

Foundations for repatriation and peace in DRC

Vanessa Noël Brown

Parties to the protracted Congolese conflict have long promoted fear of 'the other' and a thirst for revenge; these attitudes must be addressed if peace is to have a chance.

In 2010 there has been a steady return of Congolese refugees from Zambia and the beginnings of an official process for the return of refugees from the camps in Burundi. Returns to South Kivu from Tanzania, however, have been at a standstill due to persistent insecurity in return zones while North Kivu's repatriation process remains highly politicised. The return of Congolese refugees from Rwanda and Burundi is expected to be problematic given the ethnic minorities involved, and what stability currently exists may deteriorate. NGOs have an important role to play in advancing reconciliation, social cohesion and healthy relationships in refugee return zones.

This article explores Search for Common Ground (SFCG) initiatives to educate refugees and the communities in the return zones about the conditions of repatriation and reintegration, to build trust across ethnic lines, and to shift attitudes to favour the fight against sexual and gender-based violence. SFCG's arts-based approach in disseminating conflict management skills highlights how international non-governmental initiatives can address the psychosocial needs of both returning refugees and residents alike.

In DRC, SFCG (known locally as Centre Lokolé) collaborates with 100 local partners including radio stations, youth associations, religious organisations and civil society networks. Since 2005, the Participatory Theatre for Conflict Transformation has reached 1.6 million Congolese in refugee camps and return zones in eastern

DRC.¹ Actors trained by SFCG in conflict transformation skills and participatory theatre techniques travel to refugee camps in Tanzania, Burundi and Zambia, as well as throughout the refugee return zones in South and North Kivu and Katanga provinces (primarily in Uvira and Fizi territories in South Kivu, Moba and Pweto in North Katanga, as well as North Kivu).

Live theatre mirrors the conflicts that the target populations have experienced and, with the

theatre performances are land/property disputes, conflicts related to assistance for returnees, inter-community tensions, rumours and manipulation, and conflicts related to pervasive insecurity and a weak state.

SFCG also produces radio and television programmes to promote peaceful reintegration of Congolese returnees in eastern DRC. These initiatives seek to impart accurate, impartial and responsible information about the repatriation process, while highlighting non-violent and collaborative approaches to conflict. A 2008 UNHCR evaluation of SFCG work around the repatriation process found that exposure to these

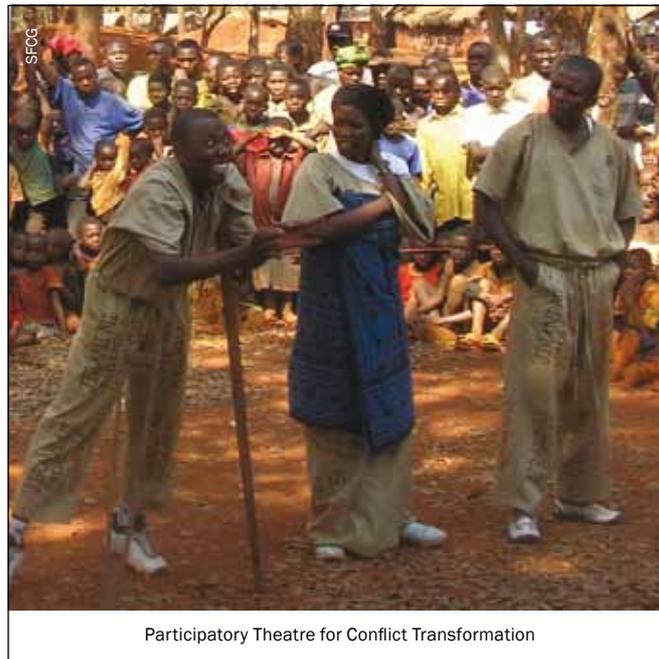
programmes led to increased knowledge of conflict resolution resources, repatriation information and non-violent methods of reconciliation including noted positive changes in attitudes related to ethnic tensions, land disputes and the integration of repatriated refugees.²

Refugees, return and community building

SFCG's refugee-focused initiatives are cross-border, such as the weekly radio programme *Wote Tukutane Tena* ('We All Meet Again'), broadcast in return zones in North and South Kivu and north Katanga province, as well as on

radio stations reaching refugee camps in Burundi, Tanzania and Zambia.

Returning refugees often encounter negative attitudes by residents who remained in country, based on the perceived 'injustice' that the refugees benefited from assistance in the camps, as well as during their repatriation and reintegration, while residents suffered during the war and do not receive assistance. Addressing these tensions requires an approach



Participatory Theatre for Conflict Transformation

participation of the audience, the actors search for non-violent solutions to the conflicts, highlighting key information as well as collaborative attitudes and behaviour. The theatre troupes perform under the banner of *Jirani ni Ngugu* (Swahili for 'My Neighbour is My Brother'), the name of SFCG's popular Swahili radio drama that addresses the issue of conflict and collaborative solutions. The most common conflicts addressed through the

that highlights a common interest, focused on a shared and prosperous future involving both residents and returnees. SFCG's goat credit project, in collaboration with local partner GASAP, seeks to build trust across divided communities. The community forms a committee to determine those with the greatest needs in the community, and gives one of them a goat. The goat's offspring is given to another person also identified as needy but who comes from a different subgroup in the community. The project addresses divisions based on ethnicity and tribe as well as divisions between returnees and residents, making the goats a common point of interest across diverse identities. The project provides a model of good practice for working together as a community – not only in terms of building livelihoods but also in mediating local conflicts.

SFCG also uses media programming and cultural events to reintegrate former child soldiers and to bring youth together in refugee return zones. An SFCG team of young journalists produce a weekly show that stresses the impact of conflict on Congo's children. In 2007 SFCG organised a drumming festival in Baraka and Fizi involving Burundians and Banyamulenge alongside groups from other South Kivu tribes. In 2008 the drumming festival brought together 100 Rwandan, Burundian and Congolese of North and South Kivu for a tour through Rwanda and North and South Kivu.

Combating gender-based violence

An April 2010 Harvard/Oxfam study conducted in South Kivu highlighted the fact that beyond widespread military rape, civilian perpetration of sexual violence is now recognised as a major problem.³ It found that between 2004 and 2008, reports of military rapes decreased by 77% but in the same period there was a staggering 1,733% increase in the number of civilian sexual assaults reported.

SFCG uses radio and television production, participatory theatre and sensitisation approaches with the Congolese army to combat sexual and gender-based violence. In addition, it uses a mobile cinema project to reach hundreds of thousands of people in refugee return zones, projecting the film 'Fighting the

Silence' to large crowds and small groups.⁴ By early 2010 the film had been shown before some 400,000 people in North and South Kivu and north Katanga provinces. The film clarifies key issues around rape and sexual violence, explaining the 2006 law to combat sexual violence. Facilitated discussions after the screenings address attitudes which often favour impunity, complicity or rejection of rape survivors. The film's four versions target a mass audience, a youth audience, couples, and political/military authorities.

Surveys of audience members before and after the film show a marked gain in knowledge and shift in attitudes. Following a screening in Uvira for the military, for example, a soldier commented, "For me this mother [who testified] looks like my mother. I feel an incredible pain after what happened to her... it is necessary that the law be respected and applied to everyone [regardless if he is military or civilian]."

The screenings complement a larger civilian protection project implemented by SFCG in collaboration with FARDC, the national army which is consistently denounced for its abuses against civilians. The project trains committees within brigades and battalions in five provinces, equipping them with multimedia interactive educational tools to use within their units.

Although eradication of sexual violence in Congo is an uphill battle, shifting soldiers' attitudes towards rape is an essential component in changing social norms. In 2009 SFCG conducted a survey of 300 civilians and 100 soldiers in Goma to measure the impact of participatory theatre and other sensitisation sessions conducted in partnership with the Congolese army. In one instance, a military-civilian theatre troupe performed sketches about human rights violations and conflicts within their unit, after which 72% of the soldiers surveyed said that they identified with the conflict and 96% said they had subsequently applied its lessons. In response to why the theatre sessions left lasting impressions compared to standard military parades where the commander gives orders to the

soldiers, one-third of respondents said it was because it was "practical" while one-sixth of soldiers said that it touched their conscience more than simply receiving orders.

Foundations for sustainable peace

Peacebuilding involves numerous overlapping elements. By listening to SFCG-produced radio programmes and watching participatory theatre performances, refugees return to their communities equipped with improved conflict resolution skills to address the challenges they will inevitably face upon their return home. SFCG's approaches address the psychosocial reintegration of refugees. Many obstacles remain – such as the skills shortage among local radio journalists as well as limited support for initiatives specifically targeting reform and training within the Congolese army and police force – but progress is being made. If we are to build a foundation for sustainable peace, returnees and residents alike need to be supported in establishing strong collaborative communities.

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1. SFCG has 6 offices across DRC with 70 Congolese staff. Programme examples were provided by SFCG-DRC Country Director Lena Slachmuisjilder and Projects Manager Mike Jobbins.

2. Gordan, G, 'UNHCR Evaluation of SFCG Programming in the DRC': <http://www.sfcg.org/sfcg/evaluations/drc.html>

3. http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict_disasters/sexual-violence-drc.html

4. IF Productions <http://www.ifproductions.nl/fightingthesilence/>

Toolbox

SFCG has developed a broad array of operational methods, including well-known conflict resolution techniques, such as mediation and facilitation, and less traditional ones, such as TV productions, radio soap opera and community organising. We have found that employing several tools at the same time increases their overall effectiveness.

More information, and links to training materials, can be found at:

<http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/drcongo/tools.html>