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Working for Reconciliation in Burundi

CENTRE UBUNTU INITIATIVE

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1. To recover the value basis: A challenge to start with.

We decided to focus on UBUNTU values because we were convinced that unless the value basis is rebuilt and reinforced all other initiatives cannot hold. Strengthening the value basis has been the core of our philosophy and all our activities. It would rather be impossible to succeed in the trauma healing, development initiatives and reconciliation if the value basis is not restored and strengthened. The value basis has been shattered and this may be the biggest loss we have had in the region. Losing this value basis brought us to lose the foundation of all the values which is the UBUNTU value, the sense of humanness. It has been clear before and during the genocide that to kill somebody physically supposed that you have killed his or her humanness beforehand. You start convincing yourself and win support from others that he or she is very bad. You continue calling him or her names of animals or insects (like cockroaches in Rwanda). You use media and communication techniques to wipe away all consideration related to humanness so that when time to kill comes people killing will not feel they are killing human beings. They will feel they are freed from moral responsibility.

For Burundi and for refugees in neighbouring countries we are spreading this awakening through two radio programs we have on the National Radio and on the radio of the Catholic Church considering the fact that radio broadcasting has been crucial these last decades for good and for bad. We also edit a monthly magazine we use for community debates. We are also involved in grassroots community approaches aimed at strengthening the resilience capacity. We also work with 3 secondary schools and 5 jails.

2. Need to accompany the trauma situation.

From our field activities, we came to realize how people show signs or experience somatic signs of trauma in a wide spread way. One can feel despair, anguish and loneliness in all corners of the country. The increase of poverty is not helping either. There is a widely spread veil of trauma on the society, and this may start from the Head of State because he is a human being as well. Religion has become a refuge for wounded people with fragile psychologies. Churches are full and new religious movements are springing out like mushrooms. It has been necessary for us to get involved in psychosocial programs helping regain and develop the resilience capacity for individuals and communities, all this being rooted in the rediscovery of the Ubuntu value. The community facilitation revealed to be an efficient tool for local communities on the hill sides all over the country where people could reflect on problematic behaviour undermining the Ubuntu value in their region including the ethnic suspicion and hatred, map the main problem they wish to see changed, analyze the root causes and the

effects, externalize it through plays. After deconstructing the problem story as a community, people could shape together the desired story, discuss what may be the required components using the local energies and resources and play the desired story allowing the process to see how realistic it is.

Community facilitation normally ends with asking the people how they want to organize a follow up from their own local strengths after they have expressed their desired story. They usually set up a local committee for the follow up. Our task is then to review with that committee after three to four months how things have evolved.

We were amazed to see how this methodology can be fruitful when in Buhero area – Gitega Province – for example - Tutsis from internally displaced camp, Hutu returnees from refugee camps in Tanzania, demobilized soldiers, former “political prisoners” and local community people on the hillside decided to set up a common local organization after a few sessions of our community mobilization. They are not yet discussing politics. They are not yet sharing on past events. It is still too early for that. But they are jointly involved in activities generating income and find this to be a “win win” process. Some Dutch non governmental organizations from The Netherlands as well as some organizations from Belgium, Germany and Ireland are helping us secure some funds to have those groups rebuild their social capital. And we continue with the grassroots community mobilization around values.

Our undertakings are not always successful. Positive changes could hardly be seen in places where repetitive and massive massacres occurred like in Bugendana, a place where more than 200 Tutsi were massacred at one time in July 1996, or in Itaba where more than 300 Hutus were massacred in September 2002 by the army. Places where people have deep historical wounds or deep traditional beliefs in sorcery are very difficult to change because of different frameworks used for interpreting phenomena. These two difficult contexts require more patience and more frequent visits. They constitute a challenge in the ways CENTRE UBUNTU has to adjust to different local and cultural contexts.

3. God is the author of our healing and reconciliation.

People know CENTRE UBUNTU belongs to the Catholic Church even if we work with communities in their respective diversities. Reconciliation has to be for the communities, not for Christians alone. This brought us to develop techniques dealing with individual and communities so that individuals and communities regain their capacity of resilience beyond gender, ethnic, religious and other considerations related to those kinds of identities. But we believe for ourselves that realizing the work of reconciliation is ultimately God’s work. The paradigm of Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection opens our vision not only to optimism, but also to Christian Hope. Our spiritual disciplines and prayer life helps us alleviate the psychological exhaustion that may lead to burnouts. This helps us overcome the moments we really feel helplessness because no word is still meaningful when you have to share some very painful wounded memories from people for whom it is very difficult to recover. It is through the vision of an eschatological community where the various identities are not a source of violence but rather an occasion for enrichment that we are trying to work for a different possible future. In our Christian understanding we are convinced that god is the author of our healing and reconciliation. This is the core motivation of our action. But we still believe in our cooperation with God to help reconciliation happen. The special assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa promoted the category of the Church being a family of God. This has to come true somehow.