Policy Brief

AEGIS
PREVENTING CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

Social Cohesion without a Mediator: The Role of Cooperative Contact

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About the author

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Executive summary

How to successfully promote social cohesion in a post-conflict divided society constitutes one of the pressing challenges worth taking up. By using the premise of contact theory, a qualitative study that explored the relational effects of contact, in the cooperative form of organisation, between antagonistic groups in post-genocide Rwanda—genocide survivors and former genocide perpetrators, as well as their respective family members—was conducted. Findings indicate that the cooperative contact, which involves cooperative members' compliance with cooperative values and principles, created a positive working environment that engaged them in an intimate friendlier communication that transformed their relationships constructively. This corroborates the existing literature regarding the positive relational effects of contact between antagonistic people to achieve the same goal. The novelty of this study is that successful social cohesion necessitates the integration of the economic and social dimensions of life. In addition, unlike previous contact-based mechanisms that are public and involve a third party or mediator, the cooperative way is private and does not involve a mediator, which makes it an alternative approach for social cohesion after violent conflicts.

Introduction

The bulk of literature about social cohesion after violent conflicts has focused much on approaches and perspectives, such as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, Problem-solving Workshops, and other mediation-based perspectives, which are public and involve the presence of a third party. Studies on the effects of approaches or processes that are private and which do not involve a third-party's intervention have received little attention, which is the gap that this study aimed at addressing. In so doing, the study focused on the cooperative contact process, which takes place in the cooperative form of organisation, between antagonistic groups in post-genocide Rwanda—genocide survivors and former genocide perpetrators, as well as their respective family members. A cooperative is a socio-economic organisation of the civil society, whose members join efforts to support each other in compliance with cooperative values and principles and without the facilitation of any third party. What happens to post-violence divides' relations as a result of their membership of the same cooperative organisation indeed constituted the core of the study.

Approach and Method

The study used the premise of contact theory to explore the relational effects of contact, in the cooperative form of organisation, between antagonistic groups in post-genocide Rwanda. The theory proposes that prejudice may be reduced by equal status contact between antagonistic groups in the pursuit of common goals, whereby the effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports, and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups.

Methodologically, the paper drew from a qualitative approach that digs into the lived experiences of post-genocide individuals, from both sides of the conflict, who are in close contact with each other and work together in the same cooperative organisation. Two cooperatives (Abahuzamugambi Coffee, created in January 1999, and Peace Basket, created in 1997) were subjectsof the study and were selected as they were created soon after the 1994 genocide against Tutsi, before even the government embarkedofficially on the road to reconciliation, with the creation of the National Unity and ReconciliationCommission in March 1999.

Results

Empirical findings indicated that the relationships between post-genocide sides, prior to their membership of each of the cooperatives visited, were negative and included the absence of communication, fear, suspicion and mistrust, as well as anger and hatred, for each side.

In spite of this situation, findings also indicate that the reason(s) that prompted post-genocide sides to form or join the same cooperative was in no way aimed at building peaceful relations between them. Instead, the purpose was to address problems—poverty and loneliness—which were common to both sides of the conflict and which could not have been overcome by each side on his/her own.

However, even though post-genocide divides did not primarily come into contact within the same cooperative in order to restore their relationships, their attitudes and relations changed positively as a result of their membership of the same cooperative. This was made possible through a safe and friendlier working environment nurtured by members' compliance with the cooperative values and principles (solidarity, equity, democracy, mutual care, education, honesty, openness, caring for others…).

With this environment, cooperative members engaged in positive communication and transformation from mutual negative attitudes (anger, hatred, mistrust, breakdown of communication) toward mutual positive attitudes and behaviours (positive communication, solidarity, trust, mutual care…).

By adopting the cooperative spirit toward a common end, conflicting parties were thus called to put aside what divided them and focus on what united them. Conflicting parties' successful achievement of a common economic end, cooperatively, thus necessitated that they

positively redefined and transformed their previous negative relationships. Since both sides of the conflict faced common problems (poverty and loneliness), it was found that their joint effort in striving to fight against these problems successfully became an opportunity for them to meet on an equal basis, to interact democratically, and to work together constructively, in a way that enabled them to not only overcome mutual negative attitudes and feelings, but also to engage in new positive ones.

This process, which integrated the social and economic dimensions, was private and intimate, and was evidenced through convivial solidarity outside the cooperative work (mutual family support, notably during festivities and mourning events, as well as in conviviality parties, notably while celebrating the cooperative's economic returns).

The above findings corroborate the existing studies, suggesting that whenever cooperative contact between antagonistic people is enlisted toward the completion of some task that is of equivalent importance to both (and which cannot be successfully completed except through the close cooperative work of the two people), those people will come to trust and like each other and become friends, which is a process that breaks down mutual negative relations while fostering positive ones.

Conclusion

The study has indicated that the cooperative contact method, within a genuine cooperative whose values and principles that bind cooperative members are effectively implemented by conflicting parties, has a likelihood to create a positive working environment that engages them in a positive communication and constructive transformation of their relations. In this process, meeting both the economic and social dimensions were found to be paramount. In addition, unlike other processes of social cohesion that are public and/or involve a third party, which were found sometimes to be (re)traumatising), the cooperative contact and work, which does not involve a mediator, was found to be intimate, private, and convivial, which makes cooperative contact in the cooperative institution an alternative approach to social cohesion after violent conflicts.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Based on empirical findings, the following policy implications and recommendations are suggested:

1. *Private and non-mediation-based mechanisms in social cohesion:* The promotion of social cohesion in Rwanda needs to go beyond/be complemented by the mechanisms that are public (public hearings and debates) and involve a third party. In Rwanda, the policy focus is much on contact-based mechanisms (e.g., Gacaca jurisdictions, a civic education academy (Itorero), unity clubs, Ndi Umunyarwanda, collective work (Umuganda), Abunzi-Mediators), which are public and involve third parties. Social cohesion mechanisms that are private and that do not involve a third party or mediator, in the example of cooperative organisations and associations, are not used to the fullest of their social cohesion potential, and should thus be the alternative focus of new policy and action.

2. *Mechanisms that integrate the economic and social dimensions of life:* Empirical findings indicated that successful social cohesion depends on how the social and economic dimensions are integrated. Yet, in Rwanda, the social cohesion potential of socio-economic integration has not yet been given attention, as existing approaches, indicated above, consider either the social or the economic in isolation. For example, while cooperatives are well known and promoted, the policy on cooperatives depicts them as mechanisms for economic change and poverty reduction, thus neglecting their social (hence social cohesion) potential. Therefore, specific promotion policies that integrate the social and economic dimensions of the cooperatives, and which are sanctioned by actions sensitising people, particularly post-genocide divides, to join or form these mechanisms are worth initiating.