

Community-based reconciliation in practice and lessons for the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Reconciliation in Zimbabwe remains a recurring question despite several interventions by the government to respond to the challenge. Such efforts stretch as far back as the first decade of independence. A key observation about the failure of the interventions is the weak utilisation of localism. Yet other countries with similar historical experiences as Zimbabwe have recorded better progress by embracing community-based methods. Indeed, the traditional liberal view that there is a universal set of approaches to reconciliation has for long been discredited and it is now widely accepted that due to diverse cultural values, practices and norms, communities should approach reconciliation in diverse ways. The National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) of Zimbabwe has the opportunity to learn from other developing countries on how community approaches unfolded, and apply such lessons in enriching its own programmes in the

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country. The East Timor and Sierra Leone cases are adduced as providing practical and valuable insights upon which the NPRC can benchmark and refine its strategy, and take advantage of the idle pool of indigenous methods in the country.

Keywords: community-based, reconciliation in practice, lessons, National Peace and Reconciliation Commission, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The manner in which a society decides to deal with past violations of human rights determines the extent to which long-term stability and reconciliation may be achieved. Interventions should aim to prevent the recurrence of conflicts while repairing the damage caused. The history of political conflicts in Zimbabwe is well documented, but the attempted responses have largely ignored the micro-level realities, and have left the national reconciliation problem still lingering. As Zimbabwe remains politically and socially unstable, reconciliation, in my view, is a specific area of inquiry which urgently needs to be further investigated in order to turn the country into a place where citizens live in conditions of peace. This aspiration is implanted in Chapter 12 of the amended Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013), which established the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) to confront the irrepressible challenge of reconciliation. The Commission has a five-year mandate to address past conflicts extending to the pre-independence era. It became operational in 2018, following the publication of a Government Gazette on 5 January. The Commission embarked on nation-wide public consultations, beginning 19 February 2018, to gather views on its strategic vision. One consistent theme that has emerged is greater inclusivity and public participation in the process and a lesser role for the government (National Transitional Justice Working Group Zimbabwe 2018). In other words, people have demanded ownership of the process. The local political dynamics do not require universal solutions, but rather local ones that are sensitive to the particular conditions for addressing both the process and its outputs.

A number of studies exist on reconciliation in Zimbabwe (see Tshuma 2019; Benyera 2014; Machinga and Friedman 2013; Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru 2013; Mashingaidze 2011; Machakanja 2010, among others). These studies offer penetrating, irrepressible and factual critiques of reconciliation in the country. Most of these studies focus on universal and idealistic arguments with a bias towards prescriptive interventions (De Coning 2018:301-303) characteristic of the liberal-democratisation discourse and its strong emphasis on retribution (see Mashingaidze 2011; Machakanja 2010). Others have also examined the micro-level peacebuilding with much interest in conflict resolution (Chivasa 2019:159-179; Mandikwaza 2018:45-51; Makumbirofa 2016:61-73). This article seeks to add to the debate by identifying the empirical experiences of reconciliation in Sierra Leone and East Timor, and explores what lessons these cases may be able to offer to the NPRC once its outreach programmes are fully developed. I will start by introducing the brief context within which the history of institutional responses to address the conflict has created the conditions which justify the persistent calls for more action from the NPRC. I then provide a conceptual framework where I link the concept of reconciliation to justice and localism/community-based approaches. This provides a context within which the experiences from Sierra Leone and East Timor can be situated. Along the way, I will demonstrate the most important lessons from the cases, and provide indicators on some local level initiatives that the NPRC can utilise to apply the recommended lessons.

A brief historical context

Zimbabwe's political history has been one of recurring violence since pre-independence. Violence was systematically established and institutionalised through colonial rule (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru 2013; Moorcroft and McLaughlin 2008), and exported into the structures of the post-colonial state. The post-colonial episodes of violence are well documented: the dissident-cleansing operation *Gukurahundi* carried out in the 1980s in the Southern parts of the country, which claimed several lives (Mhandara 2018:31); the ineluctable land reform programme that

was frequently tainted by violence (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum 2006:8); the 2005 *Operation Murambatsvina* to clean urban centres, which displaced more than 700 000 people (Bratton and Masunungure 2007:24); and, since 2000, related to elections, a trend of disruptive intra- and inter-party political violence (Masunungure 2011; Sachikonye 2011; Staunton 2009; Impunity Watch 2008). In recent years, violence has been aggravated by the conflagration effects of factional politics in both the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF), and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formations.

The government, at different intervals, characteristically reacted to the violence through a series of interventions meant to promote reconciliation. The most common reactions are briefly annotated in the subsequent paragraphs.

Amnesia was very common during Mugabe’s rule – as an officially imposed form of forgetting (Huyse 2003:36). It entailed attempts to address the past by simply glossing over violations without any meaningful step to address the transgressions. Amnesia is usually paired with amnesty and pardons. It suppresses the past in the hope that a new peaceful dispensation will eventually emerge. Addressing past abuses is seen as unnecessary because of its potential to incite anger and hostility, thereby disrupting the new order (Rotberg and Thompson 2010:113). The inherent shortcoming of this approach is that it does not acknowledge the past, which continues to burden the society (Stovel 2008:305–324). In the absence of closure, perpetrators will continue to feel insecure whenever they meet their victims. In addition, amnesia encourages loss of memory and misinterpretation of history.

The pattern of amnesia in Zimbabwe was already established in 1979 during the transition from white minority rule to black majority rule, when both the Rhodesian Front and liberation movements were indemnified from abuses committed during the war of independence (Human Rights Watch 2011; Mashingaidze 2011:21; Huyse 2003:36). This set a precedent for immunity from impunity, commencing with the 1980 policy of racial reconciliation with its pillars on ‘forgiving and forgetting’ (De Waal 1990:45 cited in

Raftopoulos and Savage 2004:64). Immunities, indemnities, clemencies, pardons and amnesties lie at the heart of the country's failure to deal with gross violations of human rights, and has effectively imposed an approach which further boosted impunity (Sachikonye 2011:67; Huyse 2003:36; Raftopoulos and Savage 2004:51).

Commissions of inquiry also featured glaringly under Mugabe's rule. A commission of inquiry can be defined as a body established in terms of the laws of a given state to examine the factual causes and circumstances of a specific issue (Brassil 2004:125). A commission of inquiry's terms of reference normally lead to a report which contains findings and recommendations, which the convenor must act upon to rectify the situation. Commissions of inquiry are valued because of the expert opinions offered by the perceived unbiased and balanced commissioners. The most notable commissions in Zimbabwe are the Dumbutshena and the Chihambakwe, established to address the violence that occurred in the first few years of independence. In the post-Mugabe era, Mnangagwa also resorted to the same approach to deal with the post-election disturbances, the best example being the Motlanthe Commission. This was a response to the violence instigated by the opposition supporters who violently protested against what they saw as delays by the Zimbabwe Election Commission to announce the results of the presidential elections. The Commissions have not facilitated meaningful reconciliation in the country, either because of vague or suppressed findings, or due to a lack of political will to fully implement recommendations. Despite having been established to investigate human rights abuses over the years, most of the commissions have reflected power relations in Zimbabwe. Most of the commissions, particularly those established under former President Mugabe's government, may thus be viewed as state-crafted pseudo-commissions of inquiry, which were part of the cover up of some officials' role in the violations.

The political dispensation brought in by the inclusive government in 2009 culminated in the formation of the Organ on National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration (ONHRI). The mandate of the Organ was derived from Article VII of the Global Political Agreement which

empowered parties of the inclusive government to consider setting up mechanisms to render advice on issues pertaining to healing, cohesion and national unity in respect of pre- and post-independence political conflicts (Zimbabwe: Global Political Agreements 2008). The Organ failed because the inclusive government's commitment to the objectives of national healing, integration and reconciliation was weak (Machakanja 2010:3; Eppel and Raftopoulos 2008:14). The politicians leading the Organ could in any case not separate their political party agendas from the national project (Machakanja 2011:8), and they were completely snubbing the past (Benyera 2014:184). The whole process also excluded people from participating in the conception and implementation of the vision (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru 2013:96; Mbire 2011:22).

During this stage, the government in Zimbabwe, most notably, under Mugabe's tutelage, had a record of engaging in elite pacts, promoting amnesia and establishing barren commissions that ignored the unresolved past and merely attempted to restore cordial relations among political rivals. This yielded pseudo-reconciliation and compounded the crisis of efficacy in government interventions. The acknowledgement that reconciliation is still needed is aptly expressed in Chapter 12 of the new constitution adopted in 2013, indicating the extent to which the nation is committed to address its past. The hope for successful reconciliation is thus still alive. It was Mnangagwa's reform-oriented government which has generated new interest in reconciliation.

Section 251 (1) of the constitution states: 'For a period of ten years after the effective date, there is a commission to be known as the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission ...'. In terms of Section 252 of the Constitution, the NPRC has at least ten responsibilities. Three major foci anchor the mandate of the NPRC to the goals of reconciliation, namely: to ensure post-conflict justice, healing and reconciliation; to develop and implement programmes to promote national healing, unity and cohesion in Zimbabwe and the peaceful resolution of disputes; and to bring about national reconciliation by encouraging people to tell the truth about the past and facilitating the making of amends and the provision of justice.

These three terms of reference for the Commission are consistent with the desire for sustainable peace in Zimbabwe. However, questions remain concerning the effectiveness of the institution, given the precedent of past efforts (see Tshuma 2019). I strongly believe that the NPRC has latent potential such that, if it becomes malleable enough to shift responses to some strategy based on inclusive and participatory approaches at the community level, its aims for reconciliation can be achieved. The strategy of the NPRC should underscore the rediscovery of localism (grassroots initiatives). The notion of grassroots-sensitive peacebuilding emphasises the empowerment of locals and their community leadership to overcome violent turns of mind and avoid attendant destructive outcomes – transforming relations and developing capacities for better management of divisive issues. This is why experiences from comparable countries are important. However, before I examine such experiences, I put forth the conceptual framework which illuminates the lived experiences and the lessons I subsequently proffer for the NPRC's attention.

Conceptual framework

Reconciliation is a complex concept because of its multidimensional nature: one can approach it through a variety of disciplines (Torrent Oliva 2011:20). Two dimensions or perspectives are especially pertinent. The first one focuses on reconciliation as an outcome; a state in which parties have changed their relationships and are mutually recognising each other's goals and interests in a peaceful environment (Howard 2004:197; Bar-tal and Bennink 2004:11–15). The second perspective shifts attention to how reconciliation unfolds *vis-à-vis* motivations, goals, beliefs, and emotions of parties. According to this perspective, the victim and the perpetrator have an opportunity to transform the nature of their relationship into one that facilitates the emergence of a new social context that is accompanied by possibilities for a peaceful future (Daly and Sarkin 2004:180–182; Maoz 2004:225; Lederach 1997:101–110). Conceived as a process, reconciliation places weight not only on ending violence or conflict, but also on the steps that lead to the construction of new relationships in which both

victims and perpetrators benefit from the new environment. The process takes place in efforts and activities that are deliberately meant to address unresolved conflict. Our understanding is that as long as people previously involved in conflict do not undergo this process, the conflict persists and the potential for relapse is ever present. The objective of this process, then, is to understand the conflict context in order to encourage people to get together in conditions that encourage long-term peace. If such long-term peace based on mutual assurance for living together is indeed attained, it becomes the outcome of a successful process. Treating reconciliation as both a process and an outcome entails that building relationships is key, since conflicts occur when relationships are disrupted, and they end when relationships are mended (Saunders and Slim 1994:43; Assefa 1993).

Operationalising the process of how reconciliation unfolds and creates the desired outcomes (relationships that encourage peaceful contexts) has and must face challenges in real situations. However, there is a general consensus that desired outcomes can be successfully achieved if the process embraces and promotes five fundamental prerequisites – *truth, apology, forgiveness, reparation and promoting encounter*. These should be implemented in chronological order as follows:

- *The truth*, or a close approximation of it, needs to be exposed to enable parties to understand their common history: an important basis for shared beliefs. However, appropriate mechanisms are needed to deal with complex situations since parties may find it difficult to eliminate bias in their narratives (Daly and Sarkin 2004:146).
- *Apology* marks the formal acceptance of responsibility by perpetrators, and is the basis for forgiveness by victims.
- *Forgiveness* embodies the values of love, empathy and mercy. Together with truth and apology, forgiveness constitutes the moral foundation of the reconciliation process.
- *Reparation* involves the retribution the perpetrator needs to pay to the victim in order to rediscover a lost relationship.
- *Initiatives to promote encounters* should be implemented to promote a positive and constructive interaction between the previously

antagonised parties. This stage brings parties to the state of being reconciled.

The five prerequisites are to be pursued in a context of justice. But yet another challenge arises as to which approach to justice best serves the goal to sustain reconciliation. Indeed, justice remains necessary and constitutes the first condition for human co-existence (Soyinka 1999), as it acts as a countervailing force to harmful past experiences (Pemberton, Van Eck-Aarten and Mulder 2017:683). The justice needs of victims of transgressions are two dimensional (Pemberton, Van Eck-Aarten, and Mulder 2017:686; Wenzel et al. 2008). On one hand, the perpetrator's violations represent a challenge to the victim's status and power which may justify the need for retributive justice. On the other, transgressions by the perpetrator also jeopardise the values shared with the victim and the community in which the act occurred, which vindicates the need for restorative justice. Since the merits and demerits of the two forms of justice are appropriately addressed in other works (Wenzel et al. 2008; Daly and Sarkin 2004; Hamber 2003; Hayner 2002; Kriesberg 2001, among others), it may be sufficient here to state that choices made on the form of justice to be pursued should resonate with the context of a particular society and conflict. Every social or conflict context has its own peculiarities which demand justice that responds to its nuances. In terms of methodology, the argument in this article is that the approach to the interventions should be sensitive to local or community-based specificities. A victim and a perpetrator residing within the same community have a smaller relational distance and share common values, and in such a case reconciliation that is informed by a restorative approach should be favoured.

To better understand the space of community-based interventions in reconciliation, reference to what has been termed the 'local turn' in the peacebuilding literature is worthwhile. The concept of 'local turn' is an argument that began in the 1990s with the works of Lederach, gained eminence in the 2000s (Paffenholz 2015), and emphasises the recourse to localism in reconciliation (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013:763). It represents a challenge to the traditional liberal view of a peacebuilding

approach of universal applicability and focuses on the core proposition that there are different ways of approaching the problem of reconciliation. This revisionism is situated in the critical peace research, and alternative sociological, ethnographic and action research methods as well as post-colonial scholarship. The premise of this logic is that society is plural and that communities exercise their agency for peace differently (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013:764). These differences stem from the disparities in the cultural values, practices and norms of the locales that tend to inform how people at various levels of the same society define and achieve peace.

The critique insists that the liberal approach is an affront to democracy, which should be preoccupied with localised rights, needs and identities (Paris 2010). Liberalism assumes that the local is an extension of the international and national models. The world is considered globalised and models of peacebuilding are seen as universal (Paffenholz 2015:862-868). At the national level, the argument has been that the nation is one, and the state has the moral obligation to prescribe initiatives for the locals. The problem of power relations in reconciliation comes to the fore. But for the localism brigade, the liberal arguments are fundamentally flawed (Mac Ginty 2015; Paffenholz 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Paris 2010). Liberals discourage the proper understanding of how the 'local turn' encourages more understanding of local rights, needs and identity in diverse contexts and plural societies. Imposing the will of the national leadership on the local may have some uses, but there are severe limitations to this. Thus we are led to the argument that the state should *not* be the primary referent in peace initiatives. However, its facilitation role has never been questioned.

This author embraces these criticisms of the liberal solution, will examine the persistent problems of reconciliation in Zimbabwe and will propose to open space for other understandings and approaches. I have a conviction that 'Engaging with the local highlights ... the need for space to be created by concerted and well-targeted activities for peace to form locally' (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013:771). This encourages local consent, legitimacy and sustainability of interventions and minimises external interests, biases

and ideologies (Mac Ginty 2015). Certainly, the sheer heterogeneity of the sources of localised thinking and expression means that there is no neat framework of ideas that will satisfy the needs of every community in a uniform way. I emphasise this approach for the NPRC as I review experiences from Sierra Leone and East Timor.

Community reconciliation in practice

The cases examined hereunder are of comparable settings to those of Zimbabwe. The countries attempted to overcome past human rights violations and schisms after authoritarian regimes were deposed. Similar challenges had to be overcome in Zimbabwe when its NPRC was established.

Community reconciliation process in East Timor

East Timor was a Portuguese colony until independence in 1974. From then until 1999, however, the country was occupied by Indonesia. The resistance against this occupation and the Timorese people's on-going struggle for independence resulted in a backlash from the Indonesian administration that led to more than 100 000 deaths (Larke 2009:652). The most acute eruption of state-sponsored violence occurred between August and November 1999, in which 60 000 homes were destroyed, more than 250 000 people were displaced and 1 400 killed (McAuliffe 2008:36). The legacy of mistrust and hostility within the population, left by both the Portuguese and the Indonesian rule, provoked a myriad of disputes and fault-lines which created a highly polarised society. The occupation of Indonesia was ended by a United Nations (UN) -sponsored referendum that asked the Timorese whether they preferred to be independent or integrated with Indonesia. This was to be known as the Popular Consultation. Since Indonesia preferred amalgamation, it co-opted local Timorese into Indonesia's formal security forces and proxy militias who perpetrated much of the violence and repression to enforce unification. The violence and displacement that occurred created fissures among the Timorese, and divided them into distinctly pro-independence and anti-independence

supporters. More than 80% voted in favour of independence (Babo-Soares 2004:15–16), which brought a window of ephemeral stability.

Another wave of political violence began in 2006 and climaxed during the presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2007. International actors responded by ameliorating the humanitarian situation. The political crisis was sparked by infighting among senior politicians, leading to escalated tension over long-term grievances such as land ownership. This was accompanied by regional divisions based on stereotyping and mythology, by widespread disenfranchisement of young people, and by the legacy of colonial violence, impunity and injustice (Larke 2009:647). In general, the East Timorese were found in the situation of a nation of systemic repression. The political violence had affected people's relationships from individual and community to national levels.

Once the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) assumed control, it worked closely with a Timorese government-in-waiting to give attention to issues of justice and accountability as an integral component of establishing governance through rule of law. Justice was therefore viewed as a pre-condition for reconciliation and as essential to the peace and security of the newly independent state. A South African-style Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CRTR) was then established, which had objectives similar to conventional TRCs, but represented a marked departure in as far as it sought to support 'the reception and reintegration of individuals who had caused harm to their communities through the commission of minor criminal offences and other harmful acts through the facilitation of community-based mechanisms for reconciliation' (Larke 2009:657). The CRTR represented a statist approach or official reconciliation whose emphasis was on bridging political differences among political leaders. It was believed that this would facilitate the reconciliation of their supporters. The elite-driven emphasis meant that little attention was given to healing the wounds of the past, and that the involvement of the people at community level was minimal. Along the same lines, the Community Reconciliation Process (CRP) was conceptualised and supported by the central authority.

The mandate of the CRP was challenging in as far as it also involved upholding the dignity and interests of both victims and perpetrators in a manner consistent with universal human rights but remaining locally relevant and meaningful. Before the commencement of the CRP's work, community consultations were held, and during these the desirability of involving customary justice procedures known as *adat* or *lisa* (sacred laws or beliefs on which local justice is based) was emphasised. This indicated that traditional justice approaches retained a strong influence among the Timorese (McAuliffe 2008:658). In the design of the CRP, *adat* leaders were invited to participate in the hearings. The hearings were conducted in a way that sought to incorporate features from a common customary conflict resolution ceremony, known as *nahe biti boot* (to spread the big mat). The process essentially involves bringing the conflicting parties together in a public meeting where they sit facing one another separated by the community leaders. However, in the CRP process, *adat* leaders assumed more ceremonial than their supposed jury roles, while mediation between the parties was facilitated by a panel of prominent community members, chaired by a senior CRP staff member.

The CRP process was voluntary and it aimed at reconciling the perpetrator and the community which was harmed. Even if individual victims were involved, the priority of the CRP was reconciliation in the community at large. The CRP would explain its aims and principles, and encourage individuals estranged from their communities by virtue of their past acts to seek community-based agreements that required them to admit wrongdoing, apologise and agree to some sort of sanction, symbolic or otherwise. However, the majority were just required to apologise and only a few were sanctioned with community service or symbolic fines. At the end of a CRP hearing, the agreement reached was registered with the formal justice system. This meant that the traditional mechanisms were integrated to the formal legal system. The CRP operated for 18 months and over 15 000 cases were heard.

The main strength of the CRP is that it emphasised 'survivor justice' as opposed to the usual binary of victim justice versus perpetrator justice.

The politically neutral term ‘deponent’ was used to refer to what would be called a ‘perpetrator’ under similar circumstances. This sent a positive signal to the community that victims and perpetrators alike had a shared identity: being lucky as survivors to have escaped the violence which was perpetrated in the name of politics (Larke 2009:559). The process was therefore oriented to restorative, as opposed to retributive, justice. The community-level processes of shaming were more effective than centralised methods of punishing offenders. Braithwaite (2003:81) argues that ‘Both the specific and general deterrent effects of shame will be greater for persons who remain strongly attached in relationships of interdependency and affection because such persons accrue greater interpersonal costs of shame’. The circumstances in which CRP operated lent themselves well to the employment of shame as a means of punishment and deterrence, given that most of the people who participated in the violence had taken part in acts against members of their own villages (Burgess 2004:147).

The CRP has however been criticised for a number of reasons. Confessional narratives used were assumed to constitute the truth. In reality, however, it is difficult to gauge whether the testifying individuals were telling the whole truth – as only known by themselves. Also difficult to determine was the sincerity of the remorse and repentance felt by perpetrators. This was complicated by the fact that remorse was made mandatory for participation in the process. Sincerity of remorse is indeed always difficult to tell. In addition, the mandate of the CRP was severely limited as it was only allowed to address low-level acts, while the all-important serious acts were left in the hands of the formal justice system. The assumption that people are not able to reconcile over serious acts is not true, however. Another limitation was that the CRP process was perpetrator-driven to such an extent that victims and the community were not afforded an opportunity for personal testimony. Their role was merely supportive, by providing additional information about what the perpetrators omitted or by intervening with clarifying questions. Also, the process was not gender-sensitive, and women were excluded from the process either as deponents or victims. On the whole, therefore, the CRP was not adequate to address

the needs of victims. Instead, its focus was on integrating perpetrators into the communities from which they had been distanced due to their past acts. Moreover, the CRP assumed that all communities had similar contexts, such that its methodology was uniform throughout. Staub and others (2005:299), however, note that interventions ‘have to be applied and adapted to particular circumstances, so that practices will vary depending on the specifics of culture, current social conditions, and the history of group relations’. The CRP was uniform across all communities in that it did not consult people in the conceptualisation of the intervention (Babo-Soares 2004:23). Nevertheless, it played a key role in restoring social stability by addressing social fissures created by political violence at the community level.

The *Fambul tok* project in Sierra Leone

Political problems in Sierra Leone led the West African country to a callous civil war, starting in 1991 and ending in 2002. The war was fought between Liberian rebels, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in alliance with the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), against the Sierra Leonean government and the government-aligned Civil Defence Forces (CDF). The civil war was precipitated by government mismanagement of diamond wealth, and political repression in the context of a one-party system (Park 2010; Keen 2005; Richards 2002). The conflict resulted in widespread atrocities, murder and sexual violence committed against civilians by combatants (Park 2010; Shocken 2002).

To address the transgressions, Sierra Leone adopted two principal transitional justice institutions: the Special Court for Sierra Leone; and the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The Special Court was established in 2002, with the support of the UN, and essentially represented a war crimes tribunal. Commentary on the court, however, pointed to a myriad of challenges and controversies, despite sentiments of broad public support (Park 2010:100). A persistent critique of the institution is contained in other works (Park 2010; Dougherty 2004; Shocken 2002; Cryer 2001). One of the main criticisms was that the retributive processes

of the Court presented an obstacle to unveiling the truth and the criminal trials became barriers to reconciliation. The TRC, however, was focused on accomplishing national reconciliation, healing victims and preventing a repetition of atrocities (Hayner 2002:15–16; Park 2010:101). The TRC was established under an Act of Parliament. Its mandate was to create an impartial historical record of violations of human rights and to address impunity; to respond to the needs of the victims; to promote healing and reconciliation; and to prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered. The TRC report has been analysed in detail elsewhere (Kelsall 2005; Dougherty 2004). It had weaknesses, however, chief of which was its lack of adequate focus on reconciliation – although its emphasis was on restorative rather than punitive justice. Reconciliation efforts ‘were largely left to the localities because the TRC had neither the time nor the money to do that’ (Dougherty 2004:44). The TRC was also overly engrossed with the truth component at the expense of other requirements of the process (Park 2010:103). Thus, notwithstanding the important contributions of both the Special Court and TRC to transitional justice in Sierra Leone, both institutions left gaps which called for community-based initiatives. No wonder that, five years after the submission of the TRC report, a new strategy for dealing with war abuses emerged in 2007: to continue the work of reconciliation at the community level. The initiative known as *Fambul tok* was fronted by a coalition of civil society organisations operating as the Forum of Conscience.

Fambul tok (meaning family talk) was a programme designed to conduct community reconciliation after the completion of the TRC. On realising that there was a lack of community reconciliation in the TRC process, the civil society initiative set structures in liaison with traditional leaders to facilitate reconciliation (Park 2010:113). The programme sought the reconciliation of offenders, victims and their communities. The project was oriented towards restoration, and was underpinned by objectives of reconciliation, forgiveness, acknowledgement and remorse. It was about acknowledgement of wrong-doing and not forgetting the past. The project facilitated the gradual mending and building of relationships. The family

talk initiative was based on the traditional practice of discussing and resolving issues within the security of a family circle. The project operated at village level, however, in order to help communities organise ceremonies that included truth-telling and traditional cleansing. Public disclosures of their experiences and actions could therefore be made by both victims and perpetrators. In this way, the *Fambul tok* events were designed and controlled by each community, based on their own traditions. The project went beyond the TRC in bringing people together. It managed to achieve what the TRC and the Special Court had failed to achieve, at least at the grassroots level.

Lessons for the NPRC

The Community-level interventions examined show that while grassroots-centred initiatives foster healing and reconciliation, there are different ways in which the process may occur depending on the choice of a particular locale. This strengthens the dictum that ‘there is no single healing and reconciliation process but what is called for is a blend of transforming activities at community level, while attending to individuals’ and community needs’ (Hamber 2001:79). Community-level interventions, it appears, are an important feature of facilitating reconciliation, giving credence to the belief that sustainable peacebuilding should be domestically rooted and embraced by the local population and not imported or imposed (Mani 2002:14). Both the *Fambul tok* and the CRP utilised their local knowledge and beliefs to deal with their conflicts. However, support from governments enhances effectiveness of interventions, as the CRP demonstrates. The CRP and *Fambul tok* experiences further exemplify how interventions should acknowledge people as inherently interdependent, and how the focus should be more on restorative processes and less on punitive ones. The purpose of the NPRC interventions should therefore be to facilitate national reconciliation through a community-driven strategy. Reconciliation is likely to be achieved when the society is accorded the opportunity to recover when the five prerequisites of truth, apology, forgiveness, reparation and encounter are enabled at the local level.

The NPRC should consider that for any reconciliation process to work, the affected people need to first openly acknowledge the problems that divided them in order to effectively engage. This is important to ensure that the people see the problem as shared, which fosters restoration of broken relationships. In turn, this helps victims to relieve themselves of their despair, insecurity and suspicion, while perpetrators will be able to reconnect and move away from the feeling of isolation. These considerations are captured in the CRP process. Notwithstanding its weaknesses, the utility of localism in reconciliation exhibited in the process include the following aspects:

- The process responded to the five requirements for a successful process, namely, truth, apology, forgiveness, reparation and encounter between the victim and the perpetrator.
- While the victim needs were not ignored, more emphasis was directed at the reconciliation of the community as a whole.
- Agreements reached at the community level were registered with the formal justice system to encourage parties to respect their obligations.
- The community process was largely dependent on shaming as a form of punishment, which proved to be more effective than the state-level methods of punishing offenders.
- In experiencing the CRP process, however, weaknesses were noted. Issues were not addressed holistically and gender sensitivity was not taken into account. The implied positive lesson is therefore that a healthy balance should be struck with regard to the needs of victims, perpetrators and the community – and the representation of both genders.

On its part, the *Fambul tok* was based on traditional practices at a village level, allowing each community to exercise control over the process. Although the intervention was initiated by the civil society, the NPRC can as well strengthen its existing synergies with the civil society to support similar efforts at the micro level. It should therefore take the following considerations seriously.

- The NPRC needs to acknowledge that while it is a creature of central government, centralised approaches are insulated from the aspirations of the people. Its central methods need to be complemented by local initiatives as the *Fambul tok* did when the centralised methods of the Special Court and the TRC faltered.
- Reconciliation processes appear to work if they have meaning for the society affected, ‘including various collectivistic contents that are seen as intrinsic parts of the universal whole recognised within a cultural context’ (Machinga and Friedman 2013:54). The process must be sensitive to the culturally congruent practices of the community targeted.
- Traditional beliefs provide a significant source for healing and reconciliation. Such beliefs should not be ignored or glossed over in the work of the NPRC. Indeed, Zimbabwe is a country with heterogeneous socio-cultural needs which are not amenable to uniform approaches.

The lessons from the cases examined are also reinforced by findings from a survey of 21 locally-based peace interventions. Dessel and Rogge (2008 cited in Mhandara 2018:31-32) conclude that there were multiple benefits in peacebuilding programmes in which the locals assumed central agency.

Lessons from other countries do not make much sense, of course, if practical local mechanisms are not available. In Zimbabwe, however, community-based reconciliation has already been explored in response to the incidents of political conflict, and the NPRC can build its efforts on these localised initiatives. For example, Machinga and Friedman (2013:53–62) evaluate an individual and community level programme known as the Lament, Welcome and Celebrate (LAWECE) which was implemented in the local communities of Mutare. The purpose of the LAWECE was to allow people to live together by fostering personal healing, interpersonal relationship recovery and community rebuilding. Their study concluded that the initiative’s most significant benefit was its ability to utilise local knowledge at a micro-level. Further approaches relying on indigenous and local knowledge to resolve past conflicts and recreate relationships from the family to community level have been explored in recent empirical studies.

Their merits and demerits have been extensively explained in literature, and, taking everything into account, some of them may surely be considered by the NPRC. For example, *botso* (self-shaming), *chenura* (cleansing ceremonies), *nyaradzo* (memorials), *kuripa ngozi* (appeasing spirits), and *nhimbe* (community working groups) (Chivasa 2019:159–179; Mandikwaza 2018:45–51; Makumbirofa 2016:61–73; Benyera 2014:196–250).

Conclusion

The article has examined enriching case studies of community reconciliation in two countries: the CRP in East Timor, and the *Fambul tok* in Sierra Leone. In all cases, it has been noted that community initiatives were adopted not only after episodes of political violence, but also when it was realised that centralised approaches were ineffective. In East Timor, there were numerous challenges, but the CRP employed mechanisms which demonstrated that shaming is more effective in reconciling people than formal legal methods of punishing offenders. Similarly, the *Fambul tok* project demonstrates the efficacy of a restorative process in which local people have total control over the process, and how the use of local traditions can foster reconciliation. By and large, valuable lessons have been derived from the two cases, and these may be considered by the NPRC in order to refine strategies which can confront the lingering question of reconciliation in Zimbabwe. Primarily, initiatives are likely to work provided they have meaning among the affected communities. That is, interventions ought to be congruent with local cultural practices and traditional beliefs that serve as a vital cog in reintegrating people driven asunder by violent conflicts. Also important is how restorative-justice processes have been used in both cases, encouraging interventions that treat people as inherently interdependent, and initiatives that concentrate more on integrative processes than on vengeance.

The above-mentioned lessons make it clear that the NPRC should not be cajoled into centralised and exclusionary interventions that frustrate or inhibit local agency in reconciliation. Each community should be supported to decide the process according to its own local conditions.

The evidence from East Timor provides proof of how a government can facilitate reconciliation without taking responsibility away from the locals. The emphasis on community-based approaches highlights the contribution of this study to the reconciliation debate by demonstrating that although reconciliation processes and outcomes are fluid, micro-level realities should not be neglected. The NPRC still has a window of opportunity to strengthen the resilience of communities through investing in, and supporting, the practice of local reconciliation methods. Indeed, the traditional liberal view of some universal approach to reconciliation has for long been discredited, and prevailing wisdom suggests that due to diverse cultural values, practices and norms, communities should be backed by national institutions when exercising *their* agency for peace.

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