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Media in the Great Lakes Region foster social dialogue

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Fostering dialogue in societies torn apart by ethnic conflicts is a contribution to peace-building processes in general and to reconciliation, trauma healing and positive changes in particular. This article lifts up some of the media initiatives of organisations in the Great Lakes Region that contribute to engaging the traumatised communities in this process.

The media are playing an increasingly important role in shaping history around the world. The recent debate on what was called the CNN effect, especially during the two Gulf Wars, is one among many examples that show how media can influence peace and conflict dynamics in the modern world. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the media are being considered the fourth form of power, beside the executive, legislative and judicial.

Steven Livingstone, in his interesting article on the CNN effect, points out the three roles the media can play in times of war (Livingstone, 1997). According to him, the CNN effect can appear (1) as a policy agenda-setting agent, (2) as an impediment to the achievement of desired policy goals and (3) as an accelerant to policy decision-making.

Hawkins shows the impact of the CNN factor on decision making processes and defines this concept as “the process by which the media influence foreign policy by evoking responses in their audiences through concentrated and emotionally based coverage, which in turn applies pressure to governments to act in response to a particular conflict” (Hawkins, 2002). It is obvious that media agendas can influence a broad range of policy initiatives and, by extension, the lack of media coverage contributes to lack of policy.

As stated by the UN Communication Department, “throughout Africa, different segments of the population have minimal access to communication media and are often not reached or provided with adequate information on issues of critical importance to national welfare and societal development. The availability and suitability of communication and information media are essential prerequisites for empowering and enabling the national population to express their views and opinions about significant development problems and to participate in the process of democratic transitions, conflict resolution and, ultimately, a peaceful society” (UNESCO, 1998).

Promoting dialogue in the Great Lakes Region

In the Great Lakes Region the role of the media, especially radio broadcasting, has been increasing and various. In 1994, the role played by the Radio-Télévision des Mille Collines (RTLM) was overwhelmingly negative due to its contribution in the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. In fact, RTLM served as a propaganda tool and was used by Hutu extremists to spread ethnic hatred and to incite the Hutu majority to perpetrate the massacre against the Tutsi minority.

Since 1998 there have been several media efforts, mainly by clandestine radio projects, supported by Hutu movements, to inform and manipulate the memory or history concept of their "groups". These stations are maybe less known than RTLM, maybe less symbolic and efficient in the role as hate speech inciters, but they were nevertheless instrumental in creating or worsening the dualistic memories of antagonism between Hutu and Tutsi. One example is Radio Rutomorangingo (wrongly called Radio Democracy in French) that aired false lists of potential Hutu victims that were going to be killed in 1996.

Despite the negative role played by some radio stations, especially during the period of turbulence in the 1990s, there were also some media that contributed to relieving the pain of people in distress, such as refugees, internally displaced people, lost children, raped women etc. For example, the availability of information during the first and second Congo war in 1996 and 1998 was vital for people who fled to the mountains where there was no connection with the outside world.

In order to help these people to be informed about what was happening, different NGOs working in the area dropped radio receivers that used solar energy or manual power generators into the forests for people who were fleeing. The aim was to help them stay informed about the situation around them, as well as help scattered families to reunite.

This was the beginning of what is known now as the BBC Gahuzamiryango Programme (meaning in the local language "the one which makes families meet"). The impact of the initiative was highly appreciated because it particularly allowed parents and children who had been separated during the fighting to be reunited.

Another important example is the role played by media in Burundi, contributing to the peace process or even to reconciliation. After the assassination of the newly elected President Melchior Ndadaye in 1993, a political crisis, followed by ethnic violence, erupted in the country. Two main ethnic groups in Burundi – the Hutu and the Tutsi – were engaged in a violent conflict. Consequently, around 300,000 lives were lost and thousands became refugees or internally displaced people. This situation triggered strong ethnic hatred.

Many efforts were made in order to help Burundians resolve this serious problem. Peace initiatives included negotiations and other diplomatic actions with the top leaders from every side. Further, there were also initiatives that targeted average people who were manipulated by politicians. Among the initiatives targeting the grassroots level, there were radio programmes oriented at promoting reconciliation through open discussions on the root causes of the Hutu-Tutsi conflict.

The message of peace was also transmitted through radio drama. For example, a radio soap opera called "Umubanyi niwe muryango"(Your neighbour is your family kin) which was supported by Search for Common Ground, had a strong impact on the mitigation of ethnic hatred in Burundi and on promoting peace and tolerance in

different parts of the country during the ethnic violence and civil war that erupted in the aftermath of the President's assassination and the mass killings that followed.

Organisations promoting dialogue

After the signing and the implementation of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement in 2000, many organisations launched programmes designed to contribute to peace consolidation efforts. Three such organisations promoting dialogue through media are: La Benevolencija, Search for Common Ground and Eirene. All of them have programmes that are run across the Great Lakes Region.

Today, the programme Murikira Ukuri (Show me the truth), produced by Radio La Benevolencija in Burundi, plays a major role in the domain of conflict prevention by addressing different issues related to understanding the origins of ethnic hatred leading up to dealing with the past. Another important issue addressed by programmes from La Benevolencija is transitional justice and reconciliation. This issue is also addressed through a radio and TV programme called "Si ma mémoire est bonne" (If my memory is still good) and "Akahise kadasorongoye" (The past which was not revisited).

These two programmes are oriented toward promoting social dialogue around problematic interpretations on concepts of Burundi's past conflicts. They are seen as a significant contribution to the transitional justice process in preparation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In Rwanda and DRC, La Benevolencija has developed similar programmes (Musekweya in Rwanda and Kumbuka kesho in DRC). In Rwanda, La Benevolencija is conducting a media project aimed at deepening reconciliation and trust among citizens in the post-Gacaca era, that is, the period after the judgments by popular courts called Gacaca of people involved in the genocide.

The focus of La Benevolencija is on the importance of equal justice in a post-genocide society, on the sensitisation of the role of the free speech, the dangers of hate speech and the need of empathy for others. Emphasis is placed on raising the awareness of leaders about the possible influence of survivor trauma and fears of decision-making processes.

Youth dialogue platform on political, social, economic and cultural matters

Another organisation playing an important role in the Great Lakes Region and using media to promote social dialogue is Search for Common Ground (SFCG). The programmes of SFCG in Burundi are directed toward conflict management and violence reduction. Responding to the deteriorating political environment, especially in the aftermath of the 2010 elections and due to the boycott of the opposition parties, the organisation has been implementing a project aimed at encouraging Burundians, and particularly the youth, to engage in peaceful cohabitation in the midst of diversity.

One of the flagship programmes of SFCG is "Generation Grands Lacs". It is a 60 minute radio talk show on air every Saturday, broadcast on five radio stations across the region – in Burundi, the DRC and in Rwanda. Its objective is to create a dialogue platform for the youth in the region and to enable them to give their views on political, social, economic and cultural matters. Further, the programme promotes debates on conflict related issues, allowing the youth to give their contribution on problem solving as well

as calling other youth to become aware of the influence of some political entrepreneurs who use young people in advancing their personal hidden agendas.

Generation Grands Lacs has been successful and is believed to have contributed to a shift in knowledge and attitudes (Slachmuis, L., 2012). The programme has proved that social dialogue through media is possible and that it can influence youth positively and contribute to the creation of a new generation who is ready to resolve regional problems by peaceful means.

The "Projet Pigiste" of the organisation Eirene Great Lakes is a regional project whose purpose is to develop professional skills of journalists across the region. The project was launched in 2009 as a capacity building programme targeting journalists from three radio stations based in three countries of the Great Lakes Region: Radio Publique Africaine in Burundi, Radio Maendeleo in DRC and Radio Izuba in Rwanda.

The aim of the programme is to develop skills related to covering information in conflict affected areas in a way that promotes social cohesion. Also, the journalists are trained to cover traumatic events without causing psychological problems. The guiding philosophy is that the radio is to be used as a tool for peace.

In the Great Lakes Region there is a strongly developed oral culture, and according to Lothar Seethaler, who works for Swiss Cooperation in the DRC, "the community radios play a socially important role precisely because of such orality" (Haasen, B. and Capitolin, P., 2011). Journalists can play a significantly influencing role by sending a message that helps prevent conflict and promotes reconciliation. Through dialogue they address problems arising from stereo- types and prejudices.

Success and challenges

Despite the recorded success of media efforts toward promoting social dialogue, there are still many challenges that need to be addressed. One of the stumbling blocks for media in the region, and in promoting social dialogue, are the repeated attempts by some government officials to limit the activities of the media. These limitations can be new regulations or policies implemented by the government.

The training of journalists is another specific issue. People working as journalists do not necessarily have a solid training as media professionals. In some situations there is a lack of collaboration between different organisations involved in peace-building through media. This leads to the overlapping of some radio programmes.

Fostering social dialogue is one of the important tools that can be used in order to promote peace-building processes in the Great Lakes Region. The activities carried out by the three organisations mentioned in this article are good examples of how dialogue can be used in order to bring healing to traumatised communities.

In the Great Lakes Region where an oral culture dominates, the use of media tools, especially radio, brings positive results, because it enables peace-builders to reach wide audiences. Also, it is clear that the media can have a big influence on how people perceive their differences within communities divided along ethnic lines. These efforts towards peace and reconciliation need to be encouraged and supported.

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