

"Keep the Conversations Alive: Community Development in Rwanda"

By Sandra Engstrom

Imagine if you can, being so afraid of your life that you would be willing to partake in methods of survival that you never thought possible. You recently heard such atrocities on the radio that you were unaware of where to turn; your neighbours have suddenly gone missing only to turn up later by the side of the road. Suddenly, due to your height, the shape of your nose, and possibly the slight difference in your skin colour, you have witnessed your mother and father murdered and your younger siblings beaten and tortured within an inch of their lives. You have also been beaten down and sexually assaulted, only to be told that you will be part of a second genocide, the HIV/AIDS genocide, that will occur once the soldiers have moved on, leaving their mark behind. In order to survive you have become accustomed to walking long distances during the nights to avoid abduction, and hiding amongst the masses of bodies along the side of the road when a rebel group can be heard from a distance. Unsure of where you are headed, unsure as to what the future holds, or even how long of a future you have, you continue down the road trying to take care of your younger siblings in hopes of finding a refugee camp where you hope someone will be able to help you. You are only a twelve year-old girl.

In 1994, the international community was made acutely aware of increasing hostilities in the small African country Rwanda. These hostilities grew to such proportions that the 100 days between April and July of 1994 have now been commonly referred to as the Rwandan Genocide (Wikipedia, 2005). Two different tribes of this small country were in such a state of escalated conflict that eventually close to one million Rwandans of Tutsi origin, and those of Hutu moderates were murdered at the hands of extremist militia, government troops, and an efficiently mobilized public. As a result of these horrific events, more than ten percent of Rwanda's total population was exterminated, purely on account of ethnic origins and political beliefs (McNairn, 2004; Wikipedia, 2001).

This is a difficult situation to understand as to how it gets this far without any intervention by the international community. Only after the fact did various countries begin to make an effort to step in and assist in a variety of ways. However, Rwanda still remains one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 158 out of 177 on the Human Development Index (Human Development Report, 2006). Resources are not equally distributed or shared, and 60 percent of the population in Rwanda still lives in poverty, with the highest rates in rural areas. The situation is especially disconcerting for widows and child-headed households (McNairn, 2004). There are still strong gender divisions and inequalities based on traditional and cultural beliefs, attitudes and practices and it is therefore difficult for these specific populations to gain any amount of social capital or gain a feeling of empowerment within their community. In fact, these divisions between not only gender, but between the Tutsi's and Hutus, were strong predictors of the genocide as there was a large majority of Rwandans that were powerless in decision making, living in poverty, and manipulated by

an elite group of individuals (McNairn, 2004). As well, since the genocide, a disturbing new division has developed between survivors of the genocide and those that were perpetrators, not a division that is needed in a country that is already being challenged through various government policies and an extreme social history.

As previously stated, how is it that this situation escalated to the extent that it did without the international community becoming involved at a level that would have made a difference? It is sad to think that because a country may not have a large economic or tangible use, in terms of the exportation of goods, they may be disposable, yet arguable that is what occurred here. There is often a sense that the neglect felt was due to the lack of strategic and economic significance in major power calculations (Ayoob, 2004). A small country, such as Rwanda, should still be placed high on the priority scale when such atrocities against humanity are being implemented. Yet that is another reason why the international community may have lacked an adequate response, that being that there is often hesitation in using the label “genocide”, as well as a lack of media representation that sufficiently reports the situation to the full extent (Melvern, 2006). This is a disheartening realization as similar circumstances are occurring yet again in Darfur without adequate attention or intervention. It could also be argued that there is an unspoken practice of racism being occurred within these situations. Although it is hard to think that this may be readily discussed, it is not an idea that should be quickly dismissed.

On the ground level there are many concerns that have arisen due to the effects of the genocide, even now thirteen years later. As previously mentioned at least ten percent of the Rwandan population was annihilated through various horrific methods. This resulted in not only a significant reduction of the population, but also to the physical infrastructure of the various cities, towns and communities. Although we must think of all the lost individuals as important, it is equally vital to think about how many of those individuals were professionals within their community, communities that are now struggling to maintain a variety of services. Before the genocide it is thought that there were around 600 judges within the justice system and that fell to approximately 237 by the end of 1994; prosecutors from 75 to 14; and criminal investigators from 576 to 193 (Uvin, 2001). This only speaks to the justice system that has been greatly affected by the consequences of the genocide, however we cannot ignore the doctors, teachers, government workers and merchants that would have also suffered significant losses within their respective professions.

Another major concern is what can be termed “the second genocide”, the deliberate infection of thousands; some say hundred of thousands of Rwandan women, with the HIV/AIDS virus (Donovan, 2002). Not only must these women suffer as a result of losing the majority of their families, physical torture and probably severe scarring, but they now must endure the long slow painful process of dealing with HIV/AIDS in an area that does not get significant access to proper treatments. There are now unnecessary deaths occurring due to this second genocide, a gruesome reminder that the international community failed to intervene.

As a result of this failure, the Rwandan community has at times voiced a sentiment of distrust against the international community and the interventions that are now occurring. There is a feeling that no one still truly speaks out, or takes responsibility about what happened, with a general suspicion towards humanitarian intervention and the true motives behind it (Kayitesi-Blewitt, 2006; Ayoob, 2004). These sentiments are difficult to hear when one considers how many organizations have been born as a result of the failure of the countries stepping in when required. It is therefore essential to reflect on what kind of interventions are occurring in Rwanda and how sustainable they are, whether they reflect the voices of the survivors, not victims, of those dark times.

Community development, at its core, seeks to empower individuals or groups of people by providing the opportunity to gain the skills they need to effect change within their own community (Wikipedia, 2001). That being said, ideally the organizations that go into Rwanda enter the country with high hopes of empowering the men, women, and children that have been affected by the genocide. With the views that were previously mentioned however, it is curious to think as to where the communication lines get crossed between the development workers and the Rwandans. Development projects need to ensure that they are working with the citizens, and in essence try to work themselves out of a job, to guarantee sustainability and that the proper needs of the community are being met.

Community development can be a slow process that often does not seem like any progress is being made. That makes it more important than ever to continue on with the work and remain true to some of the elements of community development. Building on community assets, connecting people with each other and resources, fostering self-reliance and self-sustainability, and allowing the community to assume ownership of all resources and projects are just some of the elements of community development that need to be continually worked on (Geake, 2007). It is important not to focus on what the community is missing but what they already have, and build from those strengths. It is not up to the outside communities to determine what Rwandans are missing, there should not be any 'western ideals' imposed on international community development projects, only their own ideals need to be considered.

With a situation like Rwanda's, it can be incredibly overwhelming to think of how many different areas may ask for assistance from community developers. The genocide affected all aspects of life in the various communities and it is important not to try and take on too much at once, otherwise projects and resources will not be utilized to their full extent. Interventions do not have to start out as large events; they in fact should start at a grassroots level to ensure sustainability and that the desired needs are being met. A great place to start in Rwanda would be with the women in the community. This is due to the gender imbalances that are already occurring, fewer opportunities for income generation and generally a lower literacy rate (McNairn, 2004). It is essential to encourage the women to use their own voices and empower them to make the changes they wish to see within their

community. Women are often the educators of a community; they are the ones at home raising the children and instilling the values and beliefs of the community into the children. Women therefore have the ability to influence an entire generation.

The larger international community must be made aware of the situation of women in Rwanda. This is a substantial step in advocating for not only the girls and young women of the communities, but for the future generations of Rwandans and the 'westerners'. It is not only important for there to be advocacy for the plight of Rwandans in their own country, but there must be public education on an international level. Education within the public and private school systems here in Canada about the genocide and the issues that are now at stake within Rwanda, is incredibly important. This will ensure that future crimes against humanity will not be ignored on such a grandeur scale as was this one in 1994. Although with education must come action. As we have seen with the current situation in Darfur, there is still a lack of reporting and attention about the true state of affairs. In fact, just recently, the UN human rights team criticized the international community for its reaction, or lack thereof, towards the Darfur civilians (Canadian Broadcasting Company, 2007). This just goes to show how some lobbying and action on the part of some smaller organizations can make some impact, although not large, but impact nonetheless. It is now more important than ever to keep the conversations alive about Rwanda.

On the ground level, there are a variety of ways that communities can work on gaining voices and empowering themselves. Especially the women as they still carry much of the burden of living in a society that not only has a significant negative era in its history, but also still live in a fairly patriarchal society where they are not granted full citizenship (Gervais, 2003). Women still experience severe emotional crisis, anger, humiliation, and other physical and psychological illnesses years after the genocide has occurred and they need to be able to feel safe within their community while working through the multitude of issues that plague them (Cohen, d'Adesky and Anastos, 2005). These problems only get multiplied when one takes into consideration the prevalence of HIV/AIDS within the population of women in Rwanda and the repercussions, physical and psychological, that come with that (Cohen et al., 2005; Kayitesi-Blewitt, 2006).

In Rwanda, fewer than 5000 people infected with HIV/AIDS have access to the treatments that are critical to ensure adequate health within their communities (Kayitesi-Blewitt, 2006). Therefore it is essential that community developers work on both micro- and macro-levels to guarantee that more drugs can be made available for the women of Rwanda. This could be through lobbying our own federal government, as well as working with health organizations, such as Doctors Without Borders, to try and get the personnel and equipment required that would help make this dream a reality. Working with NGO's on various levels would also assist in the capacity building of the community that we would be working in to help work with the current situation of HIV/AIDS in Rwanda. Individual family members as well as community members can become further educated about how to prevent HIV/AIDS as well as coping methods to help them live with those infected. Members of the community can become trained to give a variety workshops surrounding

these issues and hopefully gain confidence in utilizing the resources they already have available to them. We want to raise the consciousness of these individuals from a naïve status to a status where they are more aware of their situation, a critical thinking status.

As previously stated, education about health issues is an incredibly important aspect of community development in Rwanda. But education in general is an area of development that needs an equal amount of attention. Raising awareness about the importance of education will hopefully lead to a positive flow in the direction of empowerment for these women. With the average literacy rate for men being 58.5 percent and only 38.5 percent for women, there is clearly an unequal balance in the works. To add to that imbalance is the fact that only 53 percent of girls and 62 percent of boys attend school (McNairn, 2004). These are statistics that need to be resolved with further awareness and availability of education. By increasing a woman's literacy and level of education, she will be able to have more confidence within her community to become a leader. Communities have stated that the low rate of literacy of women as one of the reasons they have a low representation on various committees. However, that being said, Rwanda already claims the largest proportion of women within their parliamentary system and it is essential to keep that level high and at the forefront of importance (McNairn, 2004).

Awareness can occur through workshops, and casual discussions with the women in the community. An important thing to remember in community development is that a lot of work can be done just by talking to people within their own environment. These women are the experts of their situation and if they are more comfortable discussing issues while completing other tasks or just casually by the side of the road, then so be it. There is not always a need to conduct large town meetings to get an issue to be a topic of conversation. Often that conversation may already be happening, there just needs to be an outside source to help facilitate it and move those ideas and values into action. Once women are able to increase their control over various aspects of their lives such as health, education and business, many of their day to day tasks will become easier. In fact, an increased level of education can likely feed into an increased capacity to enter into the business world. This will then allow women to gain more independence and control over their lives in an economic sense and bring a heightened level of empowerment and leadership in their community.

One final important aspect of the plight of women in Rwanda that needs to be addressed is that of their psychological health. These women have seen more than they are often able to admit, yet it is important to create a safe environment where they are able to release that pressure. As briefly mentioned already, these women have an enormous amount of anger and emotional turmoil that they carry around with them daily. To make matters worse, with judicial processes often still continuing to this day, having to live through the memories continually can be hard for anyone to cope with without all the other stressors that have been discussed (Cohen et al., 2005). Counselling needs to be provided for those women who seek it and for those who may be curious to explore the option of seeking it. It should not be forced upon anyone; however, it is important that the forum be made available to all.

The counseling provided can also be used as a teaching mechanism for various communication methods such as conflict resolution or problem solving. With the survivors and perpetrators of the genocide living so closely to each other, it is important that the tools be made available to ease the tensions that may be present. Volunteer counselors can also lead workshops and training sessions as a means of skills transference for the women of Rwanda. Ideally, the women would be able to learn the basic skills of active listening and counseling methods in order to work with each other. Again, working ourselves out of a job is a motto that community developers should take on when working at any level, especially on an international level. This can increase the trust in international organizations that travel to places, such as Rwanda, with nothing but good intentions.

Of course it is important to follow up with these interventions in order to work on that trust as well. Long term sustainability is essential to all community development work, especially on an international level where there is already a lack of trust with the process. Without following up appropriately, one has to wonder what the point of going into the community was in the first place. On a positive note, the US-based Women's Equity in Access to Care and Treatment group, which allows easy access to trauma counselors and nurses, medical treatment, food, and HIV testing, is one example of a group that has been proven to achieve positive results, and sustainability, within the community (Cohen et al., 2005). That being said, there are still the issues of funding and awareness on a global level that need to be addressed.

The motives and interests of the global community is an issue that needs to be addressed separately, in the mean time it is more important to work on the ground level with the women of Rwanda. Increasing their relationships, social capital, and consciousness of their unique situation are themes that can be worked on as long as they remain their own experts. Creative ideas and programmes can be generated as long as these women gain, and retain, the power that is innate in each and every one of them. A key theme to community development is ensuring that people are committed to investing in themselves and the resources available to them (Geake, 2007). This will no doubt be difficult to achieve, yet is unbelievably powerful when it occurs. The potential that each person holds within themselves, to change their situation is awe-inspiring. Perhaps all that community developers need to do is tap into that potential to facilitate its flight into consciousness.

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