumption hasn't held true in many instances. In international conflicts, if you negotiate between state leaders and they agree, to a very large extent you can expect this to hold for

the rest of the society because nation-states are separated by boundaries. But when you talk about civil wars in which communities have turned against communities, just to have an agreement between leaders without involving the community in the reconciliation process is futile. Here peoples lives are so intertwined with each other that just signing a peace accord cannot dismiss the animosity and hostility that exists between them. So, in one way or another, communities must be part and parcel of this peace-building process.

We can identify two kinds of top-down processes. One is what we call “first track” which is highly visible, political and driven by power considerations. The mediation process that Richard Holbrook used in Kosovo and Bosnia is a good example of that kind of an approach. There is also what we call a “second-track” approach, which is quiet, behind-the-scenes, away from the media, aimed at developing trust and confidence and helping conflict parties work out their problems in a satisfactory way. This could be done by state actors, but in most instances no state actors are involved. A good example of this could be the Oslo accord, which got the Palestinians and the Israelis together. Among these various approaches, the power-based first-track one is considered efficient since that it can forge agreement quickly by either trying to punish those that are unwilling to agree, or by trying to provide economic inducement for those that cooperate. In this way, it can get to an agreement quicker than the alternative process of second track. But because the agreement does not take care of the deep interests and needs of the parties, it will collapse sooner or later. And we have seen a number of such agreements that have been signed and not respected later on. A good example of this is the Arusha accord of 1993 which was mediated by a lot of international actors including France, the United States and Britain and that ended the war between the insurgency of Rwanda and

the government of Rwanda at that time. But, before the ink dried, the agreement collapsed and it led to one of the worst genocides in human history: the genocide of 1994.

Alternatively, the second track trust-based approaches are relatively inefficient since they take a long time to reach agreement. But the result of the agreement is more likely to stick. In fact, in Rwanda there were a number of attempts to get the rebels --the insurgency -- to dialogue with the government in power, and there were many promising possibilities. However, the French government overtook this initiative and the whole methodology changed from trust to coercion and arm-twisting, which eventually led to the accord that ended up collapsing.

And increasingly, there is an emerging approach to peace building which is coming from the ground up. Comparatively, this approach is new and its methodology is not yet very well developed or understood. And what I will try to do is to illustrate this method by giving an example of a process that I have been engaged in for the past six years in the northern region of Ghana.

The conflict I am talking about happened in February 1994. It was called the Guinea Fowl War and how it came about is rather interesting.

**Click here to download Dr. Assefa's article, "Coexistence and Reconciliation in the Northern Region of Ghana," which describes his experiences in peacebuilding following the Guinea Fowl War. This article was published in Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory and Practice, edited by Mohammed Abu-Nimer.**

In conclusion, it was the reconciliation process that challenged people to think of a greater inter-ethnic regional identity. And recently we are increasingly discussing pan-

Africanism. Of course, African identity is not an end in itself. We should be challenged to have an even greater identity -- our human identity. Thank You.

Question: What was the substantive character of the agreement? Did these two communities move beyond the borders of the economic identity that they previously had?

Dr. Assefa: What's interesting in Ghana, and in a number of African countries, is that land is not owned individually. Land is owned by the community. And the chief owns the land in the name of the community. What happened as part of this agreement was that in those areas where the formerly landless were settled, it was agreed that their communities would appoint a chief to hold lands in their group's name. In other words, they formally became landowners. Also, the traditional landowners have a consultative body called the House of Chiefs where this new right to own land was recognized, and which the new chiefs joined.

Question: I recently returned from Burundi where there are many people that are very afraid to talk about conflict. One thing that they did talk about was the subject of reconciliation and whether one could have reconciliation without forgiveness or forgiveness without justice. And in this case, they were referring to not just justice, but accountability because the very people who had committed crimes, rapes, and killings presently had no accountability. How can you answer these people?

Dr. Assefa: That is a very thorny question. Fortunately, in the Northern Ghana situation the atrocities were not as horrendous as in Rwanda and Burundi where, for the sake of peace, those that committed atrocities were rewarded with positions in the new government. I have great difficulty trying to understand peace that way. In my definition, justice is a very important component of peace and reconciliation. I don't think the question for me is whether there should be justice or accountability for crimes, rather how is that done? If we understand justice as punishing using existing legal processes, then I wonder if that attains the objective of justice. Because to a very large extent, the kind of justice system that we have is fashioned to deal only with very small, interpersonal conflicts where the legal standards and norms are shared by all members of a society. But when you are talking about very large-scale social conflicts -- where even those norms are under dispute -- then trying to use the current system is not appropriate, especially in Burundi or in Rwanda. If you punish the Hutus that are accused of having killed the Tutsis, the next generation of Hutus will make heroes out of the accused. They will build statues for them and the conflict will continue.

So what are the appropriate justice mechanisms that do not feed the cycle of violence and hate? There is no easy answer. I think the way the Rwandans are trying to deal with it is to go back to some of their traditional ways of understanding guilt. Whether this is adequate could be debated. But when you apply the legal process that is aimed at punishing to larger-scale social conflicts as divisive as Rwanda and Burundi it does not work. This is a very difficult message, but something that has to be recognized.

Question: What was the role of women in resolving and in mediating some of the conflicts, and in creating the environment for peace?

Dr. Assefa: Again, this brings up the issues of modernity and tradition. I think it might have been by the time we reached Kumasi Five that one of the elders said that they needed to have women at these meetings because if there were women there, the discussion would not be as difficult. And so they began inviting women to come and join the discussion. And the women ended up playing a significant role. However, if from the beginning, the mediators had put pressure on the groups to include women, we may not have gone as far as we did. But creating the environment where the people themselves realized this and took the initiative to bring women into the process as active participants was one of the best parts of that peace process. And now they play a key role in the implementation body. So how to get to that objective of this mediation process and modernize it without necessarily unleashing resistance from traditional institutions is a very delicate balancing act.

Question: Could you talk of the process of externally understanding things through an internal self-reflective process and also give an example of how that took place?

Dr. Assefa: One of the significant stages in this process was that of honest self-reflection. And there are two dimensions to this. We have to take responsibility not only at the individual level and also at the collective level. In the Ghanaian peace process, some people from the land-owning groups were shocked to hear of the things that people from

their group had done to other people in the name of their group. So that is part of the individual as well as collective self-reflection process. And a number of the comments that people made were not just how their relationship with their neighbors, but also how their relationship with their families, and their relationship with themselves, was improving.

One of the things that I have learnt about mediation, and particularly working in this kind of situation is, is that you cannot control the process. Sometimes a person would stand up and just tell a story. Sometimes I even had some difficulty trying to understand what was going on. And as the story was being told I would wonder what it meant, and how it was relevant. But then I would see that it was touching people. And I would realize that everyone had their own style and that this was cross-cultural.

Question: I am from Ethiopia where we used to have very well-established mediation processes. Could you tell us one or two things about our tradition of mediation processes?

Dr. Assefa: One example is that of governance. If we really look seriously, we find that we have institutions that are even more democratic than multi-party politics such as decentralized systems with a high level of accountability and where the chief is not a dictator. A chief has to be very sensitive about responding to the will of the community. A chief cannot abuse his people or be irresponsible and get away with it. The idea of wealth in the society that I grew up in was not about greed. It was not about enriching oneself at the expense of everybody else. It was an instrument that gave you an opportunity to be generous. A wealthy person was able to open their house so that those

that did not have much could share in the wealth. But when you look at what political power has meant in Africa, you see that what we call economic growth and development just means more selfish affluence and more greed, and this is maladapted to the African tradition. And if we were to look at our traditions, there are lots of inspirations for a governing system that can meet the needs of people.

After all, the conflict-resolution movement, particularly in the United States, was inspired by work in Africa. Legal anthropologists seeing how over-burdened the American legal system was, sought alternatives in other societies that were dealing with conflict. And they looked at African experiences in mediation. This is a highly developed practice and one of the duties of the chief and respected elders is dispute settlement. For example, in my country, if two people were fighting and a woman who was passing by placed her traditional belt between them, the fighting had to stop. That is respect. The tragedy is that some of these practices have disappeared and, to a certain extent, the development of the legal system in Ethiopia has been at the expense of traditional systems that existed in the country.

The second thing is that the nature of conflicts has changed. Traditional systems, previously meant to mediate small scale inter-group or inter-personal disputes, are being overwhelmed by the intensity and size of the emerging conflicts. Also there are certain assumptions about community behavior that make traditional approaches successful. But such traditions are weakening.

Moreover, western education is a knowledge culture and our tradition is a wisdom culture. In a traditional Ethiopian mediation process, if people had a dispute, they identified somebody who is a respected elder and they take their case to that elder. But,

there is also a certain premise that goes with it. That is, if the elder speaks, you obey. I was once in a mediation process in Uganda. After lots of hearings, the elder came up with a proposal. As an outsider this solution sounded incomprehensible, and afterwards I asked this person how he felt that the judgement was given against him. But the person did not perceive it that way! And instead of saying that it grieved him, he said that he felt that he was accepting the punishment for the sake of the community. And it is in such cases that the community focus replaces the individual focus. But now elders and priests have been politically emasculated. Previously, they could go to the king and advise him. But not anymore. One of the things that the rebels in Southern Sudan do when they take over a town is take the traditional elder and flog him in public. The point is to show that this person does not have authority in the community anymore.

Audience member: You are quite right, the changes have really undermined most of the conflict resolution traditions in Ethiopia. In 1991, there was a strange phenomenon brought by the government to recognize ethnicity as the base for political organizing. And that meant weeding out those that did not belong. And about 30 domestic groups got together and said, "Wait a minute, we've been living with these people. How can we throw them out?" So they got together and they held a ritual. They got in a circle, killed a white bull, and dug a hole in the middle of the field. Then an elder women took a spear, dipped it in the blood of the bull, went over to the hole dug in the middle of the field, broke the spear, and buried it. Any conflict that was there was meant to be buried by that elder women who, because of her age, was an honorary man and political figure. If the conflict had been between individuals, she would have poured blood and milk on

both of them, put them on fresh hide, tied them together, and untied them. And just like the process of rebirth, they would have emerged as new individuals no longer remembering the conflict that they had in the past. These kinds of traditions are very beautiful. But, you know what happened to the ritual of the 30 ethnic linguistic groups? Soldiers of the new government came and shot at them and dispersed them. So the forces against the traditions are absolutely powerful.

Question: One problem is that in many cases there are a lot of forces that don't want local peace. So you have the para-military forces of the army coming in. What do you do when you are trying to build peace locally and you have outside forces that are trying to prevent you?

Dr. Assefa: Usually leaders set the tone. And first they make you hate somebody and then they say, now it is all over, we are friends. But in the reconciliation process I described, people were saying, "Yes, you are telling me to hate, but why should I?" So it actually eroded their power-base. And in the next political election, those that were against the peace were voted out and those that were champions in the peace process won. Naturally, those that want to control society for the purpose of war are very threatened by a peace process because it is democratic in the real sense of the term. But this work is risky and recently in Kenya, two of my colleagues were killed. In my country, I cannot talk about reconciliation and peace. They say, what are you talking about? There is no war here. If you are talking about peace or reconciliation then you must have a hidden agenda -- you must be part of the opposition. But in this work, part

of the philosophy of the methodology is vulnerability. The point is not to go and withstand forces when you know who is going to lose. Rather, it is to be who you are and to be firm in your cause, because in some strange way, that vulnerability often turns into a power base. Thank You.