

Non Violence as a Tool of Empowering Warring Communities to be Agents of their own Change

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Introduction

In 2009, I began my peace mission in South Sudan (Sudan by then) and Northern Kenya which is characterized by armed conflicts among pastoralist communities which inhabit that region. In Northern Kenya I went to live at the grass root (Leyai IDP-camp) with the people who were badly affected by the Rendile-Borana conflict. In South Sudan I teach in RECONCILE peace Institute which trains key persons, mobilized from all corners of South Sudan on peace and trauma healing. For the last five years I have met participants who were born, lived, married and are now aging in war. Most of them have been in and out of refugee camps. In February 2015 I started helping a Catholic Diocese in Western part of the country in establishing a Peace and Trauma healing Museum. This region has also been affected by war and worse by the atrocities of the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) (*a rebel group from Northern Uganda*), which abducted many women, girls, young men, boys, and maimed and killed many. The language of non violence helped me transform myself and empowered me to be able to live and work in these hostile environments and people who are violent as the result of protracted conflicts. Non violence has also been key in transforming the Rendile-Borana conflict in Northern Kenya.

This paper will only focus on my experience in Northern Kenya and how Non violence was very powerful in changing violent relations to peaceful relations.

Experience of Violence in Leyai Internally Displaced people (IDP) Camp

Peace and Justice Commission (CJPC) of Tangaza University College where I was a member visited Marsabit Diocese CJPC to help in peace activities for one week. I learned that the conflict situation in the region has subjected many people to live in dehumanizing conditions. I resolved to participated in building a culture of peace in the region by empowering people to be agents of their own change. The ten pastoralist groups in Marsabit County were fighting each other. However I decided to focus on the Rendile- Borana conflict which was claiming many lives at that time.

I went to live in Leyai IDP camp to create rapport with the people, understand their culture, build trust; allow the people to know me and deeply understand the violent conflict. I saw that Leyai primary school was closed several times due to the insecurity and had just reopened with only three teachers. Therefore as I lived with the local people I started teaching their traumatized children in the school.

Leyai IDP camp was inhabited by Rendile community. While there, I observed that the Rendille and Borana communities were deeply divided and never interacted. Each community used its own source of water, means of transport and never traded with each other. They perceived each other as an enemy and whoever killed an enemy was praised and termed as a hero. I witnessed situations where people were killed and cattle were raided. The pain of loss, bitterness, anger, was temporarily 'relieved' after revenge.

As I interacted with the children I learned that the enmity and hatred had been passed over from generation to generation leaving the conflict in a vicious cycle. Whenever I asked the children to draw, they all drew guns, people killing each other and cattle being raided. I asked different questions at different times. What will you do when you grow up? "I will go kill Borana and take back our cattle" Who created your parents "God" Who created parents of Borana children, "the Devil" When I bring Borana children what will you do with them? "We will kill them". My interaction with the pupils informed me of an urgent need of cutting the chain of enmity and hatred.

Overcoming Violence with Excessive Violence

The hatred and enmity between Rendille and Borana communities was a big obstacle to any dialogue attempt or solving dispute constructively. I heard from the local communities that many peace meeting ended up violently. In addition I observed that any act of violence was reacted to with excessive violence. If cattle were raided and a person killed, revenge was immediately and it was doubled in many cases. Many victims of revenge were innocent people especially from Songa and Jaldesa locations who live at the border of the two communities. The revenge mission escalated the violence to a very high magnitude, leaving the area very insecure.

Introducing Non Violence as an Alternative to Solving Conflicts with Bloody Violence

The deep rooted culture of violence and revenge could only be transformed if people changed the way they perceived each other and communicated. Consequently their violent actions will change. I met Imtraud Kauschat from Germany and her team who were training on non violent communication. In collaboration with a Irmtraud we introduced Non violence between Borana and Rendille communities. We begun by training the elders who are the key decision makers. They were taken away from the violence zone to a peaceful area (More than 600km). The elders started to interact, listen to each other; and perceive each other as a human being. They were able to sit and discuss about the violence which has enslaved them. The elders went back to Marsabit as a team and when people saw them together in Marsabit town they asked, "When did Rendille and Borana elders start talking together?". These elders visited various villages to ask people to unite and take responsibility to build their own peace. Secondly a team of Morans/warriors (Key perpetrators to the conflict) were trained on non violent communication. Some confessed how they were to kill each other during several violent attacks. They decided to remain friends. When they went back they resolved to preach peace to their peers and keep them from raiding or

killing. The women whose children and husbands had been killed by the bloody conflicts were also trained. All these people became agents of peace in their region.

The opportunities created by Non violence

The language of non violence changed the perception of an enemy to a human being whom they can collaborate with in developmental activities. Consequently the elders who are key decision makers started holding dialogues and resolving disputes before they escalate to violence.

Incidences of killing and raids have highly reduced. People living in IDP-camps like Leyai have gone back to their farms and resumed agricultural activities. In May 2014, they contributed 5,000 kgs of Maize to areas affected by drought in Marsabit County. There was enhanced communication where each community started alerting each other in case they sensed any danger. The two communities started trading together and using the same means of transport. Some Rendile started working as casual workers in Borana farms. Elder started tracing raided cattle and return them to the owners. Criminals are punished with no regard from which group they are. The elite youth took responsibility of promoting interaction between Rendile and Boran youth through sports and parties which has promoted good relationships among the young people. Consequently the Rendile and Borana have now lived in a peaceful environment for the last three years after many years of bloody conflict.

Conclusion

My experience of using non violence to myself first and then communities at war with each other, has motivated me to long to gain deeper understanding. Non violence is the solution to the protracted conflicts which have resulted to the loss of meaning to preciousness of life and subjected many people to live in dehumanizing conditions. However many people especially those working for peace do not have a deeper knowledge of the practice of non violence. This is why many negotiations have not yielded fruits due to eruptions of violent communication which worsens the situation.

The Catholic Church is very well placed in the society. It is connected with people all over the world from top, middle up to the grass root level. Therefore the Church can be a good channel of Active Nonviolence. Jesus is an icon of non violence, therefore if Active Non violence is taught at all levels then it will become a language which can overcome the violence being experienced in many parts of the world. Through the Council of Justice and Peace a manual can be developed which can be used to train people at national level hence spilling over to the grass root. Finally there is a need to document successful stories of non violence which can help others learn.